

Good Neighbours Need To Take Down Barriers In Global Marketplace

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At times of stress, we all have a tendency to turn inwards. But for nations that are neighbours and friends, turning inward only leads to negative consequences for both countries.

Putting up barriers can prevent countries from seeing eye-to-eye on how to be more secure, and more prosperous.

Social and economic prosperity today demands that our leaders – in both the public and private sectors – break down these barriers and build stronger ties with neighbouring nations, while working together for a safer and secure world.

Canada has a unique advantage in this regard. With the United States, we share the world's longest undefended border.. Equally important, we are each other's largest trading partners – a fact that has contributed much to the prosperity of both nations.

Yet barriers – real and perceived – still dot our shared border.

Last year's electricity blackout underscores how we underestimate our symbiotic relationship. Reports of the blackout highlighted just how interdependent we are, and how important joint solutions have become, to address energy supply issues. That is why we were pleased to see, soon after the incident, a bilateral initiative whose aim was to meet with stakeholders on both sides of the border to discuss ways in which future scenarios can be avoided.

BSE continues to demonstrate how fences can impede trade relations. It has devastated the Canadian beef industry. Ironically, there have been such huge movements of live cattle across the border that the U.S. and Canadian cattle are actually a single herd, with no greater-or-lesser BSE risk based on "country of residency."

As such, any meaningful resolution must lie in cooperation, not separation, of public policy. Again, we see some progress. A cooperate effort was established this January between Canada, the United States and Mexico to harmonize BSE regulations with the goal of ensuring the continued safety of the North American food supply.

However, other challenges exist: the softwood lumber trade dispute, allegations around grain and dairy farm subsidies, and border security to name a few. And, in all cases, an integrated solution is required.

The good news is that cross-border issues are a priority on the federal government agenda. A fundamental plank of enhancing Canada's place in the world, one of Prime Minister Martin's key priorities, is improving relations with the United States.

The Prime Minister recently chaired his first Cabinet Committee on Canada-U.S. Relations. He has named a Parliamentary Secretary dedicated to this file and created a Secretariat within the Privy Council Office on Canada-U.S. Relations.

All steps in the right direction.

But government cannot lead the charge alone. The private sector must also contribute to both the discussion and the solution around issues affecting our cross-border relationship.

A gathering of North American business and industry leaders in Calgary tomorrow will do just that. Participants at the Woodrow Wilson Forum on Cross-Border Business will explore ways in which the two countries can create a more collaborative environment for business, particularly as it relates to the energy sector.

This is increasingly critical, as access to adequate energy supplies is an enormous economic issue and is intimately tied to the whole question of North American energy and security of supply.

Both U.S. and Canadian citizens assign a high level of importance to the energy supply issue. An Ipsos-Reid survey commissioned by the Canada Institute of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars shows that 94 percent of Americans want their federal government to address this issue in the next year. Almost 90 percent of Canadians share the same opinion.

There are several reasons why citizens demand action now.

For one, two-thirds of Canadians are concerned that they will be personally affected by an electricity shortage in the next five years. Similarly, the same number (65 percent) are concerned about a gasoline shortage.

In the U.S., 67 percent of those surveyed fear that they will be affected by an electricity shortage, while 76 percent share the same concern about gasoline.

It is no wonder that the poll also shows an overwhelming majority of Canadians and Americans want both countries to create a common set of rules that will standardize how energy resources are developed, transported and sold in North America.

One of the biggest barriers towards this end is a lack of understanding and information between both countries. Most Americans, for example, believe their largest supplier of oil is Saudi Arabia. Canada, in fact, fulfills this role.

The absence of fundamental knowledge about supply sources led to the development of the Canadian Centre for Energy Information - and the launch of its website (centreforenergy.com). The aim is, in part, to ensure both countries share an integrated vision for our collective future.

The Centre for Energy may be one example, but it symbolically represents a large step forward in building a more prosperous relationship between Canada and the U.S.

This is an election year in the U.S. and, very likely in Canada as well. Predictably, this will encourage a chorus of critics, in both countries, of our respective relationship. They will argue that our social, economic and political differences demand divisive actions. These voices are out of tune with the majority of citizens, as the Woodrow Wilson Center survey suggests.

More cooperation – not less – is vital to all lasting relationships and requires effort. That is because there are boundless opportunities in a borderless world.

As both a distinguished academic and national leader, President Wilson felt strongly that the scholar and the policymaker were “engaged in a common enterprise”. Today, this unity of effort must include the private sector, and work towards a more intimate and integrated relationship between two great nations.

March 1, 2004