



GOVERNMENT / WASHINGTON

Fresh start

The second woman to lead the US capital, Washington's mayor Muriel Bowser tells us about the many challenges facing her city and the power of mayors to shield their fellow citizens – from creating better schools to safe places to sleep – and what she thinks of a certain neighbour.

WRITER Sahar Khan PHOTOGRAPHER Greg Kahn

Muriel Bowser, the mayor of Washington since 2015, has just returned from giving a speech at a nearby school on investing in education. Back in her Pennsylvania Avenue office, decorated with contemporary art, the Democrat leans against a pillow emblazoned with "51" above the capital's outline (a reference to the push for statehood for the district) and ticks off her victories in improving pay for teachers and boosting graduation rates in the city.

That Bowser is keen to tout her local achievements is no surprise. The 45-year-old politician has a unique status as an African-American woman leading the capital, historically a majority black city that not only serves as the seat of power but also grapples with income inequality, as well as crime and homelessness.

In spite of the pressing urban issues facing her city, Bowser tends to make national headlines not for her efforts to tackle Washington's problems but for her opposition to Donald Trump over issues such as immigration and climate change. Two and a half years into her first term, the former councilwoman who is the second woman to hold this office enjoys 67 per cent approval ratings, a healthy margin if she seeks re-election in 2018.

The number is thanks in part to projects she introduced that are set to deliver 32,000 new jobs over the next few years and her role in raising the minimum wage by a dollar to \$12.50 an hour – no small matter for the large number of low-income residents in the district. She's also spearheading the fight to achieve statehood status for the District of Columbia, something that Washington residents voted overwhelmingly in favour of in a 2016 referendum.

Bowser still faces major challenges, however, not least because detractors have criticised her for not doing more to tackle the capital's ills. Here she tells us why standing up to the Trump administration is important for Washington and what she's doing to improve the city for all its residents.

MONOCLE: There's a growing movement of mayors who aren't complying with the administration. As a Democrat, why do you think it's important to stand against the Trump administration?

MURIEL BOWSER: What I would say is that we stand up for our own values, so nothing about what we have fought for and funded in our city changed on election day. I had the opportunity to go to Mexico City for the Cities Climate Leadership Group conference, which is a compact of global mayors that we are proud to be a part of. I went in December following an election when the world was on edge about where American leaders would be in case the federal government backed out of the Paris Agreement. Then I felt it was important to speak as the mayor of the nation's capital, saying mayors make a lot of decisions that affect the environment and climate change and we are not going to back away from that for any reason.

M: What advice would you give other mayors on holding the line against the administration's agenda?

MB: We are focused on threats to our city, one of the first being to residents who are immigrants, some with documents, others perhaps without. Women and girls feel threatened by this administration. There was a lot of hateful speech and language. I think we are even seeing a rise in sexual-harassment claims in corporations across America. We want women to know that they are valued. Healthcare is a huge part of our values, which we continue to feel are threatened in the current environment. That has the biggest price tag. I don't think any mayor or governor has quite figured out how we will continue to cover all of our people if the Affordable Care Act is repealed.

M: How can mayors help to address the country's political and racial divides on a local level?

MB: On an operational level we are ready in a case of any hate incident to respond with a citywide protocol. We use

"People come here from across the country to address their government and we have to make sure that they can do it safely, even if we don't agree with them"



Clockwise from left: Muriel Bowser in her office; bookshelf containing memorabilia, including a brick from Lafayette Elementary School; statue given to Bowser from the Washington Police and Fire Dept. along with a commemorative badge from President Trump's inauguration; signed baseball from Washington Nationals manager Dusty Baker



our Office of Religious Affairs [and] our Office of Human Rights so that we're always in touch with the community to check if they've been touched by violence or if they've been affected by this hateful rhetoric. Our police department is outstanding. They deal with all kinds of demonstrations. We are very pro-First Amendment and I feel proud that this is the nation's capital. People come here from all across the country to address their government and we have a responsibility to make sure that they can do it safely, even if we don't agree with them.

M: What is your stance on Confederate statues?

