

Perspectives on post-Bush Canada-U.S. relations

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The Canada-U.S. relationship is so fundamental to both sides, it won't be much influenced by a changing of the guard on either side of the border.

That's the perspective of a trio of American political types who expressed themselves recently on the topic.

Former presidential candidate and one-time Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis, a Democrat, scolded his own country for its past attitude toward Canada on border issues.

"Frankly, the U.S. history, when it comes to cross-border disputes, leaves a lot to be desired. We want to do it our-way-or-the-highway."

His remarks were part of a recent debate sponsored by the New England-Canada Business Council. Also participating was a Republican Paul Cellucci, also a former Massachusetts governor, and U.S. ambassador to Canada until 2005.

The two were speculating on how a new president would change the cross-border relationship.

The Bush administration has been largely inattentive to Canadian concerns about a thickening border, sticking to its "security trumps trade" mantra.

Dukakis said new U.S. leadership would afford "a great opportunity to work constructively with Canada which, quite frankly, the U.S. has let down."

He argued the U.S. ignored Canada to its great detriment in making a 2003 decision to invade Iraq.

"If we'd listened to the Canadians we would not have made what, in my judgment, was one of the dumbest decisions in the history of the U.S. -- invading Iraq."

Dukakis predicted a Barack Obama presidency would be far more attentive to Canadian foreign policy perspectives. Obama, he asserted, would be a more suitable leader than John McCain for an increasingly multi-polar world.

"Frankly, I'm troubled about the notion of John McCain being responsible for this country's foreign and security policy . . . John McCain is a trigger-happy guy."

Cellucci disagreed that the Canada-U.S. border has become problematic, pointing to the "smart border" initiatives that have been taken to streamline operations. And he dismissed fretting about a NAFTA renegotiation advocated earlier in the campaign by Obama.

"On the whole issue of NAFTA and the impact of the elections, it doesn't matter who wins on Oct. 14 here or on Nov. 4 in the U.S. The fundamental relationship between the

two countries will continue to be a positive one," Cellucci said. "It's in each of our national interests to work together."

In separate remarks appearing in the Canadian publication Policy Options, David Wilkins, current U.S. ambassador to Canada, also played down a NAFTA renegotiation.

"Whoever's elected president of the U.S., once he gets in office, will understand the benefits to both countries, the magnitude of this trade that NAFTA has created between our two countries, and will continue to support it."

Wilkins said when he arrived in Ottawa in 2005, the bilateral relationship was under stress over beef import restrictions flowing from an outbreak of mad cow disease and discord over a softwood lumber agreement.

"I think there's been a remarkable improvement in the tone of the relationship and the essence of the relationship in the last three years Things are on an upward trend."

The Dukakis-Cellucci discussion also touched on health care, with Cellucci stating that a string of clinics to deliver rapid MRI and other diagnostic services has developed along the northern U.S. border to serve Canadians fed up waiting for care.

"Baloney," responded Dukakis, questioning why it's okay for the Republican presidential candidate McCain to avail himself of government-provided health care if it's such a bad thing.

The most interesting part of their exchange focused not on anything to do with Canada, but rather whether Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin would be ready to assume the presidency should anything happen to McCain.

"How would you feel with Sarah Palin leading this country?" Dukakis asked Cellucci.

His reply: "Very good. When you're a governor, you make executive decisions."

Cellucci said the Alaska governor "has more executive experience than Obama, McCain and [Democratic vice-presidential candidate Joe] Biden combined. Of course, she's qualified. She has become a transformative figure in American politics."

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