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Should the UK take a leaf out of Canada's book?

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'But we Americans are England's children! I know we don't call as often as we should, and we aren't as well behaved as our goody-two shoes brother, Canada.'

-Homer Simpson

As America's favourite cartoon character recognised when he visited London in 2003, there is a shared family tree between the UK, the United States and Canada. Centuries of history along with geography and a common language have created an interaction between the three nations that stretches beyond mere symbolism. In the world of intelligence, arguably the best example of this closeness, there is an intimate Anglo-American relationship that dates from the late 1940s and which remains extremely significant in the 21st century for not just the UK, the US, and Canada but also for New Zealand and Australia.

Yet, more widely, there is an obvious imbalance in this connection in that the child long ago surpassed the parent and the brother in terms of significance. This reality has sparked perpetual angst on the part of British policymakers and media about the nature of the relationship between the two countries. Is it still a 'special relationship'? Is it an 'essential relationship'? Does President Obama really like Britain or has the UK been dumped in favour of another European partner or another part of the world entirely?

This angst about the nature of the relationship, however, is not unique to the UK. Canada has long suffered from similar concern about the nature of its relationship with the United States and how Canada is perceived by its southern neighbour. Widespread concern emerged during George W. Bush's administration when he broke with a tradition of the new US president making his first foreign visit to Canada; he went to Mexico instead. After 9-11, the Canadian media anxiously speculated as to the significance of President Bush's failure to mention his northern neighbour when he thanked a long list of nations which had come to the aid of the US.

Even more than the UK, Canada needs to ensure the strength of its relationship with the United States for the simple reason that it is essential. This is true in a range of areas but, most fundamentally of all, with respect to the economy: over 70% of all Canadian exports go to its American partner. Canada and the United States are now more integrated, particularly economically with the North American Free Trade Agreement, than ever in their history.

There is a lesson in the Canadian example for the UK, not about how to handle the angst, but in dealing with a relationship that is fundamental but also fundamentally asymmetrical. Back when the UK still had an empire, Canada accepted that as a 'middle power' it could punch well above its weight by staying close to Washington through strong bilateral relations. Nevertheless, it also recognised the need to balance such an imbalanced partnership by engaging in international multilateralism through institutions such as the United Nations.

This has led Canada in the post-Cold War period to increasingly assert its independence from Washington. Canada was a driving force in the international agreement to ban landmines despite the opposition of the Clinton Administration. Unlike London, Ottawa refused to participate in the 2003 invasion of Iraq because of the lack of a UN mandate. It was the first time in Canadian history that Canada had not participated in a military conflict involving both the UK and the US. Canada also said no to an invitation from the Bush administration to participate in the national missile defense program and, more recently, the re-elected Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper has not endorsed President Obama's call for a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians based on the 1967 borders.

Perhaps this newfound independence represents a more mature and considered phase in Canada's relationship with the US and if so it is lesson that the UK could do well to follow.

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