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Feb. 11, 2009 - <http://embassymag.ca/page/printpage/respect-2-11-2009>

Respect in Washington Through Action Abroad

by Paul Heinbecker

The visit to Ottawa next week of the worldly President Barack Obama presents important opportunities to the unworldly Prime Minister Stephen Harper. The openings have been provided by the Americans, but, as is often the case, the ideas to capitalize on them will be up to the Canadians to supply.

If Canadian priorities are comprised exclusively or even predominantly of bilateral irritants and complaints focused on the border and Buy America, important as those subjects are, this opportunity for this odd couple to surmount evident differences and co-operate for the longer term will be lost. It may not come soon again; even prime ministers get only one chance to make a good first impression.

Mr. Harper needs to accomplish three things with President Obama: start to establish a personal relationship with him; remind him that Canada and the United States are interdependent and that that is good for both sides; and persuade him that Canada can be helpful as the U.S. addresses the major issues confronting the international community.

Personal diplomacy matters. The attention of the president of the United States is the most valuable commodity in the world. Everyone wants a piece of it. But while the president's schedule is infinite, his time is limited to 24 hours a day like everyone else, and the White House is likely to be utterly cold-blooded about its use. Canada will not get special treatment just because, as a good neighbour, we merit it.

If we want the issues that matter to Canadians to be moved up the president's agenda, his aides will need to understand that those issues are also important to him, in part because of his relationship with Stephen Harper. As Brian Mulroney showed with Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, and as Jean Chrétien showed with Bill Clinton, good personal relations produced good results for Canada, from acid rain to free trade to support on national unity.

Of course, it takes two to tango and with some American presidents, notably Richard Nixon and George W. Bush, propinquity proved impossible. Agreement to meet annually, if the president can be persuaded, would be an excellent "deliverable" this time and provide the vehicle needed to develop personal diplomatic relations over the longer run.

Mr. Harper's second objective is already partly achieved, courtesy of the protectionists in the U.S. Congress. The furor over the "Buy America" provisions of the stimulus package will have acquainted President Obama with the significance to the United States of globalization.

The outcry showed that respecting international law, including trade law, is not a matter of doing favours for others but of advancing your own interests. That is especially the case with Canada, whose co-operation is key to American

objectives, from energy security and climate change to economic competitiveness, international terrorism and the illegal drugs trade. The Canadian Embassy in Washington has already impressed on the Congress and the administration that the consequences of protectionism on the U.S., as well as on us, are likely to be negative, a lesson that seems to have to be relearned by every generation of congressmen and women since the Smoot-Hawley act tipped the world into the Great Depression.

Mr. Harper needs to reinforce the point with further information on the extent to which North American energy, manufacturing and service industries are integrated and how beneficial that is to the U.S. as well as Canada. He will also need to suggest ways forward, as he has begun to do on climate change and energy security. Over the years, we have also tabled ideas on border management, which Homeland Security may not have brought to the new president's attention. Mr. Harper should do so, preferably in an actionable form.

Mr. Harper's third objective should be to persuade the new president that we share many of his foreign policy goals and have the capacity to advance his agenda in the process of advancing our own. Diplomacy is arguably more important now than it has been since 1945. The short era of a single superpower is passing into history, replaced by a multi-power world in which the Americans will be more pre-eminent than predominant.

We in the West have forgotten that China and India *not* being major powers is the exception in history. Nor are Russia, the European Union and Latin America in retreat. This literally unruly new world will have to be managed co-operatively—diplomatically. A sea change is underway in the style, tone and substance of U.S. foreign policy. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made very clear at her confirmation hearing, unilateralism is out and co-operation with allies is in.

There are several issues that matter to the Americans on which Canada can contribute in ways that serve both sides' interests.

The president himself has made clear that he wants to reinforce the international nuclear non-proliferation regime. Canada can help advance the diplomacy required by advocating passage of the test ban treaty, contributing to the diplomacy in support of a nuclear fissile material cut-off treaty, supporting multilateralization of the nuclear fuel cycle and reinforcing disarmament verification research, all areas on which we have expertise.

We can support President Obama's decision to close Guantanamo by taking in some of its inhabitants, one in particular. We also have the smarts, if we still have the standing, to contribute to the resolution of intractable issues blocking peace in the Middle East, notably the security of a divided Jerusalem, refugees and capacity-building and education for the Palestinians.

On Afghanistan, we have an interest and the capacity to promote both multilateral and regional diplomacy and economic and social development, whether or not the Americans eventually seek to persuade us to keep our forces there. On international financial reform, we can also contribute, as we can on UN reform. As regards to Arctic waters, we can promote pluri-lateral negotiations based on science.

The more we do in the world and the more effective we are in doing it, the more respect we get in Washington. The more respect we get in Washington, the more effective we can be in advancing our interests in the world and in Washington. The Obama visit is an opportunity to get started that we must not miss.

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