

America's return to greatness will force Canada to up its game

by Conrad Black

After participating a number of times on Canadian network television this year and waving the Maple Leaf flag around fairly exuberantly in these columns, the imminent change of regime in the United States prompts me to a little introspection. As I wrote in my recent history of Canada (Rise to Greatness), it has been a great accomplishment to keep pace with the astounding progress of the U.S., even after the United States accepted Canada as an autonomous country, thanks largely to John A. Macdonald's outstanding performance at the Washington Conference of 1871. The magnetic pull of that country and its attractions to talented and ambitious Canadians, once the dreadful struggle of the Civil War was over and the shame of slavery ended, continued to threaten to capsize the Canadian experiment.

As an officially bicultural country, Canada was even less a cultural nation-state like most of the nations of Europe whose boundaries were co-extensive with a distinct language, than was the U.S. The great majority of Germans, French, Italians, Spanish, Portuguese, Hungarians and Dutch, lived in Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Hungary and the Netherlands. Moving elsewhere implied a stark cultural adaptation. Canada was, arguably, the world's third English-language culture (though India could have contested that), and the second French (though the Belgians and even Vietnamese would have argued it for a time). We could not claim, as the Americans did, with the genius for exaggerated showmanship that has been a hallmark of that nationality since Revolutionary times, to be the repository and torch-bearer of human liberty. (The

Americans had no more individual freedom than they had had as British subjects.) And we could not claim any of the exaltation of soul and spirit as revolutionaries: the Rebellions of 1837 were a Gilbert and Sullivan affair and if we had dispensed with the British, or even seriously irritated them, the Americans would have swallowed us whole, at least up to about the start of the First World War.

Macdonald's National Policy of a trans-continental railroad and protective tariffs to promote Canadian industry roughly replicated American economic growth rates of eight per cent annually in the 1880s, but the country still fell behind in comparative population, which had fallen to 1/13th of that of the U.S. in 1897, when Wilfrid Laurier and Clifford Sifton came into office, 5.4 million to 75 million. Sifton launched his promotion of immigration throughout Europe, from Ireland to Russia, and immigration to Canada increased from 17,000 in 1896 to 401,000 in 1913, and despite immense numbers of immigrants to the United States, Laurier and Sifton closed the population window between the countries to about 12 to one. At each stage, Canada has done the necessary to preserve the golden thread of a bicultural democracy in the northern half of this rich continent that would refine and enhance all the elements of the British, French, American, aboriginal, and other heritages that influenced it. (Only the Christmas season induces me to inflict such saccharine platitudes on the persevering reader, but they do possess some current relevance.)

It is also the case that in the past 20 years, Canada has risen well beyond any previous comparative position it has enjoyed. The United States has had four consecutive terms of stark incompetence at self-government, a field where it has so often inspired the world with the feats of epochally great statesmen. The housing bubble, world financial crisis, insane, open-ended wars in the Middle East creating advances for enemies of the West such as Iran and extremist Islam and a

massive humanitarian crisis, vertiginous increases in national debt, the tacit admission of 12 million undocumented, unskilled immigrants, the disappearance of 10 per cent of the work force into poverty, the black or grey market, or aggravated dependency, and an incoherent foreign policy that has now descended to China, Russia, Iran and Turkey taking turns slapping America in the face, while the Obama administration yelps with delight like a masochist enjoying flagellation, and America's allies, most of them led by ill-assured regimes, wonder what to do next. In these circumstances, Canada has stepped out of the American shadow and achieved some recognition as a well-functioning, peaceable, equable, democracy, a graceful right-sized alternative to the battered giant neighbour: not an unjust posture, nor one that Canada has assumed with any abandonment of its traditional modesty.

In Washington, there is an other-worldly state of suspension between the inexorable exit of the unbelieving American political class of decades: all factions of both parties, all the Clintons, Bushes, and Obamas (OBushtons), the fetid corrupt world of lobbyists, commentators, pollsters, journalists, seething and fomenting like a malignant yeast in and around the mighty and mocking monuments of the defiled institutions of American government and the effigies of great historic figures, which remind the living of what man has been; and the arriving forces of regeneration.

