Our leader and the Obama charm: 
The good leader syndrome

BY TIM KAPOSY
AND IMRE SZEMAN

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Comparisons and their limits

It seems so unfair. Despite being the “better” country in every way, they get the exciting and energetic guy, while we get the ultra-boring one.

The “we” and “they” are Canada and the United States, of course, and the boring and exciting ones, Prime Minister Stephen Harper and President Barack Obama, respectively. One takes impressive-looking jump shots and can talk his way around, and through, anything. The other tries to show his pop culture smarts by playing tunes with Bryan Adams and Nickelback at 24 Sussex and tries his best to make sure that he and his Cabinet say as little as possible. If Obama’s long “aaaaaaaaand”s during interviews signals someone searching for the larger implications of his answer, Harper is largely content to appear pre-digitized, curt as a good ole Stephen Leacock joke, and cordoned off from eyes and ears. There is no comparison, especially when it comes to how each moves about on the international stage.

Of course, popular perception about whether a politician is suitable for office can change in an instant—on a dime. Expecting the same speed of service that Canadians, it is because they have always been indifferent to him. Still, one imagines that Canucks might prefer the elegant Obama to the pudgy and stiff-haired Harper, less because of any real understanding of what positions and policies each holds, than because one expects (even in the age of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi) a certain gravitas from one’s political leaders.

Political comparison is instructive when it helps us to dig deep into the structure that animates public life and gives a nation’s democracy its defining characteristics.

'Cause nobody wants to do it on their own
And everyone wants to know they’re not alone
There’s somebody else that feels the same somewhere
There’s gotta be somebody for me out there
—Nickelback, “Gotta Be Somebody”

Better country, worse leader?

But if we stop at such surface tallies of the coolness of political leaders, or stick with the comfort of imagining that Canada is (by necessity) the better country despite its leadership (as Canadians are wont to do), we do not learn much about either figure, or about where our respective systems stand today. It is useful to place Harper and Obama side by side, not in order to pat ourselves on the back because we are brave enough to admit a slight flaw in our otherwise pristine global image (i.e., we have a Harper!), but because it can help us to see the very real limits and problems of contemporary Canadian politics, of which Harper is more symptom than cause.

Political comparison is instructive when it helps us to dig deep into the structure that animates public life and gives a nation’s democracy its defining characteristics. For example, John Ibbitson’s 2009 pamphlet Open and Shut: Why America Has Barack Obama, and Canada Has Stephen Harper engages in a comparison between prime minister and president in order to better conceptualize the drastic ageing and centralization of the Canadian federal government. For such a brief intervention, Ibbitson’s analysis is wide-ranging: the final chapter is devoted to a comparison of Ottawa and Washington, DC. One prominent point he makes is that Canada’s “federal public service is notoriously resistant to outside influences. Short-term appointment of experts from outside the public service to senior positions in it, to advise on policy or to help craft new programs, are discouraged. As a result, Canada lacks the sort of public policy intellectuals who exercise so much influence within the U.S.”

It is widely acknowledged that Harper’s years in government have brought a chill to politics in Canada. But this is only due in part to his own style of maximiz-
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Both the Harper and Obama governments are recalibrating their rhetoric after the pieties of global integration, security, and the inherent progress of “civilization” have worn thin.

While elsewhere, as in Australia (and, for that matter, Egypt), the leaders have been reined in through electoral and political reform. The only disquiet we feel is when the great leader has a different outlook from our own, or seems not to have the wisdom or heart of other leaders around the globe; generally, however, Canadians seem not to worry about the rapid decline of democracy in the country over the past several decades.

The control that one associates with Harper’s secrecy is in fact endemic to a system in which the executive and legislative branches of government have come increasingly to be the purview of a single individual. The fact that it is possible for a single person to possess such power even in a minority government only confirms the rot in the system.

What else can we learn by comparing our leaders? Commentators in the United States recently began to compare their national experience with Canada’s, exploring the deep fissures between the two countries’ political processes. For instance, Paul Krugman has compared national banking laws and Bill Moyers has compared health-care systems: in both cases, Canada comes out ahead, though less by design (as the US commentators tend to imagine) than by historical accident (Canadian banking law is hardly as enlightened as business leaders and their public relations personnel want us to believe). On a policy-to-policy basis, there is a difference between Canada and the United States as much as between any two countries: no surprise there.

What about in terms of their general world view? Recall the speech Lester B. Pearson delivered on April 2, 1965 at Philadelphia’s Temple University, urging Washington to cease its carpet bombing of Vietnam. The obstinacy of Pearson’s position roiled Lyndon Johnson. By comparison, Harper’s subservience to the United States parallels Brian Mulroney’s...
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Prime Minister Mulroney, who, by this stage in his tenure, had concluded a free trade agreement, an acid rain agreement, and an Arctic passage agreement with Washington; had hosted the first ever summit on climate change; and had led the international effort to impose sanctions on the apartheid regime in South Africa, among many other things.

Not all the responsibility for Canada’s slipping reputation can fairly be laid at the Harper government’s door. Mulroney’s finances are only now being litigated over for these same kinds of transactions. This pattern of privatization has spurred responses to Harper that are both flailing and concise. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), for instance, has compiled The Harper Record, a vital compendium that accounts for Harris-like changes intended for nearly every realm of daily life, from child care to nuclear energy. The CCPA is challenging Harper’s attempt to remake Canada by economic restructuring and their message is clear: even when we vote Harper out of office, the impact of his tenure will extend far beyond his term in the office of prime minister.

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LETTHE CORPORATIONS RULE!

A more telling comparison than Obama might be with a provincial leader from the recent past. During the “common sense revolution” in Ontario between 1995 and 2002, Premier Mike Harris privatized virtually all public entities available to his brokers. Harris demonized hospitals, highways, the energy sector, and universities as inefficient and lacking the due oversight of experts. They were then sold off in varying degrees to corporations. Harris, who now sits on the boards of a number of these formerly public organizations, is accumulating millions.

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