

## THE Q&amp;A: BRIAN BOW

# Canada, U.S. not paying much attention to each other these days, 'kind of bizarre'

Donner prize-winning author Brian Bow says Canada-U.S. relations ain't what they used to be.

By JEFF DAVIS

On the evening of April 28, Dalhousie University political science professor Brian Bow was officially awarded the \$35,000, and significant bragging rights, that come with the 2009-2010 Donner Prize for the best book on Canadian public policy.

The prize—awarded to Mr. Bow's *The Politics of Linkage: Power, Interdependence and Ideas in Canada-U.S. Relations*—was appropriately bestowed by Allan Gotlieb, the savvy former Canadian ambassador to Washington, now chairman of the Donner Canadian Foundation.

By chronicling the deterioration of the "special" relationship that once existed between the two nations, the Donner Jury said the book will help Canadian policymakers "see the need to adapt Canadian negotiations strategies to the new and more complex context."

Mr. Bow edged out some tough competition this year, including Michael Byers's *Who Owns the Arctic?: Understanding Sovereignty Disputes in the North*; Evan H. Potter's *Branding Canada: Projecting Canada's Soft Power Through Public Diplomacy*; and Senator Larry Campbell, Neil Boyd & Lori Culbert's *A Thousand Dreams: Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and the Fight for Its Future*.

*The Hill Times* reached Mr. Bow at his temporary home in Alexandria, Virginia, just across the Potomac from Washington, DC, last week. The interview was edited to fit the page.

**Could you please sum up your thesis for the benefit of our readers?**

"There are really two main arguments in the book. The question that motivates the book, is whether there was or is a special relationship between Canada and the U.S. The first part of the answer is, yes, there was a time when there was a special relationship back in the '50s and '60s.

"The way I understand the special relationship is not so much whether things were friendly or unfriendly, but in terms of there being a special way of actually managing the relationship; a set of rules for managing the bilateral relationship. And that those things actually had some weight in themselves, so that the way the representatives of the two governments would approach even sensitive or controversial issues were governed by those rules. That's the quality that made them successful relations

"The second main argument is that it has gone away, as of the early 1970s, and the main reason for that is not so much people stopped, for lack of a better phrase, believing in the old rules of the game. It's just that they were no

longer able to strictly follow them.

"And the reason for that is that the political systems in both countries, particularly in the United States, have become much more fragmented since the 1970s and it's not possible for any player on either side to marshal the forces and consistently follow any set of rules.

"It's more about making domestic political trade-offs. The relationship is not so much governed by the old rules of the games now, and is much more driven by domestic politics."

**Seen through the lens of history, what sort of state is the Canada-U.S. bilateral relationship in these days?**

"I would say these are neither good times nor particularly bad times. We've seen it better and much worse. This is kind of a bizarre moment where the two countries are not paying much attention to each other, really.

"The U.S. is focusing on its domestic economic problems and the Obama administration is buried under its own legislative agenda. The Harper government is similarly introverted, and is focused on keeping itself alive as a government. ... Foreign policy is much lower on the radar than usual, and things are going to stay that way for the foreseeable future.

"The governments seem mostly pretty introverted, and if something comes up like Buy American did, just try to get through it with the minimum amount of political risk. I expect more of the same."

**Do good relationships between presidents and prime ministers matter?**

"One of the implications of the fragmentation of power that happened in the 1970s is that those leadership relationships matter much less. We often have this expectation, since we like Obama and he likes us, that therefore things will go well for us over the next little while. But that's really missing the complexity of the American system.

"The President just can't deliver things in the way that Canadians sometimes imagine he can. The Prime Minister's ability to deliver legislation is much greater than a President due to the nature of the systems, even as a minority prime minister.

"Nevertheless, the personal relationship still does matter, and it's a huge mistake to neglect it. Chrétien tended to neglect it too much in the 1990s, mostly for domestic political reasons.

"He did eventually cultivate a strong relationship with Bill Clinton and there were political rewards that came out. Nothing huge—it wasn't like Bill Clinton gift wrapped anything and handed it over—but there were lots of moments when decent, if not outright good personal, relationships did sort of take some of the



Photograph courtesy of Brian Bow

sharp edges off and encourage the U.S. to pay more attention in Canadian issues. Or for the White House to invest more political capital to ensure that legislative outcomes were better for Canada, at the margins. Little differences at the margins within the U.S. arena have huge ramifications for Canada, just given the asymmetry of our relationship."

