

Interview with the Canadian and American Ambassadors

David H. Wilkins; Michael Wilson

The United States and Canada share not only a long border but their histories, economies, societies and interests are intertwined. At the centre of the relationship are the Ambassadors of the two countries, David H. Wilkins and Michael Wilson. They were interviewed separately in January 2008. Their thoughts on the various issues have been combined into a single interview.

What previous experiences were most useful in preparing for your present position?

Ambassador Wilkins: I served 25 years in the South Carolina House of Representatives as an elected member – 11 of those years as speaker of the House. I was on the ballot 13 times and know what it is like to get out and ask people for their vote. I also know what it is like to manage a budget as I was in charge of both the House's multi-million dollar budget as well as shepherding the state's multi-billion dollar budget through the House. At the same time, for more than three decades, I ran a very successful law firm begun by my father. So I was managing that business and employees as well, ultimately responsible for the firm's fiscal health and the success of our clients.

All this experience helped me immensely in becoming U.S. Ambassador to Canada. Diplomacy is ultimately all about relationship-building. I had decades of experience in the House building key alliances and working with members in both parties to pass legislation important to our state and constituents. I also had tremendous experience dealing with the media which is invaluable in this critical post.

Ambassador Wilson: I was born and educated in Toronto. Following graduation, I worked for two years in banking in London, England and New York City. I then joined a Toronto-based investment bank before being elected to the House of Commons as a Progressive Conservative Member of Parliament in the 1979 general election. I served as Minister of State for International Trade in the nine-month minority government of Joe Clark. I was also a candidate at the 1983 Progressive Conservative leadership convention. After the 1984 election, when the party formed government, I became Minister of Finance.

After seven years of Finance, I became Minister of Industry, Science and Technology and Minister of International Trade. In that role, I participated in negotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which remains one of the key achievements of my career. In 1993, after deciding not to seek another term, I returned to Bay Street to head my own consulting and financial services firm. I later rejoined Royal Bank of Canada and was Chairman and CEO of RT Capital when that business was sold to UBS AG, after which I became Chairman of UBS Canada. In early 2006, Prime Minister Harper called, asking me to return to public service as the 22nd Canadian Ambassador to the United States.

I feel that my past experience as a Minister, which also brought me to the U.S. regularly, has provided me with the best possible preparation for my current assignment. In many ways, because of its size and importance, the Canadian Embassy in Washington is very similar to the operation of a department of government. As Ambassador, you are called to deal with all aspects of management, from policy development to human resources. As a Minister, many of the issues I was dealing with involved the U.S.

Describe the main accomplishments in Canada-United States relations during your Ambassadorship?

Ambassador Wilkins: When I first arrived in Canada in the summer of 2005 I vowed I would set a new tone in the US-Canada relationship, accentuating the positive and looking to strengthen the already-strong bond that exists between our two great democracies. As I tell folks when I travel this great nation, for some reason both Canadians and Americans tend to focus on the "clouds" instead of the many "silver linings" in our partnership and actively seek controversies where so few exist. I am an optimistic person by nature and when you have the single best, most peaceful and productive relationship the world has ever known to brag on- you have a lot of material to work with. Over these last two years I think that

feeling of optimism has been contagious at the highest levels of our government and I give much of the credit to President Bush and Prime Minister Harper. The two of them became actively engaged in the softwood lumber file at the leaders' summit in Cancun, Mexico which led to a swift resolution of this very contentious issue. BSE (mad cow) has been effectively dealt with and our borders are open to Canadian beef. This year, as we continue to actively deal with the "passport issue", known as the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative or "WHTI", it will be with that same spirit of cooperation. We have already listened to Canadian concerns delaying the implementation of the passport requirements at the land and sea borders until June 2009 and exempting minors under 16 years of age.

We are working with various states to create an enhanced driver's license to be used at the border in lieu of passports. We'll continue to work with and address Canadian concerns every step of the way as we implement the Congress-mandated WHTI provisions along our northern border.

