

# Canadian Perspective: Assessing an Obama Presidency

By [Global Research](#)

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*The Left in the US and around the world is celebrating the end of the Bush Presidency. We also celebrate the election of an African-American to the Presidency of what remains a deeply racist country. And what person on the Left does not want 'change'? This all raises deeper questions about Obama's Presidency, alongside a more strongly Democratic Congress. Will this bring an end to neoliberalism?*

*How will the changes impact American imperialism in the Middle East and policy responses to the financial crisis? What are the implications for racism and the Left in the US and in Canada? The Bullet here presents two commentaries on the Obama election speculating on its implications for Canada. These are part of discussions that Socialist Project thinks should occur across the country as part of a process of renewing the left, which remains deeply divided and in retreat, as with a forum in Toronto announced below.*

## **On Race: Expect Canadian Politics To Stay (mostly) White**

### **Rinaldo Walcott**

Let me begin with a confession: The phenomenon that is Barack Obama so fascinated me that I was left in the throes of a rather buoyant addiction to the U.S. Democratic primaries. CNN reports radiated from my television 24 hours a day. I compulsively perused half a dozen newspapers and twice as many websites to keep myself up-to-date on the Obama-Clinton race. Never had I conceived of a time when a black man might clinch a nomination of a major American political primary, but now that Obama is the presumptive nominee, and the election has shifted in the way of uninspiring drivel and a choice between lesser evils, my CNN days are in drastic decline. If I were able to vote in the U.S. election, I would have no candidate to vote for.

It's clear now that Obama's emergence comes more from what he represents than the politics he has articulated. As pundit after pundit has pointed out, there is little difference between the positions and policies of Obama and his former, more conservative rival, Hillary Clinton, especially regarding the Palestinian/Israeli conflict and the war in Afghanistan. Obama and Republican nominee John McCain are shockingly similar in their market policies as well. Both of them, with minor differences, believe in a free market that regulates itself. Don't expect any fundamental political change come January 2009.

Barack Obama is not the liberal, inspirational, policy saviour that the U.S. and the world needs, and once observers here accept this fact, they can proceed to think carefully about

what his emergence means for black Canadians and the Canadian political system.

The truth is that Obama buttresses the myth that those who work hard enough can achieve what they want, which continues to hold sway over what is possible for those outside America's mythical origins. In many ways, the realities of multiculturalism just do not measure up, especially in the Canadian political system.

The parliamentary closed-shop of Canadian party politics makes it especially difficult to be an insurgent candidate, and the fabricated story of Obama as an outsider breaking into U.S. politics is not about to make itself present in Canadian politics.

Whenever attitudes toward black people in the U.S. shift and change, Canada follows suit and mirrors its lead on race relations. The history of civil rights in the U.S. and its forced inclusion of African Americans warranted similar changes in Canada as well. In Canada we follow the U.S. on these questions in a manner that suggests questions of race and racism are not a fundamental aspect of Canadian nation-building, and thus not a priority for our own national consciousness. At least in the U.S. it is impossible to pretend that race, racism and thus race relations are not central to its national formation and its contemporary conversations.

Obama's meteoric rise was planned, crafted and strategically executed by him and his Chicago political backers and has no Canadian counterpart. In a political context, Canada is a scene devoid of black Canadians in the upper echelons who could be rolled out in the same fashion as Obama. In the Canadian party system, sponsorship still operates in a fairly narrow realm of WASP family dynasties. Additionally, the demographics both in terms of population numbers and geographic concentration of black Canadians means that they do not exercise voting bloc practices in federal, provincial and municipal elections, which means they are not specifically courted. Insurgent black candidates who could use party connections to emerge as representative figures are non-existent in our system because of this.

More profoundly, black Canadians only tangentially identify as a national group, preferring instead to be Nigerian or Barbadian or Somali. In this multicultural, multiracial nation of ours, politics is still a white game. Politicians continually trumpet our demographics while keeping almost every level of government essentially white. If Obama's Democratic nomination means anything for black Canadians, it is a rebuke of our multicultural reality, which is fraught with a quite serious lie: being black still signals to many that you might not be Canadian and therefore do not legitimately belong, despite our touted multicultural citizenry.

Contemporary Canada likes to recognize itself as a nation of immigrants but when it comes to articulating the future vision of nation, province and city, the founding fathers return with a vengeance to tell us black Canadians just where our place is: following their vision, not adding to it or directing what it should be. Obama's symbolism should remind us of this failure in a country that requires more and more immigrants to secure its continued economic health and wealth.

In the realm of politics, who are the black Canadians? If Obama's symbolism is to mean anything, it might produce more Carol-Anne Wrights and Rosemary Browns (remember them?). For that to happen, though, the closed-shop party system needs to have its doors

smashed wide open. •

*Rinaldo Walcott is an associate professor of black diaspora cultural studies at the University of Toronto. This article originally published at This Magazine.*

## **Why Obama is Bad for Canada**

### **Matthew Brett**

With the universal sigh of relief exhausted following the election of America's first black president, anti-war activists in Canada have serious reason for concern as the new U.S. administration takes shape.

