



The U.S. Capitol seen from the Canadian Embassy on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington. It isn't just the White House Canada has to deal with, but equally two Houses of Congress, both now controlled by the Republicans. As Paul Frazer notes, Washington is an incredibly complex town. Shutterstock photo

Canada and the Ringmaster President

Paul Frazer

The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States has bilateral relations experts scrambling for clues as to what this means for the Ottawa-Washington policy axis. Veteran Canadian diplomat Paul Frazer, now an established Canada-U.S. consultant based in Washington, provides his early read on the next Oval Office occupant and how Canada should conduct itself accordingly.

We don't know what Donald Trump's victory will mean for Canada-U.S. relations. We can't even be sure what it means for the U.S. The post-election environment remains fluid. Trump's supporters voted for disruption; they chose someone they think is independent of the Republican Party "establishment" and they expect him to deliver. Voters, tired of Washington, wanted a straight-talker to act deliberately despite breaking some dishes along the way.

Canada faces a “ringmaster” 45th president who acts and speaks on his own terms and in his own time. He has provided scant detail about policies or specific action he will take as president. Random tweets on a wide variety of matters are the few clues about his post-election thinking.

Will the many issues in Canada-U.S. relations be dealt with primarily in 140 character bursts? Will the late-night tweet be the president’s public approach to deciding/announcing how an issue will be resolved? Is this a new and serious dimension in bilateral relations? Possibly.

The period between Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s election and the November presidential vote allowed Ottawa to take stock of the Canada-U.S. relationship and examine strategic options on TPP, NAFTA, softwood, pipelines, climate change, agriculture, border security and other border-related issues.

Regardless of who is president, the Canadian game plan in Washington must also recognize the need to work effectively with both Congress and the White House. The president and Congress are not always on the same wavelength even if the president and the congressional majority are (ostensibly) of the same party. Barack Obama had a majority in his first two years and discovered how quickly that power dissipated. But at least he and the Democratic party were reasonably united.

Trump’s victory has improved his relations with the Republican party and together they’ve enjoyed the post-victory moment. But given fundamental discord within the party, doubts about his conservative credentials and the Trump personality, expect the road ahead to be rocky. The natural tensions between the House and the Senate as well as between the president and Congress could become more significant.

T rump is enjoying the political epicentre. All supplicants file directly to him—some more than once. His manner

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is less bombastic but he continues to be unpredictable. He will not automatically be in line on party orthodoxy and this will set the stage for political struggles on a range of economic and public policy issues. For now, the party establishment and the party’s rebel factions seem prepared to give him some leeway.

Promoting and protecting bilateral trade, economic and defence issues requires that Canada have a clear idea of national interests, goals and objectives. This is a stiff challenge. It is important not to overreact; Canada must be vigilant, agile, cool and ready to act to support its interests. In Washington, a talent for multitasking is invaluable. Official Washington is notoriously complex and fraught with political land mines.

Canada’s bilateral strengths with the U.S. are embedded in the facts of the relationship and a history of sound bilateral co-operation and collaboration. But another strength can be a good understanding of the incoming president. Trump has shown he is not a hostage to ideology. His transactional nature and his results-oriented approach offer opportunities for Canada. By examining Trump’s stated interest in (and commitment to) “jobs, jobs, jobs” and support for the middle class and growing prosperity, Ottawa may identify excellent entry points for a bilateral conversation about areas also close to the political/policy heart of the present Canadian government.

Ottawa should consider approaching the bilateral relationship on an issue-by-issue basis rooted in economics and smart political strategy. Look closely at potential areas of common

cause and devise an approach to appeal to the new administration, especially the president’s self-image and to his circle, to satisfy U.S. needs and meet Canadian interests.

Initially, there may be few natural matches, but if Ottawa can get beyond the Trump political theatre there is potential to make progress in promoting and protecting Canadian interests.

Ottawa’s readiness to discuss NAFTA with the incoming administration is a very good example of keeping the door open to dialogue rather than mounting a knee-jerk negative response to what appeared to be a serious campaign promise. Trump’s statements on trade and tariffs are already generating some pushback among Republicans in Congress.

