

## First in style

### Michelle Obama could learn a style trick or two from Governor General Michaëlle Jean

BY JENNIFER CAMPBELL, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

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Canadian Governor-General Michaëlle Jean arrives with Slovak President Ivan Gasparovic (right) at the presidential palace in Bratislava on November 26, 2008 during a welcoming ceremony before their official talks. Jean is on a three-day official visit to Slovakia.

**Photograph by:** Samuel Kubani/Getty Images, Getty Images

When it comes to personal style and dressing for success, Governor General Michaëlle Jean may be able to teach First Lady-elect Michelle Obama a thing or two.

Although Jean is the head honcho and Obama is married to him, there are still striking similarities between the two women. They're both young, smart, good-looking, mothers to daughters, and role models to black women in their own countries and around the world.

So, after what many called a fashion disaster on election night, can Obama take a page from Jean's book of fashion?

Janise Bachler certainly thinks so. The Calgary-based personal image consultant with J3 Image Consulting says that when she hits the world stage, Obama has to suit up.

"Michelle Obama needs to learn the value of a suit and a collar," Bachler says. Although it doesn't have to be quite as buttoned-down as the conventional dress of her predecessor Laura Bush, Obama needs to create an impression that she is trustworthy, competent, professional and authoritative. "You can't beat a suit and I don't think I've ever seen her in a suit," Bachler says. "I don't think it's something a person in that position can afford to ignore."

Bachler notes that women's suits are no longer restrictive and uncomfortable now that many fabrics are infused with spandex, making them more movable.

While the matched suit is the most powerful look, Bachler says Obama can switch it up with a black skirt and shirt, topped with a jacket in a different colour or texture.

The fact that Obama wears dresses -- mostly shifts in solid colours -- bodes well if she does make the shift (so to speak) to suits. According to Bachler, studies have shown that a skirt trumps pants in a power situation.

"I think men appreciate that women have power and brains, but they still want them to be a woman. So that's one of things she's done right."

A look at the spouses photo from the 2007 G8 Summit shows seven women and one man (German Chancellor Angela Merkel's husband Joachim Sauer). All are wearing suit jackets and four of the women are wearing skirts.

Bachler says Jean "seems to understand how to wear a suit and not look like an 80-year-old grandmother. When there are conferences and special events, a man would wear a suit, and she understands that, if she were a man, she'd be wearing a suit too, so she wears one.

"There's nothing like the power of a collar and lapels."

That's because the angular nature of the collar and the lapels draws attention to the face -- as does the tie on a man.

Like many people for whom style is a profession, Bachler didn't like Obama's choice of clothing for election night. "I was terribly disappointed. The dress was cool, but it was on a black background. So it just looked like two bright red blotches."

Diane Craig, president of Toronto's Corporate Class Inc., agrees. "I thought it was horrible," Craig says. "I don't know what they were thinking."

Craig says Obama's style is less formal than Jean's, who she says, mostly wears expensive, nice suits and adds "some creativity. "She's fashion-forward. I would say she is into fashion."

Craig doesn't have an issue with Obama's preference for dresses. She says the president-elect's wife usually looks "quite nice" and is a woman of taste. She liked the turquoise dress she wore at the Democratic Convention, for example, but thought the pin was distracting.

Craig isn't wild about Obama's penchant for wearing clothing off the rack (she wore a J. Crew suit for her appearance on The Tonight Show with Jay Leno).

"She's going to have to bring that up a notch -- and she will. You travel a lot and you don't want things to wrinkle. If you're representing the United States throughout the world, she'll have to match her husband, and he's wearing expensive suits."

But media consultant Laura Peck, vice-president of Ottawa-based McLoughlin Media, thinks that's a

good move in recessionary times, as does Annette McConnell of Ottawa's On Your Mark Images.

McConnell likes the fact that Obama wears clothing from U.S. discount retailer Target, "but what is important with such pieces is that you make the look your own -- for example, a top from Target, a skirt or trousers existing in her wardrobe, (finished) with accessories that are current, perhaps by an up-and-coming American designer," she says.

The experts point out that Obama and Jean, while they have race, motherhood and high office in common, have different body shapes. Jean is petite and slim; Obama is tall, broad and curvy. But in terms of their styles, Peck thinks they've both got it down.

"You have to understand your place in history and both are demonstrating they know that," she says. "They both strike the right balance between being appropriate and not being a showboat."

Obama's style, Peck says, is very Chicago, both in its lack of formality and in the amount of colour she wears.

"It's upbeat and optimistic-looking. They both are."

McConnell thinks Obama could learn from Jean, who she says exudes confidence.

"Michaëlle Jean's clothing projects an image of credibility, individuality and class. She is comfortable with herself and her body image. She also adopts a 'finished' look."

Obama, meanwhile, is a striking woman, but she doesn't seem as confident, McConnell says.

"Her clothing choices make me view her as uncomfortable, (which) translates into an image that requires improvement. If we are wearing clothing that we feel comfortable and good in, that will be the image we project."

In short, McConnell says, Jean wears her clothes; Obama lets the clothes wear her.

The image consultant from Ottawa also suggests Obama dump the stiff hairstyle she has now.

"She could benefit from adopting and updating her style to that of Michaëlle Jean."

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