

Want to influence U.S. policy? Then lobby Congress, David Gergen tells BCBC audience

B.C. exports to United States decline, yet remain the lifeblood of trade

GLEN KORSTROM

Barack Obama's penchant for vision over detail means that B.C. business leaders should lobby congressmen as much as officials in the U.S. president's executive branch, senior U.S. political analyst **David Gergen** told the **British Columbia Business Council** on June 16.

Obama's focus on half a dozen domestic fronts, combined with the global economic crisis, political upheaval in Iran and nuclear security concerns in Korea mean that he has less time than his predecessors to scrutinize policy details, said Gergen, who is a CNN commentator and has advised four U.S. presidents.

"They don't have time to work through the details. So, instead of trying to do this [detail work] in the executive branch, where it's typically done, they're delegating to Congress," Gergen said. "This is a very different approach."

Congressmen are likely more protectionist than Obama. So Gergen said it will take extra legwork for B.C. business owners who want to change U.S. policies like the Buy American provisions in Obama's economic stimulus plan.

Gergen praised Obama's self-discipline, focus and strategic mind, but he said the U.S. president has his blind spots.

Chief among them, according to Gergen: he chose no CEOs or business leaders to work alongside the many academics in his cabinet.

Obama is also grappling with tension among close advisers who are divided between free-enterprise advocates and "those who believe the free market is fundamentally flawed."

U.S. trade remains the lifeblood for Canadian exports given that \$2.2 trillion worth of Canadian goods were sold to Americans in the past five years.

B.C. exporters, however, are showing a willingness to diversify and consider Asia.

B.C. Stats data shows that in 1998, 63.1% of B.C. exports were to the U.S. By 2008, that proportion had dropped to 53.1%.

Conversely, during the same period, the percentage of B.C. exports grew to China (to 6% from 1.7%), Korea (to 5.9% from 2.5%) and Taiwan (to 1.8% from 1.3%). Canada-U.S. trade is also hindered by increasingly negative attitudes and rising criticism of bilateral co-operation, said **Alexander Moens**, who is a senior fellow at the **Centre for Canadian American Relations** at Vancouver's **Fraser Institute**.

Moens' team released a report June 15 that analyzed



David Gergen, a U.S. political analyst and former adviser to American presidents: addressing the B.C. Business Council

each statement made in Canada's **House of Commons** regarding Canada-U.S. co-operation.

It noted an enormous decline in support for Canada-U.S. co-operation in 2006, when 57% of the parliamentary debate over the bilateral relationship was negative toward co-operation, said Moens, who is also a political science professor **Simon Fraser University**.

Moens said that generated a surge in negative comments about bilateral co-operation from the **Liberal Party of Canada**, which at the time was led by **Paul Martin**.

"It will be interesting to see if things are different with current Liberal leader **Michael Ignatieff**," Moens said.

Gergen mentioned that he has a longstanding friendship with Ignatieff, who lived in the U.S. from 2000 to 2005 when he served as a director of **Harvard University's Carr Centre for Human Rights Policy**. ■

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- David Gergen,
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CNN