Even prior to Obama's selection of a transition team, his rhetoric on Afghanistan was pointed.

Reasons for concern were confirmed in a Nov. 12 article that appeared in Embassy, a Canadian foreign policy weekly.

The war in Afghanistan is sucking up financial resources, and public servants are highly critical of the policy as other files and commitments in Africa and elsewhere fall by the wayside.

Cited in the Embassy article, Norman Paterson School of International Affairs director Fen Hapson said he expects the holes left in Foreign Affairs and CIDA to become larger in the face of shrinking budgets and hiring freezes as the economic crisis spreads into Canada.

Hapson says Canada will not be able to afford making cuts to the mission in Afghanistan because of its importance to the U.S. and, especially, the Obama administration.

Cuts, naturally, will be made to major social programs and that which matters most.

"Canada's major foreign policy priority is going to be to make inroads with the new administration," Hapson said. "The fact that we are one of the major players in Afghanistan, alongside the Americans, is a very important card and, I would say, lever of influence with the incoming Obama administration.

"We're not just investing in Afghanistan's future, we're also investing in the Canada-U.S. relationship and partnership. So when you do the accounting you have to include that political calculation into the equation."

The implications are wide-ranging. A Conservative minority government would not likely survive another broken promise by extending the war beyond 2011, but the transfer to a civilian mission is already apparent in Canada.

These are the same Canadian civil servants that forced the election and consequent appointment of Hamid Karzai to presidency.

These are also likely the same civil servants who helped draft the country's retrogressive constitution, as Canada was very active in the creation of Afghanistan's new regime.

Will Obama even respect Canada's 2011 withdraw deadline when Afghanistan is one of his

priorities? Or will Obama, like Bush, make a 24th hour call on Canada to ramp up its support for this failed war?

Perhaps more importantly, will Harper respect his 2011 withdrawal promise? The promise was made, after all, during an election campaign to quell opposition to the war. A 2011 withdrawal deadline was never presented to Parliament, and this is certainly something that a coalition partnership between the NDP, Bloc and Liberals could fight for when the House resumes, given that a coalition government looks unlikely

Canada has presented itself as a key player in the fateful U.S.-UK partnership, and the withdrawal of Canada from Afghanistan two year's into an Obama presidency would cause no end of problems to the Democrats — problems that neither Liberals nor Conservatives would wish to inflict.

These seem to be some of the key foreign policy questions that Canadian anti-war activists should be asking themselves.

How can the Left organize itself around these issues to insure Canada makes a full withdrawal by 2011, if not sooner?

The current Liberal leadership race seems to be an ideal time to expose a potential shift in policy on Afghanistan.

Viable Liberal candidates are clearly supportive of the war effort, but they could very well be persuaded into an anti-war position as a means of garnering support by standing up against a widely opposed occupation.

Recently elected members of parliament and incumbent MPs are also important to pressure in this respect.

This is by no means a radical proposal, but it is certainly the most viable given the weak state of the Canadian anti-war movement nearly nine years into the occupation.

Any attainable gestures toward a withdrawal should be pursued by the Canadian Peace Alliance and its partners, other social organizations and the religious left. There is little time to waste in this respect as the Harper-Obama stars will quickly align.

This war must end now, and Obama threatens to drag Canada deeper into a military industrial complex, during a financial crisis, and at the cost of major social programs and humanitarian foreign policy initiatives that have fallen into a state of neglect under Chrétien, Martin and now Harper.

With all this talk of Change, perhaps Afghanistan is not the only thing Canadians should be deeply concerned about with an Obama presidency.

**Matthew Brett** is the Canadian Dimension Weblog manager.

### **SP Forum: Assessing an Obama Presidency**

6:30-8:30pm Friday November 21, 2008. Room LG-11, George Vari Centre, Ryerson University, 245 Church Street, Toronto.

The Left in the US and around the world is celebrating the end of the Bush Presidency. We also celebrate the election of an African-American to the Presidency of what remains a deeply racist country. And what person on the Left does not want 'change'? But this all raises many further questions about Obama's Presidency, elected alongside a more strongly Democratic Congress. What will their responses be to American militarism and interventions across the Middle East and Asia, and to the Wall Street crisis and bailout? What are the implications for the Left in the US and in Canada? Three of Canada's leading labour activists and critics of American society will address these and other issues.

Speakers: • Abbie Bakan, Department of Political Studies, Queen's University • Ajamu Nangwaya, CUPE labour activist and educator • Herman Rosenfeld, CAW Retiree, and Labour Studies, McMaster University

Drinks After the Forum: Imperial Pub (upstairs), 54 Dundas St. East.

Organized by the Socialist Project ([www.socialistproject.ca](http://www.socialistproject.ca)) and International Socialists. Co-Sponsored by Centre for Social Justice.

PDF poster <http://www.socialistproject.ca/events/event435.pdf>

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