

People to know in Washington

BY TIM MAK, CITIZEN SPECIAL OCTOBER 22, 2009 9:17 AM

Ambassador-designate Gary Doer's first week at the embassy here in Washington will be filled with meetings, many of which will revolve around scheduling a dizzying array of appointments. There will be a standard list of politicians that he must meet with, but there are some less prominent individuals and organizations whose help could be crucial to his success as Canadian ambassador.

Here are four unconventional suggestions for people and organizations that the new ambassador should get acquainted with:

The unions: SEIU and AFL-CIO.

Perhaps the most pressing issue for the new ambassador will be to beat back Congress's slide towards protectionism. At the vanguard of the "Buy American" movement are unions, and two of the most influential are the SEIU (Service Employees International) and the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organizations). As a former union organizer himself, reaching out to unions is an aspect of the job in which Doer's personal experience will come in handy.

The think-tanks: Cato, Heritage, AEI, Brookings and CAP.

Unlike Ottawa, which has a paucity of local think-tanks, many of Washington's ideas flow from these five native organizations. In D.C., think-tanks have a significant role in setting the legislative agenda, proposing policy solutions and the facilitation of networking.

With Barack Obama in the White House, this is the season for the left-leaning Brookings Institution and CAP. "Think-tanks like the Center for American Progress are pretty influential with the Obama administration right now," says Scotty Greenwood, the executive director of the Canadian-American Business Council. John Podesta, the president of CAP, was a co-chairman for the Obama-Biden transition team, and many former CAP staffers have found jobs in the administration.

This is not to say that Ambassador Doer shouldn't reach out to think-tanks on the right. Although they may have weaker relationships with the Democratic party, the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute are still forces to be reckoned with. Heritage has been a key player in the push-back against health-care reform, and AEI remains prominent in American foreign policy decisions.

Last but not least, the libertarian Cato Institute always has fresh ideas, and can be counted on not to pick sides. Free of partisan attachments, Cato calls it like it sees it.

Mexican Ambassador

Arturo Sarukhan.

Although Doer's primary job is to represent Canada's interests in the United States, it may be to his advantage to reach out to the Mexican embassy. Robert Pastor, a director at American University's Center for North American Studies, suggests that Doer could extract greater concessions from Congress by pairing up with Mexico.

"The best road from Ottawa to Washington is one that passes through Mexico City," asserts Pastor. "If Canada and Mexico were to reach agreements on a North American exemption to 'Buy American,' this is far more likely to succeed than if Canada keeps trying to pursue its interests alone."

The cultural associations.

We often think of the Canadian ambassador to the United States as a political emissary. But Ambassador Doer will also be in charge of promoting Canada's culture.

As such, one hopes that the ambassador will take a genuine interest in the cultural life of the city, and take the time to scope out opportunities for Canadian cultural activity. Doer should cultivate the embassy's pre-existing ties with cultural groups such as the American Film Institute and the Smithsonian Institution.

"You want to have a handle on the city's life; you need to know what makes this place tick (culturally). It's a far more vibrant city than it was 20 years ago," said Paul Frazer, a former Canadian diplomat.

"There's a great opportunity here for an ambassador who knows his country well, and can reflect it with humour and imagination."

Tim Mak is a journalist working in Washington D.C.

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