

# CanadaWatch

PRACTICAL AND AUTHORITATIVE ANALYSIS OF KEY NATIONAL ISSUES

SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE—THE CHRÉTIEN ERA: A RED BOOK AUDIT

## Adaptive navigation in the Chrétien era

### CHANGING THE CANADIAN LANDSCAPE

When Jean Chrétien defeated Kim Campbell in the fall of 1993, Canada's economy was emerging from a recession, the country was in serious debt and running annual deficits, and the Canadian dollar was eroding in value. Quebec had joined the majority of Canadians the year before in defeating the Charlottetown Accord and was ramping up for another referendum on its constitutional status.

BY MICHAEL ADAMS

Michael Adams is the president of the Environics group of companies and author of *Fire and Ice: The United States, Canada and the Myth of Converging Values*.

In the fall of 2003, the Canadian economy is strong, the federal government has reduced its debt and no longer runs deficits, and the Canadian dollar is rising in value.

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## Taking care of business: Chrétien and the Americans

### "HARMED" RELATIONS AND THE BAD SINGER

As I write this comment for *Canada Watch* "The Chrétien Era," his successor, Paul Martin, is gathering editorial praise for his promise to restore the US-Canada relationship, supposedly damaged by Jean Chrétien during his decade as prime minister. Today's e-mail included an invitation to a scholarly conference devoted to the question "Did the relationship between President Bush and former Prime Minister Chrétien 'harm' the Canada-US relationship, and how might this change with the recent political leadership shift in Ottawa?"

BY JOHN HERD THOMPSON

John Herd Thompson is director of the North American Studies Program and chair of the Department of History at Duke University.

I'll argue instead that—given the circumstances in which he governed and the massive asymmetry of power between the United States and Canada—Chrétien did a pretty good job with US-Canada relations, by any reasonable measure. Remember that Jean Chrétien won office in 1993 in large part because Canadian voters were fed up to the

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cell phones, Blackberries, Global Positioning Systems and Personal Digital Assistants are the advanced weaponry of the information age as Canadians balance work, family, social responsibilities, and leisure.


## THE PURSUIT OF AUTONOMY AND BALANCE

Canadians' pursuit of autonomy and balance in everyday life has emerged in this decade as being just as important as work. Duty to others has returned after several decades' absence to be balanced with personal pleasure. Money is important, but it is the medium for personal control of destiny now and in one's fu-

ture. In the United States, money is virtue and is used for conspicuous consumption; work is paramount and fealty to employer expected; imagine Canadians pledging allegiance to their employer as do Wal-Mart's 1.4 million employees. As consumers, Canadians wish to be discriminating and ethical as they remember the harm being done to the environment.

Like all moderns who feel the stress of hectic lives, Canadians express the need to escape, to enjoy the simple pleasures in life, and to be exposed to and even create physical beauty. Escape can be to another culture or another time, especially a time when time stood still.

Chrétien leaves Canadians less angry and more inured to social change than his predecessors. He leaves a people tolerant of, even celebrating, the religious and ethno-cultural diversity of this country. That so many people of such diverse backgrounds and value systems can live together in such relative harmony in today's world seems nothing less than miraculous.

Hendrick Hertzberg, the editor of *The New Yorker* magazine, wrote in July that Canada is the kind of country that makes you proud to be a North American. I know it is hard for Canadians to admit it, but that is Jean Chrétien's Canada to which he is referring. 

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teeth with the Mulroney Conservatives' effusive enthusiasm for America. Chrétien excoriated the Tories at every opportunity for their alleged America-philia. His favourite gambit was to remind audiences of the maudlin Mulroney-Reagan performance of "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" at the 1985 "Shamrock Summit." There would be no more such duets, Chrétien promised; "besides," he quipped, "I am not a good singer."

## THE CHRÉTIEN DOCTRINE ON AMERICAN AFFAIRS

As a new prime minister, Chrétien brought no broad new vision to Canada's relationship with the United States. Instead, he offered a simple defining principle: "business is business and friendship is friendship, and the two cannot be confused." The phrase deserves a place in *Colombo's Canadian Quotations*, or perhaps on a Chrétien statue on Parliament Hill.

And Chrétien didn't confuse the two. Because "business is business," he reneged on the first promise that he made about the relationship: that he would "tear up" the NAFTA. (Shocking—politicians breaking promises. Next you'll be telling me that Pete Rose bet on base-

ball!) After a farcical claim to have wrested "improvements" to the agreement from President Clinton, Chrétien proclaimed the NAFTA.

Ten years on, Chrétien's about-face seems prescient. After wrenching adjustments, the Canadian economy rebounded to become North America's and the G8's most dynamic in terms of job creation. Assessments of NAFTA's first decade conclude that Canada has benefited more than the United States or Mexico from continental free trade. If Chrétien read the *New York Times* analysis on December 27, 2003 (and he almost certainly did *not* read it—it ran to 3,000 words) he would take satisfaction from the conclusions that "In Canada . . . NAFTA helped shape a more competitive economy," and that the "growing pains" during the transition "were cushioned by a strong social safety net."