**What do you think of the relationship between Barack Obama and Stephen Harper?**

"It's hard to tell for sure, but my impression is they get along reasonably well. They're clearly not obviously compatible personalities, not two people you'd expect to spend a lot of time together outside work. But they do seem to have got off to a reasonably good start.

"I think a lot of people have the impression that during Hillary Clinton's recent trip up to Ottawa, that she said some things that were fairly blunt. Some people saw that as a sign that the Obama administration was trying to send a message it didn't like the Harper government. I think that's wrong, and that it has more to do with Hillary being Hillary, and saying what she thinks and not being too worried about provoking.

"The fact [remains] that the policy differences that were highlighted are real differences, and that either the U.S. government position or her personal position is out of step with what the Canadian government is doing. But that's not a sign that things are disastrous or that the Obama administration has negative feelings towards the Harper government.

"There have been times when

the president has really disliked the prime minister, and I don't think this is one of those times."

**It wasn't a 'you pissed on my rug' moment then, eh? [When president Lyndon B. Johnson picked up prime minister Lester Pearson by his lapels and shouted this following his Vietnam War speech, during an official visit in 1965.]**

"Right. Exactly. But even there, Lyndon Johnson mostly liked Pearson and got along pretty well with him, but that was a moment where you made that one choice I really didn't like. But if you go back further, Kennedy just hated Diefenbaker and everything he did. And it was pretty clear near the end that Nixon hated Trudeau, or at least disliked him. I don't think we're anywhere near that kind of thing."

**How do you think Canada's refusal to participate in the Iraq War affected relations? I see that one of your book's subheads is that 'things will never be the same.'**

"I don't necessarily think the Iraq War has done any long-term permanent damage to the bilateral relationship. Certainly a lot of people at the time thought that was true.

"In fact, if you think of just the military relationships, things were pretty close to back to normal a couple of years after Iraq. With the bureaucrat to bureaucrat thing, sort of similar. There aren't that many people in the US that are holding a big grudge over Iraq, and in that sense it hasn't had a big effect.

"A lot of America's favourable treatment of Canada, or its willingness to exercise restraint in Canada's case is based on a perception that Canadians are pretty much exactly the same as Americans, they have the same interests, and

**Author, author:** Brian Bow won the \$35,000 Donner Prize for the year's best book on public policy.

want the same things. And therefore if they want something, we should probably give it to them.

"That's not necessarily based on them knowing Canada very well, its just sort of a presumption they have. The war on Iraq shook that perception a little bit, and got people thinking 'Maybe Canadians aren't so much like us, or loyal to us, as we thought they were.'

"So if anything has been a long-term affect on the bilateral relationship, it's the shaking of that perception that we're the same, and that we can be counted on to be in there to support the U.S."

**What do you think will be the effect of the Canadian Forces pulling out of Afghanistan full stop in 2011?**

"Well the first thing to say is I doubt it will be. full stop. There's no question we will withdraw the bulk of our presence there, but we won't go to absolute zero, there will be continuing Canadian presence of one kind or another.

"My impression is people have had a long time to soak up the idea that Canada's going to do that.

When you ask [American] people, like they asked Hillary Clinton, how do you feel about that, she said, 'We'd rather that wasn't the case, we value the Canadian contribution and we would like them to stay.' But there's no indication from anybody here that they're upset about the withdrawal, that we're free riding or anything like that. It's pretty widely recognized that Canada has done way more in Afghanistan than most of America's traditional allies.

"There's a hope here [in Washington] that when we go, we'll do it in a way that doesn't cause political problems for the White House, that we try to arrange things in a way so we can find a replacement, some European country that's willing to step in, and make this look like it's not everyone just bailing out.

"The way they're thinking is: if you've got to go, you've got to go, we understand that. But don't do it in a way that causes any more trouble for us."

**Does the U.S. have more influence over Canada now than in the past?**

"We're so tightly tied up with the U.S. economically and socially, even militarily, given our interoperability with the American forces, that when they make choices we tend to move in step with them. Not because they asked us to, or compelled us to, but because we're so tightly tied up that it sort of seems obvious that we have to or ought to. So in that sense we are influenced by them, but not compelled."

**The Politics of Linkage: Power, Interdependence, and Ideas in Canada-U.S. Relations, by Brian Bow, UBC Press, 215 pp.**

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