

Reagan, Canada, and the Common Environment

by Don Munton

Whatever Ronald Reagan's eventual legacy, his tenure is clearly challenging the notion that, in politics, established patterns and structures dominate transitory office holders. At a time when cynicism abounds about such trappings of democracy as elections, when positions on issues seem less matters of conviction than matters for compromise, and when arguments that bureaucracies cannot be beaten seem to have become established orthodoxy, along comes this most unlikely of successful revolutionaries. Suddenly, it seems, philosophies and personalities can indeed prevail.

President Reagan's apparent impact on foreign policy matters appears no less evident in America's relations with its contiguous, friendly, northern neighbor than in relations with its other, unfriendly, northern neighbor. The current list of Canada-U.S. irritants is as long as, if not longer than, it was in the infamous days of the 1971 Nixon economic shock. And many of the outstanding issues reflect the different and diverging perspectives, philosophical and political, of Reagan's Washington and Trudeau's Ottawa. The "good ole boy" days of Jimmy and Pierre seem very distant. For many observers a change of climate was not unexpected. Indeed, if the Gallup poll is to be believed, the Canadian public at large sensed the approach of a chill.

When Jimmy Carter was entering the White House in 1977 most Canadians apparently anticipated no change in Canada's relations with the U.S. (50 percent of those polled) or thought relations would improve (25 percent). Only a small minority (five percent) expected a deterioration. This generally positive reaction was actually very similar to that reflected in Canadian polls after the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960. A significantly different feeling prevailed, however, on Ronald Reagan's inauguration. While about one in four (27 percent) Canadians thought relations would improve, as many or more (28 percent) believed they would worsen. Fewer, about one in five (22 percent), anticipated no change. In other words, compared with previous incoming presidents, Ronald Reagan was viewed as a benign factor by half as many Canadians and expected to be a negative factor by five times as many.

Canada's experiences with the first year of the Reagan

administration may or may not have significantly altered this mood. The apparently new perception of the U.S. presidency as a potent and negative influence on the bilateral relationship nevertheless appears to have been borne out. This is perhaps the case most evidently seen in the environmental area. The direction of some key joint transboundary pollution endeavors has been changed fundamentally. Moreover, the changes from Canada's perspective are not for the better and the effects will become even more noticeable in the longer term. Whether the changes are as substantial or the effects as certain in other policy areas is another matter.

The tone is set in the appointments

The influences being felt on Canada-U.S. relations, given Reagan's tendency to delegate responsibility, are probably, even more than is usually the case, those of his appointees. And here the contrasts with the previous Carter administration are stark. The official in the Carter Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) directly responsible for air pollution policy was David Hawkins, who was originally recruited from an active and well-known environmental lobby group called the Natural Resources Defense Council. (Hawkins, incidentally, returned to that organization after the Carter defeat.) His successor as Assistant Administrator of EPA is Kathleen Bennett, who, like Hawkins, was a recognized expert on the U.S. Clean Air Act, but who, in contrast, had earned her stripes lobbying for corporate clients against EPA air pollution regulations.

Another key figure in the new Washington lineup is James McAvoy, formerly director of environmental protection for the Rhodes administration in Ohio — a government with the well-deserved reputation of being the least sympathetic to pollution control of all the Great Lakes basin states. McAvoy's credentials are more loyal conservative Republican than his colleagues; his previous appointment under Rhodes was as assistant director of mental health programs. He has the dubious distinction of being the only would-be Reagan appointment in the environmental area to be turned down by Congress. Testifying for Ohio at hearings in 1980, he flatly denied that acid rain was a serious problem. He is now apparently the chief White House strategist on acid rain.

In short, the perspective of officials in charge of U.S. environmental policy has shifted from almost one end of the spectrum to the other. The present crop is loyal, firm, even aggressive, in its pursuit of de-regulation and govern-

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