Ambassador Wilson: Reaching an agreement with the United States, effectively ending our long-standing dispute over softwood lumber in April 2006, was one of our key accomplishments. The Agreement outlines the terms for a fair and durable resolution and reflects Canada's objectives and interests, and it paved the way for a stronger bilateral trade relationship—a relationship upon which so many Canadians depend for jobs and prosperity. It also set a positive tone that allowed our countries to move forward in collaborating in other ways to make North America more competitive on a global scale.

More recently, management of the Canada-U.S. border, including security, trade and tourism issues, has been my greatest preoccupation. The Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative is the most pressing immediate issue. While there are still matters of concern to be addressed, it must be said that considerable progress has been made as Americans, particularly Members of Congress, have become sensitized to the risks of implementing this new requirement before travellers on have obtained acceptable documents.

For 2008, I hope that we will continue to solve problems proactively before they become actual issues for our two governments. Former Secretary of State George Shultz used to equate diplomacy with "tending the garden" – meaning vigilantly addressing the small problems that arise between partners and friends. Thus, as Ambassador, I make it a priority to ensure that we keep excellent lines of communication between all partners involved in the good health of the relationship and that we fully understand each other's perspectives on key issues.

In terms of your time and energy which areas of Canada-United States relationship are most demanding?

Ambassador Wilkins: We have a saying at the U.S. Mission in Ottawa: "It's all about the border." Nearly everything we do as a diplomatic mission is focused on what happens along the border in terms of facilitating trade, travel and making sure always our borders are safe for the passage of goods and people. When you enjoy the world's best, most peaceful and productive trade relationship in the world (\$1.5 billion a day) that is something you do not ever take for granted. We are working hard every day, not only to protect this relationship that puts food on the table for families on both sides of the border, but to grow it. In this post 9-11 world, we also work to make sure that every citizen – be it Canadian or otherwise – who travels within the United States is safe. That means implementing smart security at our borders and working with our neighbors on pro-active measures that prevent terrorist activities and other incidents and accidents.

Ambassador Wilson: The links between Canada and the United States are deep, diverse and complex. Some 300 agreements and treaties cement our mutual co-operation. Both countries understand each other's policies on a multitude of issues. While we do not always agree, we are each determined to maintain the vital partnerships that have served us so well.

Maintaining a secure border without jeopardizing two-way trade and tourism between Canada and the U.S. is a key priority for me. Trade volumes between Canada and the U.S. are huge. Two-way trade crosses the Canada–U.S. border at the rate of more than a million dollars a minute. And more than 400,000 people a day, on average, travel across the border. It follows that a smart and efficient border is essential for our highly integrated industries.

We must make sure that the border provides gateways to prosperity – not cumbersome checkpoints that stifle our competitiveness. At the same time, both countries are rightly concerned about border security. Canadians and Americans once spoke of sharing “the longest undefended border in the world.” That should now be referred to as “the longest secure border in the world.” But problems remain, and I regret to say that the border is thickening.

In the case of WHTI, the new U.S. travel document requirements for Canadians to enter and Americans to return to the U.S., the pressure of speedy implementation could well overwhelm our abilities to issue secure travel documents. Several provinces and states – including British Columbia and Washington State, – are working on plans for enhanced driver’s licenses to be used as alternative travel documents to a passport. However, the most advanced of these plans are still in the pilot project stage.

Canada agrees with the security aim underlying documents to validate a person’s nationality and identity. My concern is that we must prevent gridlock at the border, during the critical implementation period of WHTI.

Shifting the focus from the border to international security, the Embassy also plays a key role in ensuring Canada’s commitment to Afghanistan is well understood. We highlight our contribution on Capitol Hill, among think tanks and with the media to show how Canada is playing a real, tangible and substantive role on international security issues. It also means intervening regularly in the policy-making process – for example, during the ongoing Iraq debate, we have consistently worked to ensure that decisions on Iraq would not compromise the U.S. commitment to Afghanistan.

Do you foresee even closer integration between Canada and the United States than is presently the case under NAFTA?

Ambassador Wilkins: In the sense that communication and travel keep getting cheaper, making the whole world smaller – then yes, we will likely keep getting more integrated with each other, just as we will keep getting more integrated with the rest of the world.

