

Broader lessons to be learned from our quiet, behind-the-scenes diplomacy

The approach has kept relationships strong on the Great Lakes and, in so doing, has bolstered their multi-billion-dollar economic impact, and maintained more than 240,000 Canadian jobs.



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Opinion

STRATHROY, ONT.—In 1969, prime minister Pierre El-

liott Trudeau met with then U.S. president Richard Nixon and, while Trudeau praised our national partnerships, he also described the nature of Canada-U.S. relations in a way that remains relevant even today. He said, "Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant. No matter how friendly and even-tempered ... one is affected by every twitch and grunt." Recent comments made in *The Hill Times* by Liberal MP Wayne Easter, chair of the House Finance Committee, and Conservative MP Randy Hoback, his party's trade critic, underscore that relations between Canada and our closest neighbour are a nuanced and delicate balance that requires constant effort and careful attention.

Canadian diplomacy with the U.S. has always been relationship dependent. Parliamentarians, regardless of partisan stripe, know that our geographic placement beside one of the planet's military and economic superpowers, means that regular interaction is essential, but little is easy. Of course, there have been times when the relationship between our leaders has been warm. For example, few of us would argue that the Bush/Mulroney years, and the Clinton/Chrétien years,

produced favourable interactions between Ottawa and the White House. There have also been frosty times in our history, most notably, the Nixon/Trudeau years when chiding and name calling often set the tone between our governments.

To most Canadians, the former is more the norm than the latter but, in reality, divided governance has long been a struggle for our two nations. This has certainly been the case when it comes to the management of binational resources like the Great Lakes, and especially during the pre-1955 efforts to control the invasive sea lamprey predator that nearly collapsed fish stocks and obliterated that particular resource sector in Ontario, Quebec, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and New York. At that time, Canada, Ontario, and Quebec, were unable to resolve serious policy differences with the U.S. federal government and the eight Great Lakes states. As the crisis loomed, governments reached across the line, and established the Great Lakes Fishery Commission (GLFC) to bring heft and structure to collaborative and binational management of the Great Lakes fisheries and invasive species control.

In the decades since, the GLFC has helped to manage the multi-billion-dollar binational resource, with a consensus approach, for our shared benefit, regardless of the ebbing and flowing of national politics, by fostering an array of cross-border relationships on which to draw when the tone and tenor of more prominent linkages becomes fractured. This model for trust-base, issue-focused, cross-border collaboration has been successfully used in a number of instances including, the GLFC, the International Joint Commission, and the International Boundary Commission. Each of these groups are somewhat unique in their mandate but they all rely heavily on working relationships that are rooted in a genuine sharing of resources and goodwill in pursuit of common and reasonable national objectives.

Just as MPs Wayne Easter's and Randy Hoback's comments recognized the critical importance of both "official and unofficial circles" when it comes to affecting trade policy, so too did the treaty drafters involved in the creation of the cited commissions. Clearly, most individual MPs and Senators know that any effective diplomatic effort must be premised on good relationships that are built and strengthened over

time but, too few of our current institutional mechanisms and structures permit or facilitate this type of exchange.

In an age when politics are fraught, perhaps there are broader lessons to be learned from our past successes when it comes to quiet and off-the-side diplomacy. The approach has kept relationships strong on the Great Lakes and, in so doing, has bolstered their multi-billion-dollar economic impact, and maintained more than 240,000 Canadian jobs.

In this spirit, if Canada is to be diplomatically successful in this the age of Trump and Twitter, sourcing, maintaining, and building opportunities for candid, yet respectful, dialogue would seem to be the coin of the realm. Whether leveraging existing agencies and commissions, or refocusing, and retooling less formal groups such as the Canada-United States Inter-Parliamentary Group, history confirms that collaborating across lines, partisan and geographic, allows Canadian interests to resonate most effectively. At the very least, learning to manage when the elephant grunts or twitches continues to be far more fruitful than binational one-upmanship or retreat to within our national bunkers.

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