

A New Canada-U.S. Agenda

By Perrin Beatty

It was recently reported that the Security and Prosperity Partnership was closing shop. A Bush administration initiative, the SPP brought together the leaders of Canada, Mexico, and the United States to deal with a plethora of issues to enhance North American competitiveness. While progress was made on parts of the laundry list of about 300 items, it did not reach its potential.

This shouldn't surprise anyone – laundry lists can't be bundled up into a long-term vision.

Of course, the day-to-day relationship continues with many interactions with the United States – Prime Minister Harper and President Obama have spoken a number of times since January on a variety of issues. Also, on September 16th, Harper and Obama will be meeting, and it is the hope of the Canadian Chamber that the Canada-U.S. border be on the agenda. With a new U.S. administration, Canada has the opportunity to help shape a new agenda that institutionalizes regular leaders meetings around a visionary agenda that is important to both our governments.

Why? North America is at a crossroads. We are both facing immense competitive pressure from the new economic powers around the world such as China and India. Never has there been a time when our ability to compete – and win – has been under so much pressure. Neither one of us is going to be able to go at it alone.

There are a number of elements that must frame this agenda. First, we must learn from the past, reach out, be broadly-based, transparent and reflect the needs of the whole business community; small to large, from all regions of Canada. The focus should be on pragmatic, practical solutions that are in line with our North American vision such as border security and trade-efficiency, pandemic planning, energy security, environmental cooperation, transportation planning, and the joint fight against terrorism.

Of course, we must also engage Mexico to tackle issues of trilateral concern. There must also be separate bilateral tracks. This recognizes the reality that the level of importance or ability to move forward on issues differs between the three North American partners.

A new engagement with the United States is a very easy sell in Canada. After all, our prosperity is heavily tied to the U.S. Today it is not clear that there is a widespread appetite in Washington for a new comprehensive mechanism with us. To succeed, the Prime Minister must lead the initiative that offers President Obama and Congress a compelling and constructive plan for the Canada-U.S. partnership. Then both business and government must work together to sell it by showing them their benefits.

What is our case? What's in it for them? We have to offer compelling answers to how working together will help them enhance their global competitiveness, including how a partnership with Canada will create jobs in the United States.

Few Americans, including those that make key decisions that affect Canada, know that there are over 7 million U.S. jobs are a result of their trade with Canada. They don't know that we are their largest customer with 35 states naming Canada as their number one export destination. Too many don't know Canada is the largest source of foreign energy to the United States or why this matters to their energy security. Needless to say, both countries have a monumental task ahead of them in dealing with climate change. We must show how banding together will make a real difference both at home and in ensuring any multilateral mechanisms are not biased against North America.

In short, we simply must stop talking about us and start doing a better job of selling to them.

There is a lot to be done. Both countries have a lot to gain. But for us to succeed we need to have a clear and articulated vision. Now is the time to get the new Canada-U.S. agenda off the ground.

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