The question would seem to be, is there something beyond this that we’d choose to do as a matter of policy? A look at our shared history would suggest that we have tended to make those choices positively in the past. Less than 200 years ago we fought a war against each other. Until about 100 years ago, the United States was not Canada’s top economic partner; Britain was. Less than 70 years ago, before World War II, we were not allies in any formal collective security arrangement. It has been less than 45 years since we agreed to trade autos and parts back and forth without restrictions.

We no longer argue about whether those past decisions to grow closer together were good or bad. I think most agree that they’ve had tremendously positive effects on both our economies – as has NAFTA. I spend the majority of my time working to strengthen the bonds between our two great nations and this includes working with both Canadians and Americans who are committed to improving our trade relationship by reducing redundant restrictions and the bureaucratic red tape that impedes our efficiency and thereby reduces our bottom line. We’re always striving to ease the flow of goods and services across the border by providing a secure, productive environment that benefits both countries. Having said this, I would caution against any thinking that either the U.S. or Canadian government is striving in any form toward an EU-type arrangement.

The United States and Canada are two distinct democracies and we both cherish and protect our sovereignty. We will remain two separate nations – blessed to share a prosperous partnership made better by the efforts of agreements like NAFTA – but separate and sovereign nonetheless.

Ambassador Wilson: There is no doubt that NAFTA has been the key to the growth of bilateral exchanges between Canada, the United States, and Mexico. I say that, not because I signed NAFTA on behalf of Canada in a previous life, but because, objectively, NAFTA has been a remarkable success. During NAFTA's first 13 years, trade among the NAFTA partners almost tripled. Investment flows have also increased substantially. Trade means jobs – in all three countries.

Moreover, as trade has expanded freely across the border, more and more industries, companies and their suppliers operate on either side of the border. Assembling the parts into a single car, for example, can involve seven border crossings – one company's North American supply chain, made stronger by NAFTA. What has developed in many sectors is an integrated North American economy, using North American supply chains. Canadians, Americans and Mexicans will not be competing so much with each other, as much as they will be joining forces as North Americans to compete with the world. I believe that this is a trend that will continue to grow in the upcoming years.

How do you make sure you are on top of every aspect of this diverse and complex relationship?

Ambassador Wilkins: I think to be on top of the relationship you have to be out there- actively participating as much as you can. I am not here in Canada to mark time, I am here to make my time count. So I want to be out on the road, meeting Canadians, telling them about my country, and just as importantly, listening and learning from them. I have traveled extensively across Canada visiting every province and territory – many of them numerous times. There are often occasions where I may speak 4-5 times a day to various groups, especially when I am out traveling. I do not think I am being an effective representative for my country when I sit behind my desk in Ottawa, so you will most often find me out meeting with Canadians, giving speeches and touring different facilities. I likewise think it's vital that the folks back in Washington know what's on the minds of Canadians. I make it a point to get back to Washington and meet with officials there, be it Secretary Rice or Secretary Chertoff, officials at the Commerce Department or representatives in Congress, so they understand what is important to Canadians.

It is a complex relationship, and sometimes I am concerned that we fail to appreciate what we have in each other – a truly indispensable and irreplaceable partnership based on common values. I do take great exception to those people who do not know President Bush as I do, who have no clue of the terror assessments he reads each morning and the major attacks he and his administration have thwarted since 9-11, who fail to recognize that it is because of this administration's diligence that North America has not been attacked since September 11, and are so very critical of this president. That is bothersome. On the other hand, I think history will very much vindicate this president and the next U.S. president will soon discover he or she has much to contend with and big shoes to fill when confronted with these same threats.

Ambassador Wilson: Canada's priority relationship with the United States is reflected in the twenty three offices (including the Embassy) that we have throughout the United States. To complement the work of these offices, we have 16 Honorary Consuls – local champions of the Canada-U.S. relationship – who are keeping an ear to the ground on the local scene as well as sharing Canada's story.

