

## Official Visit to Canada: A first 'first' for Obama

By [Eric Walberg](#)

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Barack Obama's first international trip as United States president was a quickie seven-hour visit to Canada's capital Ottawa, where he thrilled adoring fans by calling Canada "sexy", though he added, "even if it's in an unsexy way," a rather backhanded if appropriate compliment for those toque-clad, rosy cheeked admirers bussed in to catch a glimpse of the new president. One commentator compared his visit to the Second Coming. He was greeted at the airport by his fellow black head of state, Michaëlle Jean, Canada's Haitian-born governor general, who along with 80 per cent of Canadians are delighted that the days of George W Bush are over. He then met Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who was a big supporter of Bush and is most certainly not one of Obama's fans.

Despite being ideological opposites, Harper was nonetheless delighted that he merited the coveted "first". It traditionally belongs to Mexico, but Harper is a key ally for Obama in his Afghanistan war, vowing to keep 2,500 troops in the volatile Kandahar region for another two years despite polls that show 60 per cent of Canadians want them home now. They have suffered the third largest casualty rate, with 108 deaths. No doubt Obama's generals decided on where Obama would go first.

Other issues that unite the neighbours in an uncomfortable embrace are trade and environmental regulations. On the eve of the trip, Obama renewed his call to renegotiate North American Free Trade Agreement, an early campaign pledge that he dropped once his campaign was taken over by the corporate elite. He emphasised that he wanted to strengthen labour and environmental standards in the pact, which have proven toothless in practice. "My hope is that... there's a way of doing this that is not disruptive to the extraordinarily important trade relationships that exist between the United States and Canada." Harper warned that it was a "very complex agreement" and cautioned against reopening it.

However, the deepening depression means that just about any policy is now up for grabs. The \$787 billion stimulus package originally included a "Buy American" clause for idle steel producers, which alarmed Canadian producers. Harper dared to lecture him publicly: "If we pursue stimulus packages, the goal of which is only to benefit ourselves... we will deepen the world recession, not solve it." Obama reassured Harper that he wanted "to grow trade and not contract it".

NAFTA was signed into law by president Bill Clinton in 1993, bringing the US, Canada and Mexico into a common market. At the time, former secretary of state Henry Kissinger described the agreement as "the most creative step toward a new world order since the end of the Cold War." Interestingly, he just last month called the current world economic crisis a "unique opportunity for creative diplomacy" to achieve his "new world order". For those who

shudder at what he has in mind, perhaps NAFTA would be better scrapped than merely adjusted. Since free trade suggests a minimum of governmental regulation, the fact that the agreement between political elites is “very complex” is an oxymoron.

The agreement has little to do with genuine free trade and a great deal to do with greater economic and even political union. It builds on the experience of the European Union, which was the result of a series of NAFTA-like agreements (the European Coal and Steel Community, the Common Market, the European Atomic Community and the European Community). The EU now has its own flag, parliament, courts, currency, and issues passports. But with the current economic crisis, thankfully, there is as yet little incentive to pursue such an agenda in North America.

Canada has several complaints about unfair US trade practices, one concerning beef exports, which will be exacerbated by US Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack’s proposal for changes to country-of-origin labels on meat sold in US stores. Canada shelved a World Trade complaint last month that charged the US labelling law was a trade barrier that depressed prices for Canadian livestock. Canadian Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz warned that Canada would revive its WTO challenge if proposed protectionist rules are put in place.

Regarding energy and the environment, the two leaders are poles apart. Harper has made Canada the object of ridicule for his refusal to abide by Canada’s commitments to the Kyoto Protocol, his enthusiasm for the ecologically disastrous tar sands of Alberta, and Canada’s wasteful use of energy in general. Nonetheless, the leaders discussed a joint initiative to strengthen research and development on clean energy, including the reduction of carbon emissions and the development of a shared electricity grid. “I’m quite optimistic that we now have a partner on the North American continent that will provide leadership to the world on the climate change issue, and I think that’s an important development,” said Harper. He hopes this “leadership” will agree to exempt Canada’s oil sands from any new American environmental regulations.

A note of whimsy was struck by ageing French movie icon and long time animal-rights activist Brigitte Bardot, who has for decades campaigned against Canadians hunting baby seals on ice flows in the spring. She sent a letter to Obama urging him to speak out against seal hunting while in Canada. The US banned Canadian seal products in 1972. The EU is considering a ban on seal products, and Bardot expressed hope that Obama could use his positive image in Europe to lobby for the ban.

Harper is fretting these days, worried about his own political future, after calling an early election last November, hoping to coast to a majority government on the back of his beloved US hawks. But his calculations were mistaken. The hawks were trounced (unless you consider Obama a hawk in sheep’s clothing), and he was almost deposed by an invigorated opposition. They called on Governor General Jean to give them the reins of power after Harper introduced a budget undermining election financing laws and ignoring the economic crisis besetting the world. What Harper told Jean has never been disclosed, but she quickly caved in to Harper and dissolved parliament for two months, letting Harper lick his wounds and introduce a budget which met all the opposition’s demands. However, the writing is on the wall for this “unsexy” politician, and Obama would do well to keep a polite distance from him.

Canada’s relationship with the US was famously compared to a mouse sleeping with an elephant by prime minister Pierre Trudeau. Jack Granatstein of the Canadian Defence and

Foreign Affairs Institute grimly called on Canadians to pray for Obama to get America 's act together, writing that "if the United States falls into the pit, Canada will be one of the nations dragged down with it."

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### **About the author:**

Canadian Eric Walberg is known worldwide as a journalist specializing in the Middle East, Central Asia and Russia. A graduate of University of Toronto and Cambridge in economics, he has been writing on East-West relations since the 1980s. He has lived in both the Soviet Union and Russia, and then Uzbekistan, as a UN adviser, writer, translator and lecturer. Presently a writer for the foremost Cairo newspaper, Al Ahram, he is also a regular contributor to Counterpunch, Dissident Voice, Global Research, Al-Jazeera and Turkish Weekly, and is a commentator on Voice of the Cape radio. Eric Walberg was a moderator and speaker at the Leaders for Change Summit in Istanbul in 2011.

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