Canadian ministers, ambassadors and parliamentarians easily cite the numbers on cross-border trade, investment, and U.S. jobs rooted in the bilateral relationship. This is the Canadian mantra in Washington. However, today’s political circumstances require that Canada actively take this key message beyond Washington as well, to those who voted Republican because of their serious malaise, even anger, over the impact of globalization and the long, deep recession on their personal lives and communities.

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Ottawa can argue that what it wants for Canadians on these issues is what the president-elect wants for Americans. Methods and approaches will be different but that does not preclude successful efforts to reach common ground on specific issues and set a positive tone for managing relations.

The Trump administration will not be the first one to be inadequately prepared for the U.S.-Canada relationship. The sooner it learns the core facts and sees the collaborative opportunities, the better.

Canada must move quickly beyond impressions and uncertainty and work to define the relationship in constructive and imaginative ways. Show the administration how working with Canada can pay dividends; how building on what exists will enhance U.S. and Canadian economic, job creation, and middle class interests. I suspect Mr. Trump will understand before most that there are excellent opportunities on the bilateral horizon in keeping with his own views; but he needs a straightforward brief that speaks his language.

“Canada” was not an issue in the presidential campaign nor is it a source of present anxiety. Few Americans recognize Canada as a NAFTA partner. They don’t know the real relationship nor the value that accrues to them from it. Canada should use this to engage the new administration and the Congress. There are members of the House and Senate in both parties who are Canada’s allies on many issues. But this can’t be taken for granted and must be enhanced and broadened.

Americans, generally, are open to information, they will listen and they can be practical when challenged to address a matter relevant to their (political) interests. They will not “roll over” on an issue to favor Canada and it is therefore incumbent on Ottawa to devise the strategic case to meet U.S. needs while serving Canadian interests.

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The incoming vice president is another critical entry point. He is emerging as a sound, stable and trusted voice in the new administration. As governor of Indiana, he was very active on trade and investment and will appreciate Indiana’s role within the Canada-U.S. economic/trade context with its almost 190,000 Canada-dependent jobs and nearly \$12 billion in high-value exports to Canada.

We won’t have a clear picture of the full range of cabinet choices, White House advisors and senior appointees for departments and agencies until the confirmation hearings in early 2017. The new Congress will be in place before the new president’s inauguration on January 20.

International events and U.S. domestic developments will impact the administration’s ability to focus on a consistent, constructive bilateral role with Canada, let alone on international issues of mutual interest. But the bilateral aspect is a long game and Canada must do the bigger job of keeping both players on track.

This requires Ottawa’s diligence, patience and a clear-headed strategy. There will be early setbacks. Interminable softwood discussions have clearly demonstrated that some issues have no easy resolution. Canadian frustrations will increase on some subjects until Canadian and U.S. decision-makers get a sense of each other. Expect issues such as Buy

America to emerge in protectionist legislation on trade and domestic infrastructure initiatives; U.S. actions taken against others could readily sideswipe Canada.

The prime minister and the new president differ from each other in many ways. These differences must not be allowed to impede their ability to manage the relationship. This “newness” is an important opportunity for both to meet, to get to know each other, to test each other’s mettle and to explore opportunities together.

In this period, Ottawa should continue to consider the potential impact of any proposed Canadian policy—foreign or domestic—that can be ill-perceived or misunderstood south of the 49th parallel. I am not suggesting that Ottawa be silent so much as strategic in the manner that it rolls out certain measures. Ottawa did an excellent job positioning the Canadian program for Syrian refugees. Confidence building measures can be critically important.

As other prime ministers have discovered, there are many “Pentagon pipsqueaks” who claim to speak for a party, for Congress or for the White House. This can be avoided and need not derail or taint bilateral efforts. Given the disparity between the character of the government of the day in Ottawa and that which is forming the new U.S. administration, Canada needs to devise the best calculus to work with Washington while promoting and protecting Canadian interests.

Trump trampled long-standing norms in his presidential campaign. Canada must identify the new points of contact with a larger-than-life President-elect and use them effectively to secure a relationship larger than both national leaders. **P**

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