Since May 2006, I have had the opportunity to travel to more than 15 states (more than once in some cases), from Blaine, WA to San Antonio, TX to Plattsburgh, NY. And during each trip, I meet with the local academic, business, cultural and media communities to learn about the issues that are important to Americans. These trips, which always involve a public speech, allow me to share Canada's importance with that specific state or region. The Embassy also has a number of advocacy tools that allow us to drill down and capture the economic and social relationships between Canada and the states.

Your Embassy is a large operation. Can you give us an idea of how the Embassy is organized and what are its key responsibilities?

Ambassador Wilkins: We do have a large operation that is appropriate to the size and scope of the bilateral relationship. State Department offices within the Embassy focus on political, economic, consular, public affairs and management functions. Personnel from fifteen other U.S. Government agencies manage commercial, agricultural, customs, immigration, law enforcement, and military relations – all of which fall under my authority as Ambassador. Although we have many responsibilities we all have one chief mission: to strengthen the already robust relationship between the United States and Canada.

Ambassador Wilson: The Embassy in Washington, is Canada's main diplomatic mission to the United States.

I oversee the work of staff at the Embassy and work in close collaboration with employees at 13 Consulates General, eight Consulates and one Trade Office across the United States and in Puerto Rico. The Embassy is divided into five functional areas of operation:

The Political Section embraces a number of policy and operational programs: Foreign Policy, Energy and Environment, Intelligence Liaison, Border and National Security, Immigration and Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) offices.

The Economic Section promotes Canada's economic interests, in a full range of economic, commercial, trade and investment areas.

The Washington Advocacy Secretariat, which houses the Public Affairs section, Congressional and Legal Affairs section, and the Parliamentary and Provincial/Territorial Affairs section, reaches out to the groups that play a role in policy-making in the U.S., including members of Congress, U.S. states and their organizations, the media, academics and think tanks, and cultural and civic leaders.

The Canadian Defence Liaison Staff, with representatives from land, sea and air branches of the Canadian Forces, advises the Ambassador on military matters, serves as a vital link between Canada's Defence Department and the Pentagon and handles the support needs of the 600 Canadian defence personnel serving in the United States.

Finally, the Management and Consular section provides administrative and technical support services for the Embassy, as well as assistance to Canadians visiting or resident in Washington, D.C., and the states of Delaware, Maryland and Virginia.

Several Canadian government departments and agencies place full-time representatives in the Embassy.

Are there any particular considerations that come into play when you deal with the Premiers or Governors?

Ambassador Wilkins: We are fortunate at the U.S. Mission Canada to have six Consulates General and one "American Presence" post to expand our connections across this vast country. We therefore have representatives to meet directly with provincial and local officials in their neighborhoods. They do a great job at this, but I also know it is important to travel myself, and I am frequently on the road in this beautiful nation.

It is often said, "the business of America is business," and another important part of our work is facilitating visits from state governors and their trade delegations and American companies. The links between our

two nations are close on every level: at the national, regional, private sector, community, and individual level.

Ambassador Wilson: We recognize that legislation, and other policy developments in the U.S. often have a direct impact on one or more provinces. Because of this and the important role provinces and states play in Canada-U.S. relations, the Embassy's Provincial, Territorial and Parliamentary Affairs section, supports my efforts to act both as a channel and facilitator for provinces and territories, particularly to help deepen their engagement in the U.S.

We are pleased that the province of Alberta operates an office within the Embassy – an arrangement which has proven to offer many advantages for cooperation. We also enjoy a solid working relationship with the Government of Quebec's stand-alone office in Washington. In addition to bringing the provinces and territories into the Embassy's advocacy strategy, we partner with them in the planning and execution of their incoming missions to Washington.

Are there any particular services of the Embassy intended to help legislators deal with political or trade issues involving the other country?

Ambassador Wilkins: Our Embassy's Information Resource Center (IRC) provides outreach, website (<http://ottawa.usembassy.gov>) and research services to MPs and other government officials. The public can contact research specialists by e-mail or website for assistance in locating accurate information about the United States government, history, and culture. Likewise, our "E-alerts" provide recent government statements, think-tank studies, or important academic articles on issues such as the economy, culture and the arts and U.S.-Canadian relations. In addition, the exchanges office of our Public Affairs section facilitates a variety of exchanges each year designed to bring Canadian legislators and other professionals into direct contact with their American counterparts.

