

Who will make the case for a better Canada?

By DAN LEGER
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IF BARACK OBAMA can do it, why can't Stephen Harper? If Barack Obama can articulate a vision for the United States that people understand and want to share, why can't our leaders do it too?

In the election campaign, at his inauguration and in these first few days of his presidency, Obama has been able to set out an agenda to "bring change to America."



President Barack Obama has been able to set out an agenda to 'bring change to America.' Why can't our leaders? (GERALD HERBERT / AP)

Just as important, he has described the ethos for a new take on politics: less partisan and confrontational, more based on common interests. Obama's vision is of a superpower that is less warlike, where greed is no longer worshipped, where people live within their means, where government is accountable and political parties act for the common good. Obama's America is getting out of Iraq and shutting down Guantanamo Bay. It is not rolling over on terrorism, but finding new ways

to fight it, we hope.

But Obama goes beyond generalizations. He plans to reform health care and spend on public facilities to create jobs. He aims to encourage alternative energy and transform higher education.

Obama is obviously a far more charismatic figure than any on our national scene or in any province. There isn't a Canadian leader with his compelling personal history. None represents the emerging new face of North American culture, post-melting pot and post-multiculturalism.

Our leaders can only envy Obama's personal appeal. But they can emulate his strategy and set out their own manifestos for a better Canada.

Then we'd have a far better idea whether the Conservative Canada or the Liberal, NDP or Bloc Quebecois versions of Canada would make it a more peaceful and prosperous place. We'd know how they plan to keep it that way.

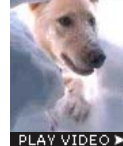
The parties would answer central questions: Is Canada still a safe place? Can it defend itself? Is it reasonably united? How is the environment to be managed? How should we educate our people and foster our culture? And Canadians deserve to know which party is most fit to deal with the war in Afghanistan.

How do we make this a just country, a country with the best of intentions, a striving country and a country ready to face what is coming?

You would expect that after its near-death experience before Christmas, the Harper government would consider that a bit of the vision thing might buck up its tattered "Trust us" message. They'll have their chance, starting with the budget tomorrow. But with the economy pressing down like an anvil on the government's neck, the temptation will be to improvise and manage, not necessarily to dream.

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OK then, what about the official Opposition? Is it still the carbon tax party? Apparently not. How about the national unity party? Sure, but everyone's in favour of that these days. The fact is we don't know what the Liberal vision is because the once-mighty party has another new leader and no obvious consensus about what his party should be about.

These currents were reflected in the Nanos poll reported last week by The Canadian Press. Among other results, the survey suggested that a majority of Canadians, 58 per cent, are "unsure" about Michael Ignatieff. That would seem to indicate he is far from defining a new Canadian Liberalism.

It's not fair to compare Harper, Ignatieff or NDP Leader Jack Layton to the global phenomenon that is Barack Obama, who hasn't had time yet to make a mistake or have something blow up into a terrible mess. Those things will certainly happen.

But it is fair to ask of Harper and the others to set out an idea for this country in 2009 and beyond. What kind of Canada would we have, prime minister, if every aspect of your policy came about?

Ignatieff has to find something to replace the tired red bunting of the Liberal party, the one without plan or overarching ideal, other than to win and hold power. The times demand more than that from leaders, which Ignatieff has said.

But there's also a reward for presenting a clear message to Canadians. People want reliable direction in these precarious times. Making the case for a better Canada could make someone prime minister for a good long time.

(dleger@herald.ca)

Dan Leger is director of news content for The Chronicle Herald. The opinions expressed here are his own.

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