

# Who does Brown want in the White House?



IRWIN STELZER

**G**ordon Brown has long been more than a casual student of American politics. Indeed, if he were to tire of the trials and tribulations of the office to which he so long aspired, and decide to move to Cape Cod to be closer to the Kennedy clan, he could make his livelihood as a premier political commentator. And he would be able to attend the Democrat and Republican conventions in the relaxed role of an observer, leaving the fraught-laden Labour Party conferences to his younger acolytes whose ingenuity in snatching defeat from the jaws of victory knows no bounds.

But that is not to be. Instead, Brown watches from the sidelines, and tries to guess who he will be doing business with after the new president is sworn in. Not as much business as Tony Blair did with George W. Bush – heaven forfend – but as much as is necessary to push his own international agenda.

His choice is now down to three, barring the miracle that Mike Huckabee says he always relies on more than the maths of delegate counts: Republican John McCain, and the winner of the increasingly vicious battle between Hillary (and Bill) Clinton, and Barack Obama.

Brown and his team have long-established relations with the Democrat establishment, of which the Clintons are the acknowledged leaders. No surprise there: Labourites and traditional Democrats are Left-of-centre political players. Blair's amazingly close – and politically damaging – relationship with conservative Bush is an aberration, born of Blair's conviction that Britain's future as a world power depends on its ability to serve as a bridge between America and Europe. That at times requires marching shoulder-to-shoulder with America in order to maintain influence in Washington, a fact of international life Brown has been reluctant to accept.

Brown, a more traditional Labour leader than Blair, naturally finds the Democrats a more congenial lot. Brown's affinity for Democrat policies does not go so far as to favour the sort of tough, effective welfare-to-work reform that Bill Clinton signed into law. But since Hillary Clinton resisted that reform, and is in many other respects far to the Left of her husband on matters of tax and fiscal prudence, the Prime Minister should find her a soul-mate of sorts, especially since Senator Clinton does not evince any desire for a physically huggy-feely relationship of the Bush-Blair sort.

But there is one problem whichever Democrat might be sworn in next January. Both Clinton and Obama, and the majority of their supporters, are having a serious flirtation with

protectionism. Many Americans lay the nation's economic problems, such as they are, at the door of globalisation and free trade. Jobs to China, outsourcing to India, immigration in larger numbers than most communities care to tolerate, dangerous investments by sovereign wealth funds – all these results of the free movement of labour, capital and people are increasingly unsettling to many Americans, especially Democrats. So Clinton and

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Obama, and especially the former, are making protectionist noises.

Both would take their country in the opposite direction from the one Brown believes will produce the greatest prosperity for the greatest number of the world's people. Both are promising to get tough with China so as to reduce America's trade deficit. And Clinton has even promised a critical review of the North American Free Trade Agreement,

one of her husband's proudest achievements.

Obama talks the language of free trade as eloquently as Brown, but walks the walk along the well-trodden path laid out for him by the trade unions. To show solidarity with workers displaced by trade, he voted against the Central American Free Trade Agreement, even though he thought it economically advantageous to all parties.

Of the two, Obama's protectionism is the least strident. So Brown might be comfortable with him. But it seems reasonable to guess that Brown, so policy-heavy and charisma-light, more Clinton than Obama, harbours suspicions of a young, handsome, charismatic politician long on charm and elevating rhetoric, but short on policy details. After all, the then chancellor's relations with the New Labour version of Obama were not trouble-free. And there is the matter of Obama's lack of experience, which must make a politician campaigning on a platform that says experience matters, more than a little nervous.

Which might cause the Prime Minister to cast a favourable eye on the candidacy of John McCain, a committed free trader. McCain shares Brown's belief in the material advantages of free trade, and in the economic advantages of a relaxed immigration policy. Unlike many of his Republican colleagues, he also agrees with the PM that global warming is a threat that must be dealt with, and now.

But policy agreement stops

there. McCain is suspicious of tax increases, which Brown most definitely is not, and believes more in the economic dynamism provided by lightly regulated entrepreneurs than does Brown. Those differences could be ignored were it not for major differences over foreign policy.

McCain has publicly rebuked Brown for withdrawing British troops from Basra – “unhelpful” is how he described it. Brown bristles at that charge, and contends that his calling home of some troops, and the retreat of others to an air base, is not a withdrawal. But he is unlikely to win military debating points with Vietnam war hero McCain, or to provide what McCain will consider an adequate explanation for a military budget so shrunken that Britain cannot provide its soldiers with adequate protective gear, armoured vehicles, helicopters, or even boots. McCain knows the difference between an ally that can put boots on the ground, and one that cannot, or do so only in a very limited way.

Nor is it likely that Brown, about as famous for his impatience with opposing views as is McCain, will have as smooth a ride with the Arizona senator as he would with whichever Democrat emerges as the candidate. Still, Brown is a charter member of the ABB club – Anyone But Bush – and so will think himself ahead of the game come January 20, 2009, when the new President takes the oath of office.

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