

COMMENTARY

A little courtin' would refresh Canada-U.S. ties

ROBIN SEARS

From Wednesday's Globe and Mail

November 19, 2008 at 12:12 AM EST

Only at the highest levels of statesmanship does one find more peculiar bedfellows than in ordinary politics -- that's why Stephen Harper and Barack Obama should work quickly to develop a strong personal relationship.

For Mr. Harper, the risks of becoming the first Canadian prime minister to have a real friendship with an American president since Brian Mulroney are smaller than they may appear. Mr. Obama is widely popular among Canadians, even Conservatives. For Mr. Obama, being able to demonstrate a shared agenda on energy, the environment and the economy with his most important partner on each is proof of his international skills -- and with a leader with whom he needs to reach "across the political aisle." Each man faces the same crisis: an economy heading fast for a deeper ditch than most of us can recall.

This crisis should be the foundation that permits two men with very different political values but very similar personal approaches to political leadership to find common ground. Each is a cool, disciplined intellectual. Each brings great strategic intelligence to their roles. Each relies on a very small group of devoted advisers and suffers the fools and drama queens of politics badly. Leaders with much less in common have built strong partnerships in similar circumstances. The difference in their partisan convictions can be left on the table while finding solutions to their shared economic nightmare.

It is a cliché to us that no two economies are more integrated. That reality is less well understood in Washington. Before the current turmoil sent economic engines on both sides of the border into a tailspin, the post-9/11 friction was doing a lot of damage to the successes Canadians and Americans had enjoyed since the original free-trade agreement went into effect two decades ago.

Each government is focused on deepening relations with new trading partners in Asia and Latin America. Canada is once again flirting with the European Union, as yet without being clear about how much more than showing a little ankle we will do. For Mr. Harper and Mr. Obama, no matter how successful they are in building relations elsewhere, each shares an implacable political reality: They will quickly restore the health of the North American economy or they will be replaced at the first electoral opportunity.

Canada has more at stake in developing this relationship, so we should put more on the table and soon. Environment Minister Jim Prentice has signalled a willingness to find common ground on climate change quickly, an excellent first step. But Ottawa should go further and appoint an eminent persons group to work with a similar team of Americans on “deepening North American economic integration.” If they wait until a protectionist Democrat demands that Mr. Obama act on his “reopening NAFTA” suggestion of mid-campaign, the discussions will begin on the wrong foot. If they can articulate an agenda that goes beyond the tit-for-tat exchange of NAFTA irritations, they will have established a stage where a far more positive set of new agreements can develop: on border security, on environmental and energy partnerships, and on continental defence.

Ottawa should encourage the private sector to create a more serious forum for cross-border partnership and exchange than currently exists. The model used by several Asian countries to promote their international economic agenda, and by some Canadian agricultural producers, may be instructive. Using a “suggested contribution” based on levels of cross-border revenues in an appeal to the largest Canadian players in North American trade could generate a multimillion-dollar fund. This fund could sponsor research, conferences and events to encourage Americans to understand the power of a deeper partnership with the most important supplier of their most strategic commodities.

The senior bureaucratic, let alone ministerial, institutions that operate between Ottawa and Washington have withered to an embarrassing shell. Several provinces, even some cities, have more active personal relationships with their American peers than the federal government does. A high-level agenda, with public deadlines and goals, endorsed by the Prime Minister's Office and the White House, would help revive those moribund bureaucratic structures, in support of serious dialogue and deal-making between the government leaders. They could lay the foundation for a long missing ingredient in our relationship - permanent consultative institutions at the cabinet and leader level.

As Asians of Chinese and Japanese origin learn in elementary school, risk and opportunity share the same character in their languages, and are merely opposite sides of the same coin. The economic crisis still unfolding for Canadians and Americans will be full blown by the time Mr. Obama takes office in January. Bankruptcies, layoffs and real winter hardship will greet his administration from its first days in office. Mr. Harper, therefore, can expect a warm welcome to an offer to seek common approaches to healing the North American economy. He will face none of the political pain of being seen to be “too soft on Americans,” which the usual critics in more normal times would seek to inflict. It could secure his search for a majority, even his place in history.

Robin Sears is a public affairs consultant and partner with Navigator Ltd. This article is drawn from his contribution to Carleton University's Canada-U.S. Engagement Project.