MB: We have one statue in the city that we are aware of that is a Confederate soldier [Albert Pike]. It is on a piece of National Park Service land so it's a federal issue. We don't think it adds one bit to the Washington experience and it very definitely should be taken down.

M: What do you think about Trump's claim that removing the statues destroys history?

MB: I think all of his messages have been unfortunate and they don't reflect what I would expect the president to say at a time when you have people marching on a college campus with lit torches and Nazi salutes. A neo-Nazi plowed down a group of people where a woman was killed. We demand our president speak for all of us in such times.

M: Washington has some unique challenges: it has the second busiest subway system in the US and some of the worst traffic in the country. What is the city doing to make transportation more efficient?

MB: We're one of the most competitive metro regions in the nation. A thousand people move here each and every month. Our city population doubles in size every day with people coming here to work. So you can imagine that often traffic reflects the economic activity of a city. And we are focused on making sure we have an efficient transport system. It is undergoing a transformation right now and we've seen improvement even in the past year.

M: After you were elected, homelessness spiked by 14 per cent between 2015 and 2016.

MB: No.

M: That's what was reported. Homelessness does tend to be a big problem in the city.

MB: Homelessness is a problem in cities. We are a little different in our city in that our voters believe that the



there is a right to shelter. We have a law that says there is a right to shelter in DC so during the winter months we provide shelter to people who present themselves to us as homeless. And so we have, over the past two-and-a-half years, really transformed our system so that we are better able to help people when they have an emergency but also able to cycle them through the emergency system and to affordable housing. Where we are still challenged is making sure that there are affordable places for people with very low incomes to go for affordable housing. So we have done probably more than at any other time in our city [when it comes to] investing in affordable housing for people with very low incomes. We now spend \$100m [€84m] every year to help us figure out not only how to create new units but to preserve the existing units that are already affordable. It's something we work on every day.

M: You've also invested a lot in education.

MB: We have bet big on schools. We're celebrating 10 years of a robust school-reform effort met with mayoral control of the school at the centre. Many mayors don't have control of the public schools in their cities. We do. And we have spent more than \$4bn [€3.4bn] remodelling our buildings in that time. We've made a huge investment in paying our teachers what they deserve. Graduation numbers are going up. We'll have the biggest school population that we've had since the Second World War in our city this year.

M: Why does the district need statehood?

MB: Why do 681,000 Americans need to be treated like other Americans, is that the question? People who live in DC pay the same taxes as their neighbours in Maryland and yet they aren't represented in that capitol building with a vote in the house or two votes in the senate like their counterparts. It is a very simple situation where we are being taxed but not represented.

PUBLIC IMAGE / GLOBAL

Easy on the eye

Spin doctors talk of 'optics' and this summer has shown how male politicians are becoming acutely aware of an image war whereby youth and good looks could be vote-winners.

WRITER Megan Gibson



Just three months after Emmanuel Macron became France's youngest leader since Napoleon, it was revealed that his youthful good looks aren't exactly au naturel: the president has spent a whopping €26,000 on a make-up artist since moving into the Elysee Palace. While the news of Macron's sky-high bill has raised some eyebrows (not just our own), it shouldn't come as a shock that the man being touted as the hot new politician on the world stage is concerned about his looks. Part of his USP is his youthfulness and in a world of high-definition TV, that allure takes some work.

As women in politics have long known, optics shouldn't matter – but they do. And now it's male politicians and their advisers who are working on keeping up appearances. Because while no respectable newspaper columnist or pundit today would get away with openly criticising a female politician based on her outfit (they try but they get called out), few seem to have qualms about slandering, say, Donald Trump's peculiar hairstyle or wondering why UK opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn struggles to knot a tie with élan.

And it's not just politicians' looks that are up for judgement. When Trump announced a \$3.4m (€2.9m) renovation of the White House, most onlookers waited with bated breath to see the doubtlessly dubious results. Would the White House now be festooned with velvety finishes, marble everything and the imitation baroque furniture of his Louis XIV-style digs in Trump Tower? Most observers, however, were underwhelmed by the renovation. Little was changed besides a few gold drapes in the Oval Office and the removal of the stained and scuffed Barack Obama-era wallpaper.

