

Canada-U.S. relationship unfolding as it should: we should let government do its job

If our history tells us something, there's no need to panic—at least not yet.



Jacquie Larocque

Opinion

OTTAWA—Since Donald Trump's election to the U.S. presidency, nothing has been more pressing on our minds than the relationship with our neighbours to the south. The view can be especially daunting for businesses worried about the U.S. president's "America First" policy, if not his pressing need to target partners across the globe. If there's one thing Canadians can take from last week's meeting between Trump and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, however, it is that the relationship is unfolding as it should.

Coming out of the bilateral meeting last week, Trudeau struck the right chords and balanced the levers with Trump, who

acknowledged that the United States and Canada "have a very outstanding trade relationship." In the official statement, both leaders also noted that "the partnership between the United States and Canada will continue to be unique and a model for the world."

It's why those of us in business eager to run to Canada's defence with big pronouncements need to step back and let the government do its work. At least for now.

After an initial rough period where cards were shown far too soon, if those cards were real at all, there are consistent signs that the government is on the right track when it comes to dealing with our American neighbours. From sending his top advisers early to Washington to discuss Canada-U.S. issues with their counterparts, to tweaking the cabinet with ministers able to deal with the unpredictable U.S. administration, to making senior staff changes and reaching out in a firm yet conciliatory manner last week at their meeting, the prime minister is showing that he understands the complexity of the relationship. He's clearly leaning on those who have relationships with key people in the United States and has seemingly accepted help offered from opposition parties too. These early signs show that business can be reassured that the Canadian government appears to be deftly managing the relationship.

Trade and the renegotiation of NAFTA wasn't mentioned in the final statement of last week's visit, but don't be fooled—it was there in spirit. As the official com-

munique did mention, it will be up to both countries' cabinets to iron out further details. This only bolsters the thought that Canadian companies should let the government do its job.

That's not to say businesses should stand still and not have a strategy. This is after all a make-policy-at-3 a.m.-on-Twitter president we're talking about. Canadian businesses should continue to monitor, stay close and be ready to act when necessary. All those potentially affected by a renegotiated NAFTA—or a now new relationship with the United States—should take stock of their arsenal and build it up with a story that helps level the playing field and that undeniably shows the strength of the sector and why both Canada and the U.S. will be better for making trade deals in their interest. For business sectors that have U.S. wings or headquarters, arming them with the information they need to talk to their government is also important.

The response to the new U.S. reality must not be done in haste without deep and proper understanding of various facets and certainly without a long-term strategy. In some cases, this could mean engaging forcefully while in others saying nothing is the right thing to do. Building that arsenal and having quiet yet influential conversations with the right people who need to hear these messages at the right time is critical. One of the hardest things to do as a business is let the dust settle. But this is that time.

Committees heading south

Legislators have been vocal and anxious about getting their pro-Canadian message out too, rightfully so. Various House of Commons committees are planning trips to Washington before spring hits. For years, the Canada-U.S. relationship has been managed through the Inter-Parliamentary Group of informed and engaged MPs and Senators who have built strong relationships with their U.S. counterparts. There was a reason for that. They got the nuancing. They got the defensive issues. And got the proactive ones. In this new normal, it's safe to assume the PMO's Canada-U.S. war room is managing the committees' trips to the U.S. and that Andrew Leslie is playing a big role too. Critical to the success of these trips is a deep knowledge of those nuances, defence points and opportunities. That arsenal of information you were gathering would be best sent to those committee chairs you know as soon as possible.

The conversations between legislators, stakeholders and the public about the long-standing Canada-U.S. relationship will continue to occur over the next several months. There's plenty of time to shape it. If our history tells us something, there's no need to panic—at least not yet.

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Canada can build on its strengths in Trump, Brexit era

Universities would be only too happy to help our governments. But we must take action now. How we build Brand Canada during this historic opportunity could determine our future for generations to come.



Alan Shepard

Universities & Trump

MONTREAL, QUE.—British loyalists during the American Revolution. Black slaves on the Underground Railroad. Conscientious objectors during the Vietnam War.

Now, Trump's anti-immigration rhetoric, and his attempted ban to back it up, have sent a chill around the globe and left visa-reliant U.S. institutions scrambling. Meanwhile, a post-Brexit U.K. has cut its annual immigrant influx from 300,000 to 170,000.

Talented scholars and knowledge workers looking to learn and settle in a tolerant, progressive country are running out of options. We know Canadian cities hold considerable appeal for university students. That fact was validated recently with news that the highly respected QS Best Student Cities survey has ranked Montreal first in the world. Montreal displaced Paris from the top position it had held for five years while Boston, the U.S.'s most important university city, ranked 8th overall. Vancouver and Toronto clinched the 10th and 11th spots, respectively, Ottawa 26th, and Quebec City 72nd.

So, Canada's stock continues to rise. Potential education migrants know that in today's global intellectual meritocracy, turning inward will compromise the ability of U.S. and U.K. universities to collaborate, seek funding and recruit top talent.

Current trends present us with both a responsibility to preserve the open intellectualism that underpins societal progress every-

where and an opportunity to build a strong, competitive next generation for Canada.

Interest is already high. Before the U.S. election, recruiting firm Intead—International Education Advantage—found that 59.5 per cent of students surveyed in 118 countries would be less likely to study in the U.S. if Trump were elected (compared to Clinton at 3.8 per cent). On Nov. 9, U.S.-based Google searches for "college Canada" more than doubled.

Redbrick Research recently found that 64 per cent of international students in the U.K. think Brexit has made it a less desirable place to study. Among EU students, Canada overtook the U.K. this year as the top English-speaking education destination.

Many Canadian universities are already reporting jumps in applications that cannot be explained by recruiting efforts alone. At Concordia, U.S.-based undergraduate students applying to transfer are up a whopping 45 per cent, as are our graduate applications. Applications from Mexico are also up sharply.

Canada's education lure is no mystery. Our universities do well in international rankings. We have the lowest cost of living and highest quality of life among G7 countries.

The QS ranking reaffirms this. Their results took into account other university rankings; liveability and safety; affordability and employer activity; tolerance and inclusion; and a city's social and cultural offerings.

But the reasons to stay are even more compelling.

Immigrants seek social mobility. Canada ranked second overall in the comprehensive 2016 Social Progress Index—well ahead of the U.S. and U.K. On the index's opportunity ranking, Canada finished first (Australia second, the U.K. sixth, and the U.S. thirteenth). And, according to a recent survey by the polling firm Environics Institute, some 80 per cent of Canadians think immigrants are good for the economy.

Immigrants seek diversity, tolerance, and good odds. A student visa is a strong step on the path towards Canadian citizenship.



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and U.S. President Donald Trump. *The Hill Times* photograph by Jake Wright and courtesy of Gage Skidmore

But even with so much going for us, global competition to seize this historic moment and draft a talented team is fierce. We have an eager audience and we need to engage with them directly. As borders close, bright stars around the globe are seeking their future on screens.

Let's meet them there, with comprehensive web and social media campaigns. Let's provide this information-hungry group with career-specific language training, cultural immersion courses, compatriot contacts, accreditation equivalencies, and concrete steps to ensure they succeed. And let's make doubly sure their user experience is friction free. While express entry immigration has improved, there's still plenty to do to be globally competitive.

Universities would be only too happy to help our governments with all of this and more. But we must take action now. How we build Brand Canada during this historic opportunity could determine our future for generations to come.

Alan Shepard is the president of Concordia University. *The Hill Times*