

Canada's relations with the United States

Stop, border ahead

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New border controls and protectionist bills have dashed Canadians' hopes that the change of occupant in the White House would mean warmer relations

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WHENEVER Canadians grow anxious about heightened security at the United States border—as they are now because of America's new requirement, from June 1st, for passports or other approved identification to be shown at entry points—their news media invariably invoke the twin towns of Stanstead, Quebec, and Derby Line, Vermont. In these towns, the line that looks so neat on maps is a messy business, running through a factory, a combined library and opera house, and a number of homes. In some cases it lies between the bedroom and a morning cup of tea.

To Canadians, this pleasing informality underscores their special relationship with Americans, with whom they share the world's closest country-to-country trade ties as well as bonds of kinship. Until September 11th 2001 Americans and Canadians crossing the border often only needed to state their nationality. Even after the attacks a wide range of informal identification documents was accepted.

Such laxity is an anomaly to Janet Napolitano, President Barack Obama's homeland-security secretary, who wants controls along the United States' northern border to be brought closer in line with those on the frontier with Mexico. Speaking to reporters before a two-day visit to Canada, on May 26th and 27th, Ms Napolitano said she wanted to "change the culture" along the 8,900km (5,500-mile) line to make it clear that "this is a real border."

Her words are a clear sign that the Obama administration will not only uphold but enhance measures introduced since 2001, despite complaints from both sides of the border that they impede movements of all sorts,

particularly trade in goods that was worth \$1.6 billion a day in 2008. Ms Napolitano tried to assuage Canadian concerns during her visit, talking of the need to help trade, jobs and growth. But her department's plans to install heat-detecting sensors along the border, put more surveillance drones in the sky and place additional cameras along the St Clair river in Michigan and the Upper Niagara in New York are taken by some frontier communities as a personal affront.

American officials say the millions of new identity documents they have issued should ensure that there will be no big delays at the border after June 1st. But if their confidence is misplaced, heaping more trouble on Canadian exporters already struggling to cope with the recession, the bilateral relationship is likely to sour.

Some Canadians understand that their southern neighbour has real concerns about security, given the relative openness of its northern border. "We're not going to go back, no matter how much we want to, to the situation before 9/11," says Shirley-Ann George, head of policy at the Canadian Chamber of Commerce. "But we can make it better." The chamber has been working with its American counterpart to propose ways of reducing border delays while maintaining adequate security. These include clearing shipments and people before they get to crossing-points.

Canadians are already worried at signs of rising protectionism in their neighbour's Democrat-led Congress, in the form of Buy American provisions in the economic-stimulus package and proposals in a new environmental bill to impose trade sanctions on countries with high levels of greenhouse-gas emissions. Their indignation has been heightened by two unfortunate incidents. A contractor at the Camp Pendleton Marine base in California ripped out a section of sewerage pipe because it was Canadian-made; and a Canadian salesman travelling to an equestrian-products trade show was turned back at the Washington state border on the ground that he was "stealing" American jobs.

Tony Clement, Canada's industry minister, says all this risks provoking a backlash among his countrymen. It has already begun. The industry group representing Canadian manufacturers has identified seven bills with protectionist provisions making their way through Capitol Hill and is calling for Canada to threaten retaliatory action. On May 25th a member of Canada's left-leaning New Democratic Party introduced a private member's bill that would require the government to give Canadian companies priority when buying goods or services.

Like many others, Canadians had unrealistic expectations of how much things would change when Barack Obama replaced George Bush. Ms Napolitano's words both before and during her visit to Canada have put an end to such optimism. For the new occupant of the White House, as for his predecessor, the noisy demands of Capitol Hill will always drown out any whimpers from across the border.

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