

# What does Obama's presidency mean for Saskatchewan?

BY JAMES WOOD, SASKATCHEWAN NEWS NETWORK JANUARY 20, 2009 8:01 AM



U.S. President-elect Barack Obama smiles while attending the Bipartisan dinner honoring U.S. Senator John McCain (R-AZ) in Washington January 19, 2009.

**Photograph by:** Jim Young/Reuters,

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REGINA — Premier Brad Wall appears to have taken the “audacity of hope” to heart as he considers the potential impact on Saskatchewan of Barack Obama, who will be sworn in Tuesday as the United States’ 44th president and the first African-American to hold that office.

While Obama is hugely popular throughout Canada, there have been concerns in Saskatchewan and elsewhere that he would lead a more protectionist administration that would restrict the flow of Canadian goods to the United States or that his concerns about “dirty oil” and advocacy of a “cap-and-trade” greenhouse gas emissions system would hurt western Canada's natural resource-based economy.

In a recent interview, Wall said he had been among the skeptics, especially when tough talk on trade played a major role in the Democratic primary battle between Obama and Hillary Clinton last spring.

"The answer was yes, I was worried about it," he said.

But Clinton is now slated to be Obama's secretary of state and in her confirmation hearings she made positive comments about Canada and free trade, said the premier. The new president meanwhile will make Canada the site of his first foreign visit, underscoring the importance of the relationship between the two countries.

Besides such obvious signals, Wall said Obama's conduct as the presidential nominee and as president-elect — his eloquence, his plan for an economic stimulus that includes innovative infrastructure spending and tax cuts, his focus on technology in the climate change battle and his attempts to reach out to friend and foe alike — bodes well.

"Frankly, it's all pretty hopeful," said Wall.

Ken Rasmussen, associate director of the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, said that

Saskatchewan should have less of a concern over trade issues than other provinces because there will always be a large American appetite for provincial resources such as oil, natural gas, potash and uranium.

The irritants at the U.S.-Canada border aren't likely to go away however as security will remain a foremost concern, he said.

But Rasmussen said any worries in Saskatchewan about particular policies should be dwarfed in significance for the province by the major challenge facing Obama — resuscitating the flagging United States economy.

A buoyant U.S. is the best possible outcome for Saskatchewan, no matter what other policies are enacted, he said.

"I think everybody here is hoping the Obama team has a plan that's going to rescue the American economy and get it back to a kind of aggressive period of growth so we can once again sell our commodities at the price they were a year ago," said Rasmussen, adding that the biggest concern should be that the best efforts will be ineffective and the U.S. enters an extended period of stagnation such as Japan in the 1990s.

For Wall though, that kind of thinking is too negative.

It lays the burden on one man while the problems must be dealt with on a worldwide basis, said the premier.

It also underestimates both the talents of Obama and his team and the hope he has fostered in the population of the United States.

“Given how historic this administration is, can you imagine the mood in that country when this president is inaugurated? It will be very similar if not amplified from the mood of election night when he won and really captured the attention of the whole world and certainly the United States,” said Wall.

“I’m pretty optimistic that to the extent any one administration can turn things around to the extent they need to be turned around, this administration has a chance to do that.”

Wall acknowledges there is some concern about a cap-and-trade system for greenhouse gas emissions.

But Obama's “big vision” on sustainable energy by the new administration is good news for the province as the Saskatchewan Party government moves forward with a “clean coal” pilot project and considers the possibility of nuclear energy development, said Wall.

A close ally of Obama is Montana's Democratic governor Brian Schweitzer, Wall noted, a strong proponent of wind power, biofuels and the conversion of coal to fuel as ways to win American independence from foreign oil.

Montana and Saskatchewan are in talks on a joint project that would see an “internationally renowned” test site for different carbon sequestration technologies, said Wall.

David McGrane, a political studies professor at the University of Saskatchewan, said there is a question mark over how the incoming administration's quest to reduce consumption of carbon intensive fuel will affect the nascent oilsands industry in Saskatchewan.

Obama is also less pro-nuclear than John McCain, his Republican rival in the campaign, he noted.

But while there are open questions about the effects of the new president’s policy, Obama’s mere presence has also raised the possibility of change in culture and politics, said McGrane.

“Will people start looking for an Obama figure in Canada?” he asked.

“Is Obama going to open the door for more minorities to enter the Saskatchewan legislature, whether its First Nation people or other minorities? That’s another open question. This Obama effect is really hard to judge.”

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