

A The midterm elections took place in November 2014 - aren't the results going to make the rest of President Obama's second term in office difficult?

B The outcome of last November's midterm elections was a serious setback for the Democrats. The Republicans now have fifty-four of the one hundred seats in the Senate and two hundred and forty-seven of the four hundred and thirty-five seats in the House of Representatives.

A So I suppose Obama will have his hands tied now.

B The Republicans now control both houses of Congress, so it will be even harder for President Obama to pass legislation. But the president hasn't been able to get much done for several years, as he's had neither control of the House nor a super-majority in the Senate. The Republicans won't be able to govern either, since the president will be able to veto any legislation they pass.

A Weren't the results of these elections surprising? Just before the elections, the US unemployment rate went down to five point eight per cent with over two hundred thousand jobs added in October alone. A lot of countries would be happy with such figures.

B US businesses have added eleven point eight million jobs over fifty-nine months of growth, but that's not necessarily translated into higher pay for workers. The wages of the middle class in America have been stagnant for the last two decades. American voters aren't happy. They want a raise, they want cash. The head of the president's council of economic advisers said recently that the rates of real wage growth were still too low - more had to be done to ensure that all families could feel the strengthening recovery in their own lives.

A So the problem of the government is to share the new prosperity. What other problems will President Obama be tackling in the next year or so?

B From his latest speeches, the environment seems to be one of the issues that's close to his heart.

A What are the problems that President Obama will have to face in this area, and what initiatives is he likely to take?

B The Keystone XL pipeline is one of the issues he'll be dealing with.

A The Keystone XL project would expand an existing pipeline from the vast tar sands of Alberta to refineries in the US Midwest, nearly doubling the initial capacity and transporting crude oil on to refineries on the Gulf coast of Texas. The southern leg of the pipeline, from Oklahoma to the Gulf Coast, was completed and began shipping oil last year.

B Yes, but the State Department has yet to approve the northern leg of over one thousand miles that would carry crude oil from Alberta into Montana and onwards to Nebraska where it would connect with existing pipelines. Canada's prime minister built his economic strategy around natural resource extraction - Canada wants to double production from the Alberta tar sands, and it's important for it to have new exit routes to be able to do so.

A Proponents argue that it would give the US economy access to oil from a friendly neighbour-so-called ethical oil- which would also create many jobs and drive down the price of gas.

B The thing is, the US economy doesn't really need all that oil because it's in the midst of an oil and gas boom. And environmental groups oppose the pipeline, arguing that it would tie America even more deeply into a highly-polluting source of energy.

A What is President Obama's decision likely to be?

B President Obama has been expanding fossil fuel development while also trying to move on climate change, much to the frustration of campaigners who say the two policies are incompatible. In his state of the union address, Obama gave strong support to natural gas development.

A What are Obama's achievements on the issue of climate change?

B One of his main achievements is the US-China joint announcement on climate change and energy in November last year. The two largest CO2 emitters have finally spoken, and they've spoken together. This agreement has the necessary components for deep transformations by mid-century.

A Should we be sceptical of the real importance of this announcement?

B An announcement is just an announcement, of course. Years of action will make the difference between mere rhetoric and true climate safety.

### **Outline**

Last November's midterm elections were a serious setback for the Democrats as the Republicans now control both the Senate and the House of Representatives. It will be even harder for President Obama to pass legislation, but the president has not been able to get much done for several years. The problem of the government is to share the new prosperity. Among other current issues, the environment seems to be close to the President's heart. The Keystone XL pipeline is one of the issues he will be dealing with. President Obama has been expanding fossil fuel development, and at the same time he has been trying to move on climate change; one of his main achievements in this area is the joint US-China announcement on climate change and energy.

### **Questions**

1 In a country famous for efficiency, Congress and the President can limit each other's initiatives. This is this surprising, isn't it?

2 What would be your criteria for deciding if a country is successful in fighting global warming?

3 Should we take seriously such joint announcements as that by the US and China on climate change and energy?

4 What do you think North Americans would feel most grateful to president Obama for, better distributing wealth or limiting global warming?