

CANADA GETS NEW AMBASSADOR

By DANIEL LIBIT | 10/21/09 4:42 AM EDT



The Canadian Embassy's farewell bash for outgoing Ambassador Michael Wilson drew American political heavyweights such as Sens. Dick Lugar (R-Ind.), Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), George Voinovich (R-Ohio) and Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.). But the country's incoming top diplomat is expected to attract that crowd and then some.

Meet Gary Doer, Canada's new ambassador, who is said to fully live up to his surname. Funny. Charming. Energetic. A true retail politician. "He is going to tend to be assertive and communicative and probably occupy quite a high profile," says former Canadian Ambassador to the U.S. Frank McKenna. "I think he suits the moment."

With a Democratic administration in the White House, the liberal Doer's arrival is well-timed. As premier of Manitoba, he spent a number of years cultivating bonds with U.S. governors, including former Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano, now President Barack Obama's homeland security secretary. He's a center-left politician, says Chris Sands, senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, who can help Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper better grasp "the divisions between center and center left that now define Washington, the fault lines between a [Henry] Waxman and [a John] Dingell, the subtleties between Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid and Obama."

Doer, the longest serving of the current crop of Canadian premiers, offers a significant contrast to his predecessor. Wilson — who was a conservative House of Commons member, finance minister and financial executive — had represented Canada since 2006. He was increasingly seen as being perhaps a bit too conservative (big "C" and little "c") to fit the emerging scene in Washington, and his tenure was viewed as the victory lap following a long and robust career in both government and business.

"The downside of elder statesmen is that maybe they are a little less dynamic," says Sands. "You have somebody who is working within their safe zone."

Plus, Wilson didn't exactly kick things off to a good start with the Obama administration, having been at the center of the so-called NAFTA-gate scandal during last year's Democratic presidential primaries.

At the time, Hillary Clinton's campaign tried to make hay of a leaked memo from the Canadian Consulate in Chicago. The memo claimed Obama economic adviser Austan Goolsbee had privately told Canadian officials that the campaign's pledges to renegotiate

the North American Free Trade Agreement were simply "political maneuvering," not to be taken too seriously.

In the wake of the ensuing dust-up, Harper launched an investigation, and Wilson was forced to repeatedly deny that he was the source of the leak. Though there were calls for him to step down, he weathered the storm.

Doer himself got a taste of American political drama recently, but the gregarious man was able to charm his way out. In June, he spoke before an energy and climate luncheon sponsored by the Canadian American Business Council. As a last-minute fill-in keynote speaker that day, he had flown in overnight from northernmost Yukon. He won over the crowd by joking that "you can see the Alaska governor" from where he had traveled.

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