

And the person we admire most...

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Like many people around the world, Canadians have been suffering for several months with a nagging chronic condition. The affliction is likely to flare up painfully in the coming weeks. The condition is Obama-envy, and the flare-up will be induced by the visit of the new President on Feb. 19.

If it is a cliché to fawn over Barack Obama's intelligence, charisma and symbolic power, it is by now as great a cliché to remind ourselves of the many serious challenges he faces, and the vast potential for disappointment with his administration. Rationally, both Canadians and Americans know the man is only human - a politician, even! But in the current cultural imagination, there is little room for nuance: Mr. Obama is an icon.

Some public figures become more than the sum of their parts; a combination of their words, deeds and personal histories comes to resonate with other people in a way that exceeds specific achievements or attributes. To say we admire this or that person is to say something about our own personal values and beliefs.

In Environics' last social values survey in the fall of 2008, we asked Canadians to name the person they admired most, living or dead. This being Rick Mercer's Canada, when my colleagues began sifting through the answers, they found that 16 people had answered "living" and two had said "dead."

In all, of the 2,066 people surveyed, 1,687 people named 443 icons. Since there was no list of names to choose from, the replies were extremely varied - and sometimes personal. Touchingly, "my father" got 22 votes and "my mother" 16.

The survey was fielded before the U.S. election, but even as a presidential candidate Mr. Obama attracted 40 votes. This tally was only good enough to get him into ninth place, but it did place him well ahead of the highest-ranking current Canadian politician: Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who gained 13 votes for 26th place.

A number of Canadians picked their most admired figures from Parliaments past: Tommy Douglas tied Mr. Harper's 13 votes, as did Nobel Prize winner Lester Pearson. John Diefenbaker was only one vote behind. The monarch who presided over all these men's careers, Queen Elizabeth II, outstripped them handily with 21 votes. (The late Diana, Princess of Wales, received 40.)

Some leadership only exerts a force on politics from the outside, by virtue of its moral or spiritual force. Mahatma Gandhi came in third overall with 68 votes. (Winston Churchill

might be surprised to learn that this diminutive Indian attracted more votes than his own 63 among citizens of his favourite dominion.)

Another leader whose power was rooted in religion but brought to bear on worldly problems was Mother Teresa, who placed second overall with 87 votes. The woman who became a symbol of ministering to the poorest and most socially marginalized people attracted more than three times as many votes as the official leader of her faith: Pope Benedict XVI was named by 25 Canadians and came in 14th. Indeed, Mother Teresa attracted more votes than that other leader of her faith: Jesus was named by 61 Canadians as the object of their greatest admiration. In this poll, Jesus did prove more popular than the Beatles: John (Imagine No Religion) Lennon was 24th with 13 votes.

Lest anyone imagine that admiration for figures such as Mother Teresa and the Pope is driven primarily by Canada's distinct society with its Roman Catholic heritage, I must report that a secular figure, René Lévesque, topped the list of figures Quebecers admired. The patriarch of the Quebec independence movement took 59 votes, exceeding all religious figures, including Jesus. Indeed, the 59 votes he attracted in Quebec (he received no votes elsewhere) were enough to put him in sixth place overall.

Careful readers - and those who have not yet fainted at this list that has Gandhi, Jesus and Diana sitting cheek by jowl - will have noted that I have coyly avoided naming the individual cited by the greatest number of Canadians as the person, living or dead, they admire most. First place goes to our own dashing political icon, Pierre Trudeau, named by 121 Canadians.

It seems Mr. Trudeau set the standard of political leadership in Canada (with the exception of Mr. Lévesque in Quebec), and others since - even if they have managed the books better and made momentous decisions such as Jean Chrétien's refusal to participate in the Iraq war (Mr. Chrétien received two votes) - have proved somehow lacking in the intangibles that inspire admiration long after one has departed from the headlines or even the Earth.

The putative heir to the Trudeau legacy is new Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff, but his persona has yet to figure in the public mind (no votes in our poll). The member from Harvard has a way to go not just to catch up to Stephen Harper but to beat the top-ranking Canadian who is not a politician: David Suzuki, our homegrown green icon, got 18 mentions and finished just behind the Queen.

This little item is more fun than it is serious social science. But amid a great deal of reflection on leadership in Canada - inspired by Mr. Obama, the competent but unmagnetic Mr. Harper, the ineffable Stéphane Dion, the brilliant but untested Mr. Ignatieff - this exercise provides an unusual window into the values of Canadians as expressed through personified ideals.

In a deeply secular society, for instance, it is interesting to see how many of our most admired figures are religious people. Do those who chose Mother Teresa think of her as a

Catholic first or simply as a person of compassion? Do those who chose Gandhi think of him as a Hindu or as the embodiment of non-violence? Leaders are human beings, with all the complexity that entails. Feelings of affinity and admiration for them are rooted in similarly ambiguous allegiances.

Meantime, Canadians will be searching for the elusive heir of Mr. Trudeau and the Canadian cousin of Mr. Obama. Ideally, this person will bear faint traces of Churchill, Diana - oh, and did I mention Oprah Winfrey in 10th place? At the same time, leaders must come across as authentically, easily, uniquely themselves. No wonder it's so hard to get ahead in politics.

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