

Trump and Trudeau: A Successful “First Date”

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E-Notes

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U.S. President Donald Trump meeting with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at the White House.

One of the classic descriptions of the U.S.-Canada bilateral relationship is that “We are best friends—like it or not.” And all too often “not” has been in ascendancy.

The practical parameters of that simple characterization are relatively complex. Trying for a good “fit” between the governing parties and personalities can be challenging:

- When both sets of leaders are “conservative,” (e.g., U.S. Republicans and Canadian Tories), relations are relatively smooth;
- Likewise, when both governing authorities are “liberal,” (U.S. Democrats and Canadian Liberals), relations are relatively smooth as well;
- Problems occur when U.S. Republicans are juxtaposed with Canadian Liberals or when U.S. Democrats encounter Canadian Conservatives.

That said, the bumps and grinds are probably greater when Canadian Liberals with “attitude” encounter conservative Republicans with significantly different worldviews. We have seen such when Chretien Liberals

clashed with GHW Bush in the early 1990s and again when Martin Liberals struggled with “Dubya” Bush. For their part, to demonstrate independence, Liberals want the poorest possible bilateral relationship that will not prompt USG retaliation. On the other hand, Canadian Conservatives want to have as good a relationship with the United States as possible (without giving Canadians the impression their prime minister is a poodle).

Thus, Tory PM Stephen Harper struggled through much of the Obama administration attempting to extract a positive USG response on the “no brainer” decision to approve the Keystone Pipeline to convey Alberta oil through the United States. Concurrently, Harper’s foreign policy strongly supported Israel, backed Ukraine resistance to Russian aggression, participated in fighting against ISIS, and committed to purchase U.S. F-35s—all ostensibly USG priorities. To no avail. Obama wouldn’t even deign to offer Harper an official state visit (something he did instantly for PM Justin Trudeau).

Consequently, for much of a year, starting with Trudeau’s victory in October 2015, it was close to being the “best of all possible worlds” for Ottawa—characterized by a “bromance” between Obama and Trudeau. Trudeau didn’t push Keystone, backed away from axiomatic support for Israel and Ukraine, and warmed to the UN (which Harper viewed with contempt). Trudeau-Obama views on environment and energy coincided. Obama overlooked Ottawa’s minimalistic defense/security commitments, including his rejection of the F-35 purchase. And Trudeau got Harper’s official state visit in March 2016.

Doubtless, Trudeau anticipated a victory by Hillary Clinton in November 2016 and, consequently, a continuation of the congenial Democrat-Liberal relationship. But a funny thing happened on the way to the White House. And the best laid plans...

For Canada’s Liberal government/Trudeau, the Trump victory meant a 180-degree pivot so far as anticipated personal congeniality was concerned. And they hoped that palliative, nonconfrontational approaches could avoid or mitigate disasters anticipated from economic confrontation. How was Canada to manage that southern “elephant,” which in the best of times produced northern angst with every twist and twitch, from rolling over?

Already, President Trump had blithely blown past previous historical signposts by not having initial major meetings with foreign leaders of Canada or Mexico. Instead, the first meetings were with UK’s PM Theresa May and Japan’s PM Shinzo Abe.

But Canada’s PM Justin Trudeau met with President Trump and separately with congressional leaders in a hurry-up meeting on 13 February. In truth, Trump and Trudeau are close to polar opposites. If one could read minds, one might conclude: “He’s a pinko twit who never met a payroll” vs “He’s a sexist, racist, braggart bully who lost the popular vote.” The likelihood of a “bromance” equivalent to that between President Barak Obama and Trudeau would be akin to anticipating Potomac River icebergs—or Rideau Canal palm trees.

Thus, we should not anticipate President Trump offering an official state visit to Trudeau (Obama covered that base after denying former PM Harper the honor). Nor should we anticipate Trudeau will propose Trump visit Ottawa to address Parliament. Indeed, Trudeau’s objectives were probably avoiding a shouting match blowup as media characterized Trump’s conversation with Australian PM Turnbull, sparked by differences over refugees. Or the remarkable 19-second “handshake” with Japan’s PM Abe that video indicated ended with Abe’s obvious relief.

Consequently, the sides focused on areas of agreement. Both desire to increase the prosperity of their middle class citizens (“...we will coordinate closely to protect jobs in our hemisphere and keep wealth on our continent...”). They want to secure borders (“safe, efficient and responsible cross-border travel and immigration.”) They value useful infrastructure by building “even more bridges and bridges of cooperation and bridges of commerce.” And they look forward “to the expeditious completion of the Gordie Howe International Bridge” between Detroit and Windsor.