Yet creating an image doesn't always go to plan. While Trump avoided the garishness that many were expecting, the renovation did send a message. Far from making a decent statement for posterity or adding something for his family to enjoy, he'd settled instead for a little gold window dressing – and been lambasted for his blandness in the process. While seemingly lacking much news content, every paper unleashed its style and design critics to pass judgment. They know that looks matter and that an audience grown adept at passing brutal judgment on people after the merest flash of an Instagram image would have an opinion on Trump the Decorator.

No male politician knows the value of a public image choreographed to perfection better than Justin Trudeau and Vladimir Putin. Though the two men might project vastly different messages, each one has become a master of the calculated photo op. Think of Trudeau's gleeful appearances in rainbow socks at gay-pride parades across Canada or Putin's shirtless posturing while on holiday in Siberia. The subsequent viral images ensure that most people think of the world leaders exactly what they want them to think: in Trudeau's case that he's an inclusive, modern and fun-loving progressive; in Putin's that he's a macho strongman.

These photo ops aren't just about vanity. Nailing the image of a campaign or a premiership can help smooth over no small number of sins. So while we might want to roll our eyes at Trudeau's "sock diplomacy" or Macron's exorbitant grooming bill, you can't really fault them for trying. So long as they're working on the substance beneath the surface, we might as well enjoy the view.

Above: What Macron thinks his image says: 'I have the youth and vigour to fix France.' We think: youth and vigour come at a steep price.



What Trump thinks his White House redesign says: 'Restrained and tasteful.' People think: it's as uninspired as his leadership.



What Trudeau thinks his candid appearances say: 'I'm the most liberal leader in the land.' We think: he spends a lot of time planning photo ops.



What Putin thinks his holiday photos say: 'This is what a man looks like.' We think: that's an old trout.

Comment



Why Afghan media may benefit from a US redeployment

WRITER Christopher Lord

When then president Barack Obama announced the withdrawal of the bulk of the US force from Afghanistan, it didn't feel like a mission accomplished. And an unintended consequence of the pullout was that it took a sharp bite out of Afghanistan's economy at almost every level. When an army vehicle's engine failed on the road, an Afghan mechanic would be employed to get it back up and running. When the army needed latrines and makeshift shelters away from base, local carpenters went to work. Simple shops found a new market for their provisions; an entire economy hinged on this new money. One World Bank estimate suggested an 11 per cent drop in GDP growth in the year after the withdrawal began.

The recent news that US president Donald Trump will be sending a surge of troops back to Kabul (why it's not just "more troops" we're not sure) was met with bewilderment. It's obvious from the rhetoric that he doesn't understand the war in Afghanistan. The days of simply chasing after bad guys – "losers" as he puts it – are over. The Taliban is more entrenched than ever.

Yet the redeployment, however blundering it could turn out to be, may bring some vigour and vitality back to Afghanistan's economy and particularly its media industry. It's one sector that boomed in the years after the invasion.

The media group Moby, founded by Afghan-Australian entrepreneur Saad Mohseni in 2003 at the start of the invasion, led the way with its TOLO commercial-television network, music labels, radio and film production. Though its shows were decried locally as un-Islamic, its journalists harangued and harassed, and

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although its studios were bombed last year by the Taliban, still the network kept the cameras rolling.

From just 15 news outlets before the invasion, hundreds of radio stations and dozens of private television broadcasters have since opened in Afghanistan. The US, rightly observing the opportunity for a soft-power tool, poured money into independent Afghan media as part of its overseas aid budget from the start. USAid kept many of the smaller outfits going, especially as traditional advertising was in its infancy.

Let's imagine then that this time around, a bold, local media market can tell the story of the deployment itself: correct, unbiased and – most importantly – watched by Afghans.

Trump has repeatedly said that he wants to slash foreign aid. Yet to go back to Afghanistan without a healthy soft-power package would add fuel to this blundering fire. Local media is not the nascent thing it was the first time around. It can be a powerful ally to do what no amount of firepower can achieve: to convince Afghans that the foreign deployment is in their better interest, that peace can be achieved even if it means bringing the Taliban to the table and that there can be a life after this long war.