

Pro-Trump argument carries the house

Chris Christie, John Manley, Martha Lou Findlay and Conrad Black debate the opportunities to be afforded by another possible Trump presidency

By Conrad Black

The C.D. Howe Institute has invited me to use this column to summarize the Regent Debate that the institute held in Toronto on Sept. 24. It was a well-attended and rollicking affair with a learned audience of several hundred or more people. The former governor of New Jersey, Chris Christie, and I defended the motion that the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States would be an opportunity for Canada. Our very worthy opponents were the former minister of finance John Manley, and the former Liberal politician and chair of the School of Public Policy at the University of Calgary, Martha Hall Findlay. It is well-known that after Christie described president Trump as “Donald Duck” during one of the Republican candidates’ debates (which Trump ignored and dismissed as “an audition for vice-president”), their relations are unlikely to resume anytime soon.



Former U.S. president and Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump speaks during a campaign rally in Saginaw, Mich., on Oct. 3, 2024. PHOTO BY IM WATSON / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

The former governor went to some lengths to explain that the lack of rapport between him and Trump should be taken as a reinforcement of his faith that Trump's policies do justify

optimism in Canada about a returned Trump administration. The three Canadian participants all stated or hinted that this country's first requirement for economic progress is better policy-making in Ottawa, whoever may inhabit the White House for the next four years. All four participants spoke in sequence with the order reversed in mid-debate and for a fixed time. There were no interruptions and the judicious debate chairman, Bill Robson, head of the C.D. Howe Institute, closed microphones if the speaker went more than 10 or 15 seconds beyond the allotted time. The Canadian participants had all known each other for some years and the atmosphere was entirely convivial.

John Manley started with generalities about the tendency of American governments to presume somewhat upon Canada, but in his later comments he descended into the customary ad hominem myth-making and mudslinging about Trump personally. He inflicted upon us the malicious canard that Trump had dismissed Americans who died in foreign wars as "losers and suckers," something the former president and close aides have

vehemently denied; and he alleged that Trump had suggested that the Nazis and Antifa members who rioted at Charlottesville, Va., in 2017 were "good people." What Trump actually said, and his remarks are available on the internet, was that there were "very fine people" on both sides of the debate over whether or not to remove the equestrian statue of Gen. Robert E. Lee from downtown Richmond, the capitol of the Confederacy. Chris Christie conspicuously consulted his cellphone to remind himself, as he explained, of the wording of the resolution under discussion. Without, I trust, being unctuous, I expressed some disappointment in John's line of argument because even if Trump had cloven feet and satanic horns jutting out of his head, it was irrelevant to what we were talking about, and that our side was not advocating Trump's election as head of a cotillion or an etiquette society. Chris Christie said he agreed with three-quarters of the general disparagements of Trump but he was still confident in arguing for the resolution.

Martha Hall Findlay commendably avoided any reflection on Trump's personality and cogently expressed her fear that a new Trump administration could prove intractable and overbearing in trade discussions. This was partly in response to my mentioning that some weeks before, as very occasionally happens, the former president telephoned and I mentioned this debate and asked if I could quote him. He responded that he loved and admired Canada, thought it "a magnificent country," but that unfortunately "your trade negotiators are more talented than ours, but we will work it out like friends." (I didn't mention that Chris Christie was my partner in the debate.) John Manley conveniently assisted the former governor and me when he asserted the obvious that "our economy is completely integrated with that of the United States." Bingo; in the four years of the Trump administration the per capita disposable income in the United States rose by 31 per cent and in the following 3 1/2 years under his opponents, it has declined by 9.8 per cent. Americans remember that, and Canadians know that comprehensive economic growth within the United States is of immense benefit to Canada. Nobody should

expect the Americans to be soft traders, but we have an excellent history of defending our interests in bipartisan negotiations with that country, and despite the strenuous hostility of the opposition parties at the time, it is clear that Brian Mulroney's free-trade agreement has been a great success. Justin Trudeau deserves some credit for his capable renegotiation of those arrangements. Since almost two-thirds of the Canadian gross domestic product is connected to economic activity with the United States, it requires no more than a basic grasp of Grade 3 arithmetic to see that the party of prosperity in the U.S. is the party most favourable to the economic interests of this country.

Both Chris Christie and I emphasized an additional opportunity that would be offered by Trump's election. Much, if not most of the world's current climate of nervous hostility and actual war are traceable to the fact that the United States is a weak super power, not in its geopolitical depth but in its leadership. Trump has already shaped NATO up from a legion of slackers, "an alliance of the willing," with gracious admission by its members of depending on an American military guarantee while most of them were outright freeloaders. On its recent performance, Canada deserves to be expelled from NATO rather than to lecture the Americans about whom they should elevate as their commander-in-chief. John Manley demanded to know how Trump would end the Ukraine war and I provided him with the widely publicized answer: Vladimir Putin can keep most of what he has taken in Ukraine but unambiguously and permanently recognize and guarantee Ukraine its revised frontiers, while Ukraine would yield that territory but join NATO and the European Union, when it met their criteria, and have ironclad guarantees of its national security, and not the phoney, worthless guarantees we have all given it in the past. Putin can accept this or Trump will arm Ukraine with weapons that could do great damage to Russia, and assure Putin that any Russian recourse to nuclear weapons would receive a nuclear response.

When John demanded to know how Trump could deport 15 million people from the U.S., it was my pleasure to tell them that no one was suggesting that, but that Trump would close the border to all further illegal immigration and deport all those who had an indisputably criminal background or who had committed

crimes within the United States, apart from having entered the country illegally in the first place. For the first time in my observations in this country, a pro-Trump argument carried the house. As we parted, Chris Christie told me he looked around Toronto a little, not having been here for some years, and considered it to be “one of the greatest cities in the world.” It was a delightful occasion, and a fine tribute to debate founder and patron Aaron Regent, a longtime director and supporter of the C.D. Howe Institute. A jolly dinner of about 20 people continued until nearly midnight.

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