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BREAKING NEWS

The Canadian Press - ONLINE EDITION

Wall sells Saskatchewan to Washington with help of former Bush envoy

By: Mike Blanchfield, The Canadian Press
Posted: 01/10/2011 4:38 PM | Comments: 0 | Last Modified: 01/10/2011 8:22 PM

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OTTAWA - Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall is no sore winner.

Wall became a bona fide national political force last year when he forced the Harper government to blink and block the Australian takeover bid of Saskatchewan's PotashCorp.

Now, he's going continental, determined to make Saskatchewan a major player in Canada-U.S. environmental policy. He makes no apologies for paying a former Bush administration envoy \$400,000 in provincial taxpayers' money to open doors in Washington to help sell his province's carbon capture and storage know-how.

"We have by far and away the most successful CCS project in the world, and so we've got a great base to build on," Wall told The Canadian Press in an interview.

Wall says Saskatchewan has 40 per cent of the world's stored carbon dioxide and he wants to broker the province's own deals in the U.S., either with state governments or private interests.

The premier insists his views are in lock-step with the Harper's government's approach on the environment — that it shouldn't penalize businesses such as Alberta's oil sands and that the policy should be in harmony with the United States.

"It would be somewhat irresponsible, at best, and maybe economically damaging if we went ahead with our own post-carbon regime without the Americans."

Wall became a player on the national political stage when he vocally opposed Australian mining giant BHP Billiton's takeover bid for Saskatoon-based PotashCorp.

Industry Minister Tony Clement blocked the takeover, surprising many, including Wall's own government. With 13 Conservative seats at stake in Saskatchewan, many observers were impressed with Wall's ability to tap into a ground swell of public support and win a major political battle against Prime Minister Stephen Harper's minority government.

Two months later, Wall is unwilling to take a victory lap at Harper's expense.

"We look forward to working with the new environment minister," said Wall. "We can't do these things and knee-cap the economy in the bargain. That's been the view of the federal government and we look forward to that continuing now with Mr. (Peter) Kent."

But that won't stop the provinces from pursuing their own interests in Washington either.

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"Every province is moving ahead. It's not such a bad thing. One of the strengths of Confederation is we have provincial capitals that have capacity and a vision," said Wall.

"Our message doesn't have to be different from the federal government message. We're down there to advocate for national co-operation on the continent on energy and the environment. So is the prime minister and so is the White House."

Wall noted that Alberta has its own secretariat in the embassy in Washington to advance its interests.

Saskatchewan has chosen a different option — one with lower overhead, based on a personal relationship rooted in a love of football.

"David Wilkins is our answer," said Wall.

Wilkins is, of course, the second Republican ambassador to Canada appointed by former U.S. president George W. Bush.

Wilkins and Wall hit it off when the newly-appointed envoy was touring Canada almost six years ago. He took the time to meet Wall, then the province's opposition leader, and the two struck up a fast rapport. They bonded over football.

That has since evolved into Wall commissioning Wilkins's South Carolina law firm, Nelson Mullins, to represent Saskatchewan's business development interests south of the border.

They started working together late last fall, and so far Wall said he's seen the dividends. Two congressional delegations have visited Saskatchewan, with more expected.

And he's had two successful trips to Washington, where Wilkins has opened the doors of U.S. lawmakers on Capitol Hill.

Wilkins also scored Wall some important face time in the White House when he helped broker a meeting with Carol Browner, who was appointed by the Obama Administration to head the Environmental Protection Agency.

There is no chance that new climate change legislation will come out of the Republican-controlled Congress, so any movement will have to come in the regulatory arena through the EPA.

Wall is determined that his province's environmental and energy interests aren't sideswiped by any EPA actions.

"We've got to be very vigilant about this," said Wall.

The access brokered by Wilkins has allowed Wall to sing from the Harper's government's song sheet on energy and the environment.

"It's conflict-free oil. And it's right on their border so, to have them see it first hand is important. That's part of what Nelson Mullins has delivered."

This international positioning begs the obvious question: does Wall have national political ambitions?

No, he maintains. He gave the matter more thought over the Christmas holidays and concluded he has more work to do in Saskatchewan. He said he truly loves his home province.

At the same time, he insisted he harbours no ill will towards Harper or his government now that the dust has settled on their potash battle.

Wall has spoken to Harper only once since earlier November, at the Grey Cup in Edmonton, where his beloved Saskatchewan Rough Riders narrowly lost to the Montreal Alouettes.

But that football story lacks some of the bonhomie of his Wilkins' recollections: "Very briefly ran into him at the Grey Cup. Said hello, and that's about it."

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