

A new U.S. chief, a new Harper mandate – and a new big idea

This could be Stephen Harper's Big Thing. Canada's Prime Minister approaches his second government with a record of competent administration – and let's not undersell the value of that, given the events of the past eight years in Washington – but with no great achievement for which he will be remembered. But such an achievement is available to him.

Mr. Harper could, and should, propose a revolutionary new agreement that would transform both Canada and the U.S., truly launching the continent into the 21st century.

The current Canada-U.S. relationship could be described as quietly troubled. There are no crises facing the two countries – no softwood or Iraq – but the 49th parallel steadily thickens, thanks to passport requirements, fluctuating dollars, and suspicion within Homeland Security that Canada lets in too many people without knowing exactly who they are.

Barring an electoral or actual cataclysm, Barack Obama will be the next president. This gives Mr. Harper a unique opportunity.

Most Canadians are Democrats, except for a few in Alberta, and Mr. Obama is wildly popular north of the border. He's the multicultural Canadian prime minister Canada never had.

Mr. Obama, worryingly, has vowed to renegotiate or scrap the North American free-trade agreement, a deal that's hugely benefited our two countries. Optimists are confident Mr. Obama is really thinking about Mexico. Pessimists fear that, once NAFTA is reopened, anything could happen.

From the St. Lawrence Seaway to the auto pact to free trade, Canada has led in proposing major changes to the border. We are about to achieve a rare confluence in which the U.S. has a new president and Canada's prime minister has a fresh mandate. This is the perfect time to do something big. This is the time for a North American environmental, security and economic accord.

While no one was watching, many U.S. states and Canadian provinces signed cap-and-trade deals to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions. In a few years, every state and province outside the coal-producing Ohio Valley and oil-producing Alberta and Saskatchewan will be part of a continental carbon market. Canada should propose a harmonized, universal, continental market, coupled with massive joint investment aimed at reducing the environmental impact of the oil sands, in exchange for guarantees that the U.S. gets all the oil.

Let's not stop there. Let's propose a joint security agreement to prescreen goods and people coming into the continent. Let's set a joint tariff. Let's remove national protections on cultural and financial services. (No, the sectors won't get swallowed up. There are more TD Bank-owned branches in the U.S. than there are in Canada.)

And let's cap it off with a comprehensive agreement that eliminates any barrier to the free flow of goods, services and citizens between the two countries, while guaranteeing the right of each country to maintain its own immigration and refugee policies.

The nationalist rabble on both sides will howl. But sensible Canadians and Americans will understand that only such an agreement can protect the continent's environment, economy and safety.

As others have observed, Mr. Harper would have a hard time selling such a deal to Canadians if John McCain won the election, because even sensible Canadians become unreasonably suspicious when Conservatives talk to Republicans. But Mr. Obama's popularity would help improve its reception.

At the same time, such a proposal would offer Mr. Obama just the kind of rethink on NAFTA that he's been asking for. In such difficult economic times, these are exactly the sort of initiatives that could help restore economic confidence in both countries.

Mexico, unfortunately, should not be part of this conversation – it's not far enough along. But just as the European Union assists eastern European countries until they are ready for admission, Canada and the U.S. could work with Mexico until it's ready to join.

Some will say: This is too much, too soon. Mr. Harper might think that himself. If so, he should ask himself: What is the most I could propose, short of this Big Bang? And he should go with that.



He should go with something. We are in new times, with new dangers and new opportunities. Canada and the U.S. need each other, now more than ever. Isn't it worth the gamble, Mr. Harper? You could transform the continent. You could make history.

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