

Obama's emphasis on trade opens door to ease border issues

A 2007 study points out that more than seven million U.S. jobs depend on trade with Canada

BY BARBARA YAFFE, VANCOUVER SUN FEBRUARY 9, 2010

If Barack Obama's intention is to create jobs for Americans by boosting trade, he'll have to start paying more attention to the beleaguered Canada-U.S. border.

Obama's jobs message, outlined in a recent State of the Union address to Congress, suggests Canada may finally have the opening it needs to take its long-standing case for easing border bottlenecks to Washington.

An article by American researcher Kathryn Friedman, appearing in the latest issue of the Canadian political journal Policy Options, urges stakeholders on both sides of the border to begin lobbying D.C. policy-makers, reminding them that "the Canada-U.S. economic relationship . . . is the lifeline for continued prosperity."

Friedman, deputy director of the University of Buffalo Regional Institute, says it's time for the two countries to devise a joint governing structure for the 49th parallel, "perhaps one modelled upon Norad," which supervises continental air defence.

"The global recession provides an opportunity to link recovery of the United States and President Obama's legacy to border policy," writes Friedman.

According to a 2007 study by the Canadian Embassy in Washington, 7.1 million U.S. jobs relied on trade with Canada.

Canada is the primary foreign export market for 36 of the lower 48 states, according to a Winter 2009 briefing paper on the border by the Border Policy Research Institute at Western Washington University.

It's the second-ranked market for all the other states with the exception of New Mexico and Louisiana.

The briefing paper asserts: "A renewed effort to reduce border-related inefficiencies is important during the current economic crisis."

Unemployment in the U.S. is just under 10 per cent and projected to climb higher in 2010.

Obama, concerned about a recent voter rebuff in Massachusetts where Ted Kennedy's Democratic Senate seat was lost to a Republican, is focusing his message on the economy and jobs in a bid to protect the seats of Democrats who will be facing midterm elections in November.

An avalanche of security measures has choked the Canada-U.S. relationship since 9/11, impeding trade flows between the two countries.

In addition, a terrorist attempt in December by the so-called underwear bomber could make matters worse.

With Canada and the U.S. reaching an agreement last week to exclude this country from Buy American provisions in Obama's stimulus package, the easing of border flows becomes more important than ever. At present, too many agencies are trying to craft policy for a single border, Friedman says, referring to "a hodgepodge of institutions and processes focused on border policy . . . in both countries."

Moreover, she argues, the lopsided emphasis on security is the result of a dominant role played by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, a seven-year-old agency with 225,000 employees.

While many other government departments play roles in regulating the border -- Foreign Affairs, Industry, Transport and Public Safety in Canada; Commerce, State, Transportation and Agriculture in the U.S. -- "these agencies collectively have been unable to counter the security emphasis," Friedman writes. Canada has had no choice but to play along with the American security obsession, with Prime Minister Stephen Harper going so far as to declare a year ago during the U.S. president's visit to Ottawa: "Threats to the U.S. are threats to Canada."

At the time, Obama responded, "We have no doubt about Canada's commitment to security in the U.S. as well as in Canada" -- but he was apparently unmoved to address border blockages.

But if his new priority really is jobs, the president is going to have to turn his attention northward and try to blend security imperatives with economic ones.

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