

## Our chance to get back in Uncle Sam's embrace

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The appointment of Gary Doer as our next ambassador to the United States is inspired. His experience, progressive credentials and can-do attitude are what we need for Barack Obama's Washington. Mr. Doer is forthright but affable. He has a network of contacts at the state level. Now he needs to reach out to congressional chairs and the czars in the White House. In the short term, he can play point in more effective co-ordination of infrastructure development – road, rail, ports, pipelines and the “smart grid,” and provide a more sensible approach to our irregular but de facto common market. He can also get out in front of some of the mischief about the border and our health-care system.

Two of our past three ambassadors to Washington have been premiers, and Mr. Doer's appointment is a reminder of the vital role these provincial leaders play in the hidden wiring of the Canada-U.S. relationship. They are sensitized to the efficient flow of goods and people across our borders, what with trade representing employment for more than seven million Americans. They actively reach out to counterpart governors, state and local legislators on practical matters such as reciprocity in procurement. Working together, they created the so-called smart driver's licence as a passport alternative for land crossings. They have also been incubators for climate-change initiatives, an area where Mr. Doer has solid credentials.

Business and labour play a critical role in reminding their American cousins that our economic integration creates mutual benefit. That we trade more with Home Depot than with France is a reminder that almost 40 per cent of our trade is intrafirm. A third of Canadian labour unions are affiliates of U.S.-based internationals, which gives us a natural entrée into this key element of the Democratic coalition. It is a card Mr. Doer (a former labour organizer) will need to play in what will be his abiding preoccupation: battling protectionism, be it dressed as “Buy America,” national security, environmentalism or health and safety.

As Prime Minister Stephen Harper prepares for his meeting with Mr. Obama in Washington this month, we need to give thought to Canadian-U.S. relations in the longer term. Canada is unique among major industrialized countries in that it has only one neighbour. We always feel that Americans need to know more about us, without acknowledging that we don't know as much about them as we think we do. We forget, for example, their burdens of global primacy. Or that their southern neighbours, beginning with Mexico, require more attention.

From Confederation on, Canadians have always been anxious to keep Uncle Sam at arm's length. Since 9/11, Uncle Sam has been more than happy to agree, creating a “real border.”

Now, we want back into Uncle Sam's embrace – or at least into his pockets, so that we can share in his industry and investment. Protecting our gains will require a smart approach to integration, including a complementary approach on immigration and refugee policy; harmonization of standards and regulations; and a robust security arrangement that includes law enforcement, intelligence sharing and adding maritime and land forces to our continental air defence arrangement.

Unfortunately, the time is not right for a bold initiative. Mr. Obama is preoccupied with the most ambitious presidential agenda since Franklin Roosevelt: managing the stimulus and its “exit ramp,” plus health care and climate change, with education and immigration reform promised for next year. With an anxious public and the 2010 mid-term elections on the minds of congressional leaders, there is no appetite for a grand design, especially given the situation in Mexico.

This doesn't mean we should give up. Rather, Canadians should use this time to focus on what we want and how to get there. Develop a national consensus on longer-term goals. Play to our strengths – energy generated by Canadian oil, gas, uranium and hydroelectricity is reliable, safe and secure. Rather than apologize for our energy development, we should aggressively market this capacity. Point out our investments in environmental sustainability. Trumpet our remarkable technological and engineering achievements in hydro and the oil sands.

Build our standing as a reliable friend, ally and neighbour by looking actively to see where our objectives complement those of the United States, especially in the intersection of international security – Afghanistan, WMDs, the Americas.

Geography, history and circumstance may shape the contours of our relationship, but with preparation and timely initiative, we can be game-changers. The new ambassador has his work cut out for him.

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