Ambassador Wilson: Much like our on-going collaboration with provinces and territories, my team also provides support to individual Canadian parliamentarians and affiliated groups and committees in the execution of their parliamentary duties. This support varies from simply ensuring they are kept aware of developments in the U.S. to the more substantive task of helping organize and execute a visit to Washington to meet policy-makers.

A primary example of this is the Embassy's support to the Canadian members of the Canada-United States Inter-Parliamentary Group (IPG). The IPG exists to exchange information and promote better understanding between Canadian parliamentarians and U.S. legislators on common problems and concerns, in the relations between the two countries. The IPG meets annually and the Canadian members travel to the U.S. fairly regularly. I have had the privilege to host the group at the Embassy, as well as travel with them to their annual meeting, last held in Windsor, Ontario, where both Canadian and U.S. members had an opportunity to have a hands-on view of operations at the Canada-U.S. border crossing.

How has modern information technology changed the traditional role of an embassy and an ambassador?

Ambassador Wilkins: Technology has helped me do my job. I can reach out to Canadian audiences via our websites. I have participated in "webchats" which allow me to interact on-line in real time with people from throughout Canada. We have also made great efforts to engage with communities North of 60 through the innovation of "Virtual Presence Posts," a coordinated outreach effort between the Embassy and the Consulates responsible for those three territories. Obviously the media allows Canadians to hear directly from me about U.S. government policies. With Digital Video Conferences (DVCs), I can directly communicate with my staff in Consulates throughout Canada, as well as with Canadian audiences. Thanks to modern information technology, the 'traditional role' of an embassy and an ambassador has

been expanded and enhanced at the same time that it has provided new challenges in the many new platforms competing for people's attention.

But even with the benefits of technology, there is no substitute for personal experiences and relationships. The best part of being ambassador is meeting with the thousands of Canadians across the country who've made Canada feel like home for Susan and me these past two-and-a-half years. It is an honor to meet so many wonderful people who have such a high opinion of my country – the folks whose opinions don't make it into the newspapers. It makes me realize every single day how blessed my country is to have Canada as our closest friend and ally and what a tremendous privilege it is for me to represent my country in this great democracy.

Ambassador Wilson: The Embassy and Consulates are using Internet and social networking technology to promote Canadian government interests in the United States and further our advocacy, trade, and consular goals. (Yes, I always carry my Blackberry!)

The best example is our Connect2Canada initiative (www.connect2canada.com), which is a web-based network of nearly 35,000 people, including Americans doing business with Canada or whose work otherwise involves Canada, as well as the Canadian expatriate community. Through these groups we are reaching opinion-shapers and decision-makers in business, media, academe, NGOs, and federal, state, and local government.

Connect2Canada is now our principal communication tool in the U.S. and we use it to convey key messages on Canadian interests in the U.S. to targeted audiences in a timely manner with measurable results. In January, for example, we launched a "Border Travel Update" message to the entire Connect2Canada network. The message described the new document requirements for border crossings beginning January 31, 2008. A very high proportion opened our message, and we know that many of them forwarded the message to others. The information quickly spread to various electronic mailing lists and websites that are read by people interested in traveling to Canada.

We use this technology to reach very targeted audiences with timely information. We have sent, for example, messages to Canadians located in areas affected by emergency situations, such as the recent wild fires in southern California, Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf states, or deadly tornadoes in the Midwest.

We also send regular electronic newsletters that focus on trade and economics, Canadian news, and research at Canadian think tanks and universities to Connect2Canada members who specifically subscribe to these information resources.

Through this technology, we are developing a motivated base of individuals in the U.S. who: 1) are, in some cases, willing to act to further our advocacy goals; 2) are knowledgeable about Canada and Canada-U.S. relations; 3) can help promote Canada's interests in the U.S.; and, 4) can recruit additional Connect2Canada members.