

B.C. needs to build better trade ties with the United States, Outlook 2020 report author says

Leveraging relationship with Americans seen as key to cultivating prosperity in the global marketplace

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BC's best hopes for future prosperity are rooted in creating stronger ties with the United States, says a prominent academic who helped negotiate the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement and NAFTA.

And as Americans cluster behind a shield of protectionism to help stave off the effects of the most severe economic crisis in its history, **Colin Robertson** said B.C.'s political, business and labour leaders should seize the initiative to engage with their U.S. counterparts.

"The onus is on us," Robertson said in an interview. "Things are going to get tougher in the next while. They are tough now because of the economic recession, but there's a new wave of protectionism in the United States."

He added that living next door to the American giant can at times be "frustrating and even uncomfortable" for Canadians. But in *United States to 2020 and the Requirement for Canadian Initiative*, Robertson shows that the proximity also affords Canada a unique seat of influence. The paper is one of three forming the first chapter of Outlook 2020, a **B.C. Business Council** initiative exploring B.C.'s future and its ability to prosper in a global marketplace.

B.C. has the upper hand in some respects and should parlay that advantage into advancing its own interests with the U.S., said Robertson, who is a senior fellow at **Carleton University's** Norman Paterson School of International Affairs.

These include security – "we watch their back door, and we do it pretty well" – and energy, whether it's the oilsands or the electricity that kept the lights on in California during its 2003-04 power crisis.

On the economic front, the U.S. administration of President **Barack Obama** plans to create three million jobs, but Robertson said too few Americans know that the country's trade with Canada provides the basis for more than seven million American jobs.

"We have to constantly remind the Americans of the importance of the relationship, because most Americans would think that it's China, Japan or Europe that's their biggest trading partner; they don't think of Canada."

Canadians, he said, look at Americans with an almost unhealthy fixation, but Americans rarely think about Canada except as a place where hockey is played.

"We have to get down there and tell our story."

Despite several troubling U.S. social and economic trends, Robertson, a former Canadian consul general in Los Angeles, said Canadian-U.S. geography, culture, partnerships and shared goals underlie numerous mu-

tually beneficial opportunities for closer co-operation that would help B.C.'s economy.

But the benefits derived from both free trade agreements have reached their limitations, he said, and Canada should "move on" from them. With the controversial "Buy American" provision attached to the U.S.'s multi-billion-dollar economic stimulus package being executed at state level, relationships – especially the personal connections between premiers and governors – are now more important than ever.

"The relationships that can be made at the state-province level are critical," said Robertson, who teaches public diplomacy at Carleton and directs a project on Canada-U.S. relations at the university's Centre for Trade Policy and Law.

By targeting state legislators, governors and local chambers of commerce, it should be possible to develop a strong positive image of Canada as friend, ally and partner.

Marketing Canada to the Americans as a "clean" and "green" destination should also be part of Canada's strategy, particularly B.C., he said, but the province needs to get a better handle on its crime.

"Right now, Mexico is engaged in basically an existential war between the drug cartels," Robertson told *Business in Vancouver*. "What you do not want to have, and there has been some suggestion ... that there are drugs coming in through Vancouver, through Asia and up from South America and then down back into the United States."

There's also a perception, based in part on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside experiment with safe injection sites, that B.C. has a "permissive climate" for drug trafficking and related criminal activity.

B.C., he said, should be vigilant about the signals it's sending across the border.

"You want to have the reputation as being a partner that they can rely upon because the Americans are particularly concerned about crime and security. If drugs can come in, then so can people."

Robertson will discuss his paper at a June 16 summit hosted by the business council. Scheduled summit panelists include **BC Transmission Corp.** CEO **David Emerson**, **CN** chairman **David McLean** and **Canadian Economic Advisory Council** chairwoman **Carole Taylor**.

Two other papers forming the first chapter of the council's initiative – in total, 29 papers are being developed – focus on B.C.'s place in the global economy and its opportunities and challenges from the rise of Asia. ■
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