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A Tale of Two Countries

President Barack Obama will be visiting Canada later this month, continuing a long held tradition of newly elected Presidents of the United States visiting their friends to the north before any other country. I am glad to see Obama carry on this tradition, yet at the same time, it gives me a moment to pause at the contrast between our two countries at this time.

Obama-mania has obviously taken the United States by storm, and also the world. Watching people from all around the world watch his inauguration was truly impressive and inspiring. The kind of inspiration the U.S. has not seen for almost 50 years and, quite frankly, the kind of inspiration Canada has not seen from a leader for about 40 years.

I recently watched a Kevin Costner movie called *Swing Vote*. In it, his character's daughter recited a quote that is generally attributed to the 18th Century historian, Andrew Tytler. The quote reads:

“From bondage to spiritual faith;
From spiritual faith to great courage;
From courage to liberty;
From liberty to abundance;
From abundance to complacency;
From complacency to apathy;
From apathy to dependence;
From dependence back into bondage.”

This quote left quite an impact on me. Did you know that voter turnout for federal elections in Canada has declined substantially in the last 40 years, and voter turnout in the United States was in decline until the last two elections? Our neighbours to the south are becoming engaged in the democratic process again – this great news! Hopefully this turn around will prevent them from slipping back into the pattern Tytler described so eloquently. History has taught us that a society that becomes complacent does fade away. Do I want to live in that kind of country? No – most definitely not!

President Obama has made it clear that moving forward with a green economy is one of his two primary agenda items. In fact, www.whitehouse.gov lists all of his 24 agenda items, of which only two are front and centre on The White House home page – the economy and energy; and the environment.

The new U.S. administration recognizes the need to be environmental leaders and agents of change on the world stage. There is also evidence that they are keenly aware of the economic opportunities that go hand in hand with addressing climate change and other environmental issues.

Contrast that level of commitment and leadership to the recent Canadian federal budget.

Two years ago, the federal government launched a very successful program to assist renewable energy projects by granting \$0.01 per kilowatt hour that they generate. This money essentially makes renewable energy projects more financially viable and helps create 'green economy' jobs. Unfortunately the program has not been extended, ending a successful and progressive initiative.

The federal government could have also included improving energy efficiency as a condition of the home renovation grant announced in the budget. Homeowners will now be able to receive a tax break for renovating their basements and bathrooms with no regard for energy efficiency, if they choose not to. Adding a 'green' condition could have been a very simple thing to do. It would stimulate the home renovation sector and build green construction capacity at the same time.

There is an old saying – “If you stand still you are falling behind”. I worry that Canada is falling behind on the environmental front because we are dragging our feet on the real policy changes that must happen if we are to move ahead. I predict that watching Obama and Stephen Harper together on February 19 will only reinforce that concern.

All this is not to make you feel powerless. Use your individual power – in our next municipal, provincial and federal elections in our next get active and vote! As has been evident south of the border, change can happen, and hope for a bright future can be restored if people get engaged in their democracy. Without that level of engagement, as a society we do risk falling into the downward spiral of complacency to apathy to dependence to bondage, regardless of our individual political stripes.

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