Chrétien believed in Canada's "strong social safety net," did his best to preserve it, and never tired of talking about it, especially to American audiences. Instead of prattling about "shared values," he pointed in his speeches on US-Canada difference. From a US perspective in 2004, that social safety net looks wonder-

ful. To use only the example of health care, we spend 15 percent of our GDP to buy measurably worse care than Canadians get for 9.7 percent of GDP. And every American now knows that Canadian governments, unlike our own, set limits to the rapacity of pharmaceutical companies.

## A DISTINCTIVE FOREIGN POLICY

In terms of Canada's international security relationship with the United States, the Chrétien government emphasized Canada's values and steered a distinctive course despite US pressure, even before George W. Bush succeeded Bill Clinton in Washington. When the *Helms-Burton Act* of 1996 threatened US reprisals against foreigners doing business with Cuba, Chrétien made an official visit to the island. Neither the US embargo nor Canada's constructive engagement moved the Castro regime one inch or one centimetre toward democracy, of course. Neither policy is really about Cuba: both are designed for domestic political consumption. Canada was able to wear Cuba as a badge of foreign policy independence.

Chrétien also gave Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy scope for his "human

security” agenda in international relations, which infuriated the Pentagon and the US State Department. Axworthy’s crusade produced the multilateral landmines treaty signed in Ottawa in 1997 by more than one hundred countries, the United States notably not among them, to President Clinton’s personal embarrassment.

President George W. Bush’s belligerent unilateralism presented every US ally with a quandary. Bush repudiated every rule of decent international behaviour that the world community had created, usually with US leadership, in the previous half century. Jean Chrétien responded to an impossible situation as well as any other head of government. He procrastinated, for example, on Canadian participation in Bush’s revival of the “Star Wars” delusion, reborn as “National Missile Defense.”

## AFTER 9/11

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Chrétien endured widespread criticism for Canada’s more reasoned approach, at home and overseas, to the “War on Terror.” Reactionary commentators in Canada and the United States berated the prime minister as “soft” on terrorism. When Chrétien mused that “the West” might bear some responsibility for creating the circumstances that bred terrorism, Fox News commentator Bill O’Reilly opined, “I expected something like this. Chrétien is a socialist. . . . His government allows nearly everyone into Canada even if they have false documentation.”

Canadian public opinion caught up with Chrétien, however, and a substantial majority of Canadians approved of Canada’s unwillingness to acquiesce to the US “Bush doctrine” of pre-emptive war, and supported their government’s decision not to participate in the US invasion of Iraq. Chrétien presented Canada’s decision with an assurance worthy of Mackenzie King: “Of course, I hope that the Americans will do as well as possible.”

Did Chrétien’s words and actions damage Canada’s relationship with the

He guarded Canada’s interests, enhanced its dignity, and emphasized US–Canada differences—those things that set Canada apart from the United States, those things that made it, in the words that he loved to quote, “the best country in the world.”

United States? No one would defend the comments that President Bush was a “moron,” or that Americans were “bastards.” But the prime minister didn’t make or endorse those remarks. It’s difficult to believe that they mattered very much. How different would the US–Canada relationship have been on Chrétien’s retirement had Canada embargoed Cuba, ignored landmines, vastly increased defence spending, and said “Ready, Aye, Ready” to National Missile Defense and Iraq? What would such concessions have earned Canada from the United States in return?

## THE MOUSE MAKES THE BEST OF THE ELEPHANT

The unhappy truth is that Canadian governments and Canadian prime ministers have very little agency when it comes to shaping the US–Canada relationship. Those Canadians who believe that Ottawa can substantially change policy in Washington, one is tempted to conclude, have been taking advantage of Canada’s more liberal marijuana laws. My choice for the most outrageous statement of this argument comes not from *The National Post*, but from *The Western Wheel*, a weekly in southern Alberta cattle country. *The Wheel’s* editor argued that “mad cow” notwithstanding, the United States would have kept its border open to Canadian beef exports had Chrétien cultivated better personal relations with President Bush!

The United States sets the agenda and determines the terms of the US–Canada relationship. The policies of the Canadian government, much less the person-

ality of the Canadian prime minister, exert at best a tiny influence over events and at worst no influence whatsoever. To the US president, domestic political advantage in New Hampshire or North Dakota carries more importance than any US–Canada bilateral issue. Within these constraints, in a difficult moment in North American and world history, Jean Chrétien maximized the minuscule margin of manoeuvre available to him. He guarded Canada’s interests, enhanced its dignity, and emphasized US–Canada differences—those things that set Canada apart from the United States, those things that made it, in the words that he loved to quote, “the best country in the world.”

Chrétien’s successor has promised a new US–Canada golden age, to be built on friendlier personal relations with President Bush, and on frenetic attention in Ottawa to “managing” interaction with the United States. We’ll see. But there’s something pathetic about the first Bush–Martin moment at the Monterrey Summit of the Americas. Canadian papers gushed that the president had extended his pre-breakfast 10 minutes with Martin to 20.

There is surely no Canadian unfamiliar with Pierre Trudeau’s famous analogy that, in their binational relationship, the United States is an elephant and Canada a mouse? Why then do so few Canadians understand the deepest implication of that analogy? In a moment of pique, many years ago, *The Globe and Mail’s* Jeffrey Simpson put it best. Americans, he wrote, “know and care the square of squat about Canada.”