

New security chief for U.S. likely to ease border rules

Pragmatic Arizona governor expected to move away from law-and-order fixation

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Janet Napolitano expected to be named head of homeland security. MATT YORK/AP PHOTO

WASHINGTON—As Barack Obama moves to flesh out his cabinet in the coming days, Canadians will be watching for signals from a 50-year-old New York-born governor of Arizona, a woman who has more than just a passing knowledge of the northern border even if she lives on the country's southern flank.

Janet Napolitano, expected to be named homeland security chief, will usher in a new, more flexible era of border security, analysts say, moving the portfolio away from its narrow law-and-order fixation and closer to an intersection between immigration and cross-border commerce.

As a border governor, she has shown a more thoughtful, pragmatic approach to illegal immigration, and approaches the problem from the perspective of a policy-maker, not a cop, which was the hallmark of the Michael Chertoff era, according to analysts who study Ottawa-Washington relations.

"Michael Chertoff's vision was about as wide as his head and that has impeded a lot of progress between the two nations," says Gordon Giffin, a former ambassador to Canada who is providing assistance on the Barack Obama transition team.

"Janet Napolitano is a thoughtful governor with an open-minded view on how to approach problems."

She has visited Ottawa within the past year to discuss trade, counts Manitoba Premier Gary Doer as an ally stemming from meetings of western governors and premiers, and has a reputation for bipartisanship, which Obama values.

There is also hope she could further delay or relax the terms of the June implementation of new ground border rules that will require both Americans and Canadians to carry passports or enhanced driver's licences to cross the 49th parallel.

Ontario has already announced it will provide new licences and high-tech radio frequency equipment has been installed at the Buffalo-Fort Erie border crossing in advance of the June 1 deadline.

But Maryscott Greenwood, executive director of the Canadian-American Business Council says she believes Napolitano will stress the need for economic security at the border even as she maintains personal security.

"I think they will view things through the economic lens as well as the security lens," Greenwood said.

That could lead to more discretion on who is able to traverse the border as trusted travellers or possibly a delay until it is clear the technology is ready and the public is properly prepared, she said.

As a border governor, Napolitano has fought to curb illegal immigration but has chosen to target employers who hire illegals rather than building walls at the Mexican border. "You build a 50-foot wall, somebody will find a 51-foot ladder," she once said.

She has refused to punish illegals already in her state and vetoed a bill that would have allowed police to arrest illegal immigrants in Arizona. She did, however, ask for the National Guard on her southern border, and George W. Bush provided forces to patrol the international border.

Paul Frazer, a former Canadian diplomat who is now a Washington consultant, agrees that Napolitano knows the vagaries of the northern border and would be anxious to learn more.

"She has a track record on immigration and is not someone who would allow the border to thicken unnecessarily," Frazer said.

A number of analysts compared Napolitano to former Pennsylvania governor Tom Ridge, the first homeland security czar, who worked with Ottawa on a so-called "smart border" accord and was seen, because of his executive experience, to understand Canadian concerns over the need for commerce to flow smoothly.