



Genial Doer faces great expectations

Former NDP premier's amiable approach, contacts key to tackling 'Buy America,' clean energy issues

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OTTAWA—Gary Doer's first problem as Canada's next ambassador to the United States could well be high expectations.



CHRIS WATTIE/REUTERS
Prime Minister Stephen Harper shares a laugh with Manitoba Premier Gary Doer, the ambassador-designate to the United States on Aug. 28, 2009.

The long-time New Democrat premier of Manitoba, appointed yesterday to Canada's top diplomatic post, arrives in his job with an already well-established network of influential U.S. contacts and a reputation for openness that may not always sit comfortably with the tightly controlled Conservative government in Ottawa.

"This will be the first time in my life I have to be diplomatic," Doer joked yesterday with reporters after meeting Prime Minister Stephen Harper in Ottawa and formally taking up the role as ambassador-designate.

His official start to the job will probably come next month, to coincide with Harper's trip to Washington for one-on-one meetings with President Barack Obama on Sept. 16.

What not to do in Washington

Teachable moments from Gary Doer's predecessors in the Canadian embassy

Don't pick electoral favourites

Raymond Chrétien, nephew to former prime minister Jean Chrétien, said in a 2000 speech that if Al Gore were elected president it would

Doer, who served as premier of Manitoba for 10 years, amassed a remarkable array of working friendships with U.S. politicians.

The regular dealings between U.S. governors and premiers put Doer in close touch with people such as Janet Napolitano, the former Arizona governor and now Secretary of Homeland Security.

Those Canada-U.S. connections also gave him a deep knowledge of issues that will be his day-to-day duties in his new role – the cross-border clean-energy strategy, the "Buy American" provisions in the new U.S. stimulus legislation and the questions surrounding trade and resource management between Canada and the U.S.

"I don't know of anyone who knows more governors than he does," said David Wilkins, the most recent U.S. ambassador to Canada, who said Doer was the first premier he met when he arrived in Canada in 2005 – on a trip to Churchill, Man., along with the former governor of Colorado, Bill Owens. "He gets it. He understands that relationships are very, very important."

Asked what would be the number one issue waiting on Doer's desk when he arrives in Washington, Wilkins said, flatly: "Protectionism," a reference to the Buy American provisions that could hamper Canada-U.S. trade.

Doer, already turning his mind southward, reached to a U.S. example yesterday to demonstrate how he, a life-long New Democrat, would be able to serve as the representative of a Conservative government in Canada. He noted that when Obama went looking for an ambassador to China this year, he chose Republican governor Jon Huntsman of Utah.

Like Huntsman, Doer said he accepted the job,

mean little change for Canada since Gore "knows us," while George W. Bush, he said, did not. The remarks were widely viewed as an endorsement of Gore. Chrétien served as ambassador to the U.S. from 1994-2000.

Don't appear to interfere

Outgoing ambassador Michael Wilson, appointed in 2006, was pulled into the so-called NAFTA-gate scandal in 2008, when Canadian officials questioned the sincerity of Barack Obama's campaign trail trade pronouncements.

Don't hit

An international lawyer with a reputation for intellectual toughness, Allan Gotlieb played a highly visible role under Liberal and Conservative prime ministers during his stint in Washington from 1981-89. But his tenure is still best remembered for the furor that ensued after

not as a perk or payoff, but as a duty.

"The public doesn't like this kind of only, narrow partisan views of Canada. The public doesn't like that in the United States," Doer said. "The public actually wants all of us, from different political parties, to compete when we're in election campaigns, and to work together, in the public interest, after campaigns."

spouse Sondra publicly slapped an employee before a state dinner in 1986.

Many people are using the word "inspired" to describe Harper's appointment of Doer, including former Canadian ambassador to the U.S. and former New Brunswick premier, Frank McKenna.

Talking to CBC-TV yesterday, McKenna praised the choice of Doer.

"He's a very able communicator at a time when we have some big issues that we have to communicate on," he said.

Whether Doer will be encouraged to keep practicing his brand of gregarious openness, however, is an open question.

Paul Frazer, now a U.S.-based consultant who once served as minister of public affairs in the Canadian embassy in Washington, said he's hoping that Doer's appointment is a sign that Ottawa now sees the need for our ambassador to be more visible and vocal.

"This environment in the United States is a very open environment and I think if you're selecting a particular person to be your ambassador for this kind of job, I think you need to be able to give that person a little more leeway," Frazer said.

Frazer hailed the departing ambassador, Michael Wilson, as a "first-class ambassador" and says it's probably unfair to compare the two styles. Wilson, known as a low-key finance minister in the Conservative reigns in Canada in the 1980s, appeared to have a similarly discreet profile in Washington over the past three years.

Doer, on the other hand, has had a reputation for genial openness, across party lines and especially with the media. When he walked out to greet reporters in the foyer of the Commons yesterday, he was greeted with friendly cries of, "Look, it's Mr. Ambassador," and Doer burst out laughing several times while taking questions.

While he was remaining coy about the conversations that led up to his appointment by Harper, Doer did suggest that it was an "ongoing" dialogue

that reached back as far as 2007, when he spoke to Harper about how he'd like to leave his premier's post after 10 years.

While Doer did not want to get drawn into detailed discussions about the issues that would be priorities in his new job, he did offer a sketch in broad outlines of the subjects at the top of his mind.

"They're the obvious ones – the whole issue of border security; the issues of country-of-origin legislation and how it's applied in agriculture, the issues of Buy America and how it affects Canadian workers and Canadian communities and certainly the clean-energy strategy that I've worked on with different governors and different companies in the United States before this appointment," Doer said

Harper did not talk to reporters about the appointment yesterday, but in remarks at a photo opportunity, he said he thought Doer would represent close but "assertive" relations between Canada and the United States.