

The heads keep rolling in a world hungry for change



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Barack Obama's election as President of the United States is a political triumph. He took on and defeated the Democratic Party establishment – the Clinton family in particular – to become the candidate. He won the election against a highly decorated war hero and respected senator. He did this as a first-term senator at the age of 47.

Regardless of his achievements in office, he has already secured a place in history as the first African-American president. There are times when profound changes take place – often led by developments in the United States – that are turning points in history: the rise of America's global leadership following World War II; the undermining of traditional authority in the 1960s; the rise of the free market and collapse of communism in the 1980s; the terrorist challenge of Islamism and the response to it, earlier this decade.

Obama's charisma has captured global attention. Countries are welcoming what they hope will be a more collaborative approach from the US. Are we now witnessing a profound shift in political culture for the 21st century?

We are seeing change. But it is not all in the one direction. For example, last weekend John Key led the National Party in New Zealand to an election victory over Labour. One year ago Kevin Rudd and the Labor Party defeated a Coalition Government. In January 2006, Stephen Harper won minority government for the Conservative Party of Canada (since confirmed in the snap election earlier this year) ending the long-term rule of a left-liberal government.

In the Anglo democracies, the last

round of elections have seen four governments thrown out of office with two countries (Canada and New Zealand) moving to the conservative side and two countries (the US and Australia) moving to the left-liberal or Labor side.

In each election, the swing was substantial: in Canada more than 6 per cent, Australia more than 5 per cent, the US over 4 per cent and New Zealand about 6 per cent. In each country, the election of a new government brought an end to a long period of incumbency: Canada's Liberal Party 12 years, Australia's Liberal Party nearly 12 years, US Republicans eight years and New Zealand Labour nine years. In each case, the change of government was led by a younger leader (Harper 46, Rudd 50, Obama 47 and Key 47).

The final country in the Anglo block – Britain – is due to go to an election in the next 18 months. The Labour Party by then will have been in office more than 12 years. The Opposition is led by a younger leader David Cameron (now 42). The signs are not good for Gordon Brown. The polls are not good either.

The parallel in these elections is not that countries are moving in the one political direction. It is that countries are voting for change. Now is not the time for incumbents. Voters have voted for change in countries with strong economic performance (Canada and Australia) and in countries with weak economic performance (US and New Zealand). Clever oppositions have been able to capitalise on the desire for change – Rudd promised "new leadership, fresh ideas", Obama promised "change we can believe in".

The longer a government stays in

office, the more enemies it will make. Every tough decision creates winners and losers. Where everyone agrees there is no need for a decision at all.

As time wears on, no matter how well a long-serving government performs, grievances accumulate. Life is more humdrum, more tawdry than the utopia promised by apostles of change. The longer it stays in office, the less interesting an incumbent government looks and the more exciting the opposition appears.

Obama's message – "Yes we can" – was brilliantly crafted to this theme. A new outbreak of international respect and peace? "Yes we can." New tolerance between races? "Yes we can." Economic security? "Yes we can."

After the long grind of making choices and governing, the American public will find there are some issues where "No we can't". By then, the Obama administration will be a long-serving one and it will be the Republicans exploiting the change issue.

The policy of change can be harnessed by the left or the right. It can be supercharged by the supporters of bigger government and who can promise more government intervention. But it can be used by conservatives as well. The lesson of the Anglo world is that, at present, people want change. It is a bad time to be an incumbent.

The mood for change will also affect other levels of government. And in Australia, long-serving state governments will shortly find this out.

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