

Our leader and the Obama charm: The good leader syndrome

'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?

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 "aaaaaaaand"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 they get at fast-food drive-thrus, Americans speedily grew disillusioned with Obama when he failed to bring about a US utopia within his first hundred days in office. Two years into his presidency, Obama's knack for negotiating national contradictions, evident in the way he addressed issues ranging from race to Iraq during the 2008 campaign, is today

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widely caricatured as a "vacuous opportunism" (see Tariq Ali's *The Obama Syndrome: Surrender at Home, War Abroad*) that has fostered insufficient support from Democrats and venom from opponents.

In Canada, Harper's blockheaded demeanour has lingered longer enough to make him appear "principled" and impervious to the day-to-day incidents of mass-media attention that comprises much of what passes for politics in North America. If Harper does not disillusion 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.

COMPARISONS AND THEIR LIMITS

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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ing control over information, which merely magnifies the limits of an inbred bureaucratic system to which Ibbitson draws our attention. Part of the intractability of US policy stems from the wholesale refashioning of government that occurs with each election. Bureaucrats and party hacks exchange keys in DC for condos in Capitol Hill and Georgetown that they expect to have for four years only. Those deposed go off to lick their wounds in the relative comfort of think tanks and lobbying firms. By comparison, in Ottawa, one can safely get a mortgage for a house in the Glebe and expect to welcome one's toddlers back home from Queen's or McGill with stories about their hijinks with the Young Liberals or Conservatives. Politics is certainly much bigger than the milieu accompanying party leaders, but to say politics *only* happens beyond this milieu and the governmental apparatus, with which it manoeuvres, has the effect of deflecting attention away from political antagonisms and tactics that originate in the fixity of state power.

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

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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. Much of the power of US presidents comes from the media face time they get: they cannot pass bills or budgets on their own, though they can exert moral and media suasion to help do so. By comparison, a prime minister does not typically have to lobby anyone for votes (neither publics nor the legislature) or worry about mid-term elections. Harper is talented at managing optics and controlling the message—in ways that any current leader has to be—but the issues that many blame his reign for are ones that have long plagued Canadian politics.

The reality is that Canadians have become comfortable living with strong leaders and an ossified public service,

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 UNITED STATES AND CANADA: SAME OLD, SAME OLD

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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NAFTA-era doctrines. It would be inconceivable, for instance, for Harper to oppose Obama and the US military industry by calling for an immediate end to drone bombing throughout the world. Indeed, much of the technology and expertise behind such weapons are produced on Canadian soil and are subsidized by taxpayers. 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.

What happens next will be laid at the feet of a Canadian public who have only maintained Harper’s authority because he has meddled little with an already politically listless middle class who, despite a declining standard of living with Harper in office, are satisfied to embrace mass consumerism in place of political activism. Harper’s lingering presence on Canada’s national stage should trigger a myriad of innovative alternatives to his oligarchy and to the Canadian political system as it is currently configured. Instead, in response to the news that in February 2011 Harper unilaterally signed a border security and information-sharing pact with the United States, we hear muted alarm from the op-eds and deafening silence from the general public.

LET THE 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.

Mulroney’s finances are only now being litigated over for these same kinds of transactions. This pattern of privatiza-

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tion 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.

It is not that Obama is better than Harper. Instead, Harper is what you get when you have a political system like

Canada’s—one run by a changing sequence of oligarchs from roughly the same political class and with roughly the same class commitments and outlook. The surprise of the United States having a “good” leader in comparison to our Nickelback-loving “bad” one might have the virtue of opening our eyes to a bad system most of us not only tolerate, but mistakenly celebrate as standing at some imagined democratic peak that is the envy of the rest of world. Otherwise, comparing leaders is little more than a distraction from the realities of politics, which extend beyond the actions and directives of any single individual—or, if they do not at present, they certainly should. 

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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. The interest of Canadian governments in the world has flagged with the budget cuts and national unity crises of the 1990s. But it is the Harper government that claimed that, under its leadership, Can-

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ada was back. The claim is more aspirational than factual. There is little that has been strategic or imaginative in current policy and much that has been tactical, unambitious, and disappointing. 