Not even I, who, as persevering readers can attest, has not wavered in my view these 18 months that Donald Trump heralded, in an atavistic, inchoate, almost inexpressible way, a revival of American greatness, can claim that what is occurring is a majestic process. It has been a crude and nasty political campaign, with little eloquence, low ethics, and an orgy of imbecilic poor sportsmanship by the Clinton campaign, vainly challenging the results in certain states, railing like Lear against their unsuspected fate, retreating inelegantly, metre

by metre, as if prodded by flame-throwers.

The OBushton era has been the first time of absolute and relative decline in American history and the worst period of presidential misgovernment in American history. Obama is thrashing about prohibiting offshore drilling from Virginia to Maine, and calling for the boycott of Israel, like Nero fiddling in burning Rome or Hitler in his bunker ordering counter-attacks by long-decimated armies. But the forces of American renewal, unstylish, even rough, but relentlessly purposeful, are preparing a national and policy metamorphosis unprecedented in its scope and pace in non-revolutionary political history.

Donald Trump is right to claim a landslide, because although he lost the popular vote, he won the election running against everyone at or near the head of both parties, from the Sanders left to the Cruz right and including all the OBushtons, all the media, and all the pollsters. Unlike Roosevelt in 1933 who promised experimentation, or Lyndon Johnson in 1964 who laid out a bold extension of the existing state, Trump was not particularly explicit in his campaign, but has been very precise since the election as he has named his proposed department heads. The new secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, will lead an assault on the teachers' unions and deliver the nation's schools from those who have undermined their quality while multiplying their cost. The new Environmental Protection director, Scott Pruitt, will fight for conservation and against pollution, but dismantle the insane campaign for renewable resources and will promote the production of oil and natural gas and the reduction of the current account deficit. The national security team will reverse the reduction of American military strength and prepare to project it without waffling or drawing disappearing red lines. The Treasury and budget and economic team will shrink the federal government, cut taxes on small income earners and businesses, and tax elective spending and the financial impresarios of the

increasing velocity of money. The country's economic strength will no longer be measured by straight deal-flow. The new labour secretary, Andrew Puzder, will drive a nail through the fainting heart of the crooked labour confederations while defending the working man. The Congress's greatest authority on health care, Tom Price, has a mandate to replace Obamacare, a fraud and a boondoggle, with two-payer universal health care with assistance for those who need it. Campaign finance reform, which has been bobbled around like a grenade with the pin pulled will be addressed by the only candidate in history who effectively paid for his own campaign.

The appearance of disorganization in the Trump campaign was a ruse, just as the great Clinton ground game was a fraud. This is a radical program and it will be enacted by the Republican majorities in the Congress by July 4, and it will work. Instead of the flat-lined economy Hillary Clinton's high-tax welfare-vote-buying program would have produced, U.S. economic growth will move toward four per cent, putting considerable pressure on the Canadian dollar. American economic confidence levels are reaching historically high levels and Trump's approval rating has risen approximately 20 points in the in the seven weeks since the election.

Canadians still feel a reassuring public relations gap in their favour opposite the U.S., but within a few months, there is likely to be a strengthening of the American economy, a resolution of decades of gridlock in Washington, a clarity in public policy and a clear and sustainable definition of the U.S. national security interest in the world, that will require a much more sophisticated response from Justin Trudeau and Bill Morneau than what we have seen as they swanned through their honeymoon year. Posturing over renewable energy, the systematic denuding of the country's defence capability, and non-competitive aspects to the tax system will have to be addressed. Theresa May is made of sterner stuff than the long-gone David Cameron, Francois Fillon will be the strongest

French leader since de Gaulle, and Angela Merkel will be strengthened by a new coalition or replaced altogether by her own party. Putin will no longer look strong opposite weak Western leaders – as Hitler did when dealing with Chamberlain and Daladier (it became more complicated with Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin).

Justin and his entourage have not had a bad year, but the present fading echoes of the shrieks of disbelief over the U.S. election will soon yield to the clear, confident success of American leadership the world was familiar with over most of the half century spanning Roosevelt and Reagan.

Selfies, solidarity with the Castros, and re-enactments of any aspects of the McGuinty misgovernment miracle in Ontario won't cut it; it will soon be time for Justin Trudeau and his principal ministers to show their mettle.

Merry Christmas and a happy and successful 2017 to all.

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