There was no NAFTA trashing. President Trump spoke imprecisely of “tweaking” for the Canada portion of the Treaty, suggesting his primary concern was Mexico. They dodged disagreements on refugee admission, where

Trudeau-Canada policy is vastly more congenial to Syrian refugees with Trudeau somewhat disingenuously saying that he did not come to a foreign country to “lecture” others how to manage their politics.

And, in a stroke of genius, a prominent portion of the meeting revolved around creating a joint task force (The Canada-U.S. Council for Advancement of Women Entrepreneurs and Business Leaders) to “recommend ways to promote women-owned enterprises and boost economic growth.” The session, apparently orchestrated by Trump’s daughter, Ivanka, met in the White House cabinet room, the first time Trump used that office. It featured five prominent female business executive and leading entrepreneurs from each country. Adroitly, it gave Trudeau a chance to reinforce his feminist credentials in Canada (and Trump the occasion to mitigate some sexist expletives directed against him).

To be sure there was some BOMFOG (Brotherhood of Man; Fatherhood of God) language in formal statements: “Our two nations share much more than a border. We share the same values...I pledge to work with you in pursuit of our many shared interests. ... at the end of the day, Canada and the U.S. will always remain each other’s most essential partner...Our families have long lived together and worked together...the pillar of which our relationship is built is one of mutual respect...[quoting Winston Churchill] the long ...frontier from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans [is] guarded only by neighborly respect and honorable obligations...” (The preceding is material selected from Trudeau’s and Trump’s statements that could have been spoken by either.)

But, one can assume, that in more private conversation, there was potential discussion of more neuralgic topics:

Trade. Reopening NAFTA is a baseline campaign commitment for President Trump. He believes it to be one of the worst agreements we ever ratified and vows to improve it substantially. Although more directed at Mexico and the belief that U.S. unemployment substantially derives from U.S. factories lured to Mexico, Canada is certainly in the gunsight as well. “Tweaking” the Canada portion still could envision attack on Canadian dairy and poultry restrictions on U.S. imports. Likewise, Canadian softwood lumber subsidies will be targeted.

Canada has a weak hand. Ottawa can note the reality that it is easier to get into renegotiation of major agreements than to emerge satisfied. And doubtlessly protracted negotiations will generate uncertainty and investor unease, damaging economic development.

Security. In both domestic and international security efforts, Trump sees Canada as wanting. Trudeau’s de facto open door refugee admission policy begs the possibility of border-crossing terrorists. Implicit Canadian indifference to U.S. importuning over securing the border is a never-ending issue. Ottawa believes Uncle Sam is paranoid when we should only be neurotic.

More specifically, so far as military expenditures are concerned, Canada is the classic underperformer. Ottawa spends far below the 2 percent objective for NATO members; its naval shipbuilding program is in chaos, and its evasive failure to commit to F-35 purchase virtually a deliberate insult. Continued unwillingness to commit to defeating ISIS by employing serious forces (beyond a token handful of Special Forces equivalents for “training” Iraqi Kurds) directly rejects Trump’s commitment to annihilate ISIS forthwith. Obama carefully avoided such (justified) criticism, but current USG officials certainly will not.

Energy. This could be a bilateral positive—if Trudeau chooses correctly. Trump has revived the Keystone Pipeline; ostensibly both sides endorsed it. Trudeau’s commitment to any pipelines, however, seems intellectual/political rather than visceral. The Liberals owe little to Alberta as there are only four Liberal MPs from the province, and environmentalists are heavyweights in Liberal circles while oil producers/refiners beg for crumbs.

Next U.S. Ambassador. The Twitter sphere identified former Alaska governor/VP candidate, Sarah Palin, as the prospective U.S. ambassador for Ottawa. While probably a tongue-in-cheek trial/lead balloon, Palin would be the first woman as U.S. ambassador to Canada—and certainly not afraid of the cold. Perhaps you would see her on a dog sled or Skidoo heading from the Residence to the Embassy or at least ice skating on the Rideau Canal.

Nevertheless, Trudeau entered the lion's den and, with the equivalent of saying "nice kitty/nice kitty," exited intact. In short, to mix metaphors, "a successful first date."