

# Issues of interest to Canada in the US election

by B.H. Barlow

Among the large number of potential issues in the 1988 elections in the United States, which ones were particularly important for our country? How were they treated in the campaign, and why were they particularly important? What finally will the victory of George Bush mean for Canada as these issues get translated into policy? Canadians, undoubtedly, will not completely agree on what is crucial for Canada in the US political arena, but let us look at how the parties and candidates approached four broad issues that have received much attention in Canada in recent years.

These subjects are foreign policy, particularly with respect to Central America; military and NATO policy; trade policy; and policies toward the environment, especially the festering matter of acid rain. Some of these choices are obvious, some perhaps less so, for example, US foreign policy, which often affects Canada. It affects us if we send our peace-keeping troops to hot-spots where the big powers have been involved. We have not yet sent such troops to Central America, but such a development is wholly possible; what has taken place in Canada in the last decade is a tidal wave of interest in a region of which we had known little or nothing. Revolutionary movements in Nicaragua and El Salvador, and the US counterrevolutionary response of "low intensity conflict," have spurred one of the largest volumes of mail in history to Parliament Hill as well as of reports from parliamentary committees, most recently from the Bosley subcommittee.

## Defence and trade

With respect to NATO and military policy, besides the fact of Canada's membership in the alliance — which was also an issue in our own election campaign — the Progressive Conservative government has set out on a massive armaments purchase program, highlighted by plans to buy nuclear-powered submarines at a cost of several billion dollars. How, therefore, did the US political leaders see the arms race and the NATO-Soviet bloc confrontation?

As for trade, it was the main issue in the Canadian election; for the United States the debate over protectionism versus free trade naturally extends beyond the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement and involves not only other countries but also (as in Canada) domestic economic well-being. Even more than trade, environmental policy may appear to Americans as a domestic issue, but few subjects have aroused as much concern in Canada in the last decade as acid rain, the major but not the only environmental problem between the countries.

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Just as the other issues, this one points up two combined factors in Canada's relations with the US: the latter's power and its nearness. Did the campaign indicate that the United States would use this power in the conservative context of the last eight years? Three places to search for an answer were the two parties' platforms, the approaches of the two tickets, and some recent actions of the Congress.

Looking briefly at each of these, party platforms are not and cannot be binding on the elected members of the parties because of the loose and undisciplined nature of the US party system; few sanctions exist to punish a wayward member who enjoys the support of powerful special interests and constituents. The platforms, however, give some sense of party views, as do the campaign speeches and strategies. Congressional actions offer a clue as to whether these proposals will ever be policy.

## Foreign policy

What sort of policies, first of all, were put forward in relation to Central America? Neither of the parties' platform planks on the subject provided much of a surprise. The Republicans, as they have done since the 1980 convention, denounced Nicaragua as a "Soviet client state," warned of the threat to democratic progress from the "Soviet military machine and armed subversion exported from Nicaragua, Cuba, and the USSR," and stood "shoulder to shoulder" with the Contras.

In the case of the Democrats, the plank and its adoption offered a bit more interesting story. The original version of their foreign policy position denounced "undefined missions to Lebanon and Honduras" and the "consistent undermining" by the Reagan administration of the peace process set in motion by the Arias peace plan. The party's left, however, led by Jesse Jackson, got the convention to strengthen the plank by calling for an "end to support for irregular forces" (the Contras, of course) and to US efforts to get Central American governments to cease destabilizing other countries in the region. The Democrats stressed the importance of negotiations and elections over military solutions, and they denounced deals with drug smugglers, a vague reference to the financing of the Contras through such channels.

In the campaign itself, interestingly, the candidates all but ignored the subject. The best examples were the two presidential debates which almost wholly avoided the issues affecting Canada. On the somewhat related topic of the 1985 invasion of Grenada, George Bush attacked Michael Dukakis for being vague on whether or not he supported that action.

## Central America

It is not hard to understand this lack of attention. As in other countries, foreign policy rarely grabs the public interest in the