
Interview: The Canada-US Inter-Parliamentary Group at 50



In May 2009 the Canada-United States Inter-Parliamentary Group marked its 50th anniversary. Senator Jerry Grafstein has been Co-Chair of the Canadian Section of the Group for fourteen years, the longest serving Chair in the history of the Group. He spoke about his reflections on the Group in April 2009 with Gary Levy.

What is the Canada-United States Inter-Parliamentary Group and why is it important?

The Group owes its origins to two American Congressmen, Brooks Hays and Frank Coffin. During the 1950s they undertook a study mission to Canada. They discovered a lot of irritants ranging from Defence procurement to trade issues. One of their recommendations was for an association of legislators from the two countries. Every year since 1959 approximately 24 legislators from each country get together to discuss matters of mutual interest.

The importance of the Group is obvious. Canada and the United States have an integrated economy. Billions of dollars in goods cross the border every day and some estimate that 50% of all the jobs in Canada are related to our trade with the United States. We are the largest suppliers of energy to the

United States. The standard of living and well being of individuals on both sides of the border depends on good political and economic relations between the two countries.

When and how did you first become involved with the Group?

The first meeting I attended was in 1987 in Vancouver. I also attended the 1995 meeting in Huntsville, Ontario. Senator Bud Olson who was Co-Chair said he was retiring and encouraged me to stand for the Executive Committee of the Canadian Section. He told me I had the necessary interest and energy to be a successful co-chair. He said the Canadian Section needed someone with the right chemistry to get along with the Americans.

My first Conference as Co-Chair was in 1996 and it was a

bit unusual in that it took place entirely aboard one of the Alaska Marine Ferries as it travelled from Prince Rupert to Alaska. At one point we were passing an iceberg and the captain announced he was sending members of the crew over to the iceberg to bring back some ice that would be used for the cocktails that evening. I told him that in Canada we do ourselves what you send crew to do and I insisted that I accompany them. He was reluctant to put me in all the safety gear but I did not want to miss the opportunity to set foot on an iceberg.

John Chafee, the Senator from Rhode Island, (former Secretary of the Navy under Richard Nixon) overheard the conversation and said he wanted to go as well. To the consternation of the Captain a half dozen Canadian and American legislators piled into the lifeboat and headed off to the iceberg. I am not sure if that is what

Senator Olson had in mind when he talked about getting along with the Americans but that certainly made me well known among the Group. Such experiences go a long way to cementing relationships that come in handy in political life.

Are you concerned about criticism that such trips are junkets and a waste of money?

Anyone who makes that argument does not understand the importance of personal and social contacts in making public policy decisions. In 2000, the annual conference took place aboard another ship, the *Delta Queen*, a Mississippi riverboat. As we steamed down the river, the Canadians were struck by the immensity and emptiness of the American heartland. In Natchez we stopped for a bus tour of the city and an old plantation. My wife noticed the two Black members of Congress sitting at the back of the bus and she asked them to accompany her on the plantation tour.

After the tour we were met by Trent Lott who was the Senate Majority Leader and one of the most powerful individuals in Congress. Not all conference itineraries are as exotic as those two boat trips but each one includes opportunities for legislators to see parts of the North American continent they might not otherwise be familiar with, to meet national, state and local leaders, and to discuss in both formal and informal settings whatever issues are of concern to their electors and their country.

How does this help in your role as a legislator?

Let me give you a recent example. I was on my way to Washington for some meetings when my staff told me that the House of

Representatives had just passed a bill with significant protectionist measures that might be harmful to Canadian manufacturers. I called the Canadian Embassy and discovered that they had been unsuccessful in making the Canadian case directly to legislators about the dangers of this bill. I called Senator Charles Grassley, a long-time member of the Group and asked to see him. He briefed me on the background and said it looked like the Bill had the votes to pass in the Senate that week. He helped me set up a meeting with Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell who was sympathetic but told me they were a couple of votes short of being able to filibuster the Bill.

With the division bells ringing in the background I met a couple of Democratic Senators in the corridors. I knew them very well from the Canada-United States Group meetings and I tried to convince them to oppose the protectionist clause. In this case I did not manage to change the bill, but without the contacts made over many years with the Group, I would not have had the opportunity to try. In any event, you have to look at politics over the long term and draw lessons from your experiences.

What lesson did you draw from that experience?

Anyone who understands American politics knows that if you want to have any influence, you must build alliances and disseminate information long before issues get to Congress. We need an early warning system to identify issues that could potentially be harmful in Canada. We need to make friends and allies inside and outside of politics in order to make our case in Washington.

That sounds like the job of the Canadian Embassy in Washington?

I have worked with a number of Canadian Ambassadors and they were all very capable individuals. Alan Gottlieb in particular recognized the importance of working with Congress as well as the Executive. In fact, Canada has set up an Advocacy Secretariat in the Canadian Embassy with a senior official and staff to deal with Congress and to facilitate contacts between Canadian legislators, both federal and provincial, and American legislators. But the Embassy is part of the Executive and Congressmen are very suspicious of their own Executive let alone representatives of foreign countries. So it is much better to have Canadian parliamentarians make the case to Senators and Congressmen, provided they do it effectively.

How effective is the Canadian Section?

When I started in 1987 the Group was a vehicle for pleasant annual exchanges with our American counterparts. Two factors altered the context of the relationship. The first was the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement (later expanded to the North American Free Trade Agreement) which vastly increased the complexity of the relationship. The second was the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which added security as an important new element in the mix.

When I became Co-Chair I concluded that we needed more opportunities to meet between the annual meetings. We also needed opportunities for our Canadian members to participate in meetings with state legislators, governors, mayors and private organizations devoted to Canadian-American relations. I



The Co-Chairs of the Canadian Section of the Canada-United States Inter-Parliamentary Group in March 2009. Senator Grafstein (l) and Gordon Brown, MP.

worked to obtain a change in the point system used for members' travel. Now Senators and MPs can use some of their points for trips to Washington provided it is in relation to parliamentary business. This has greatly facilitated the work of the Canadian section and we now send members to meetings of state legislators, governors and other public and private bodies working on Canada-US Relations.

Achieving influence is an arduous task which requires energy, continuity and resources. I think the Canadian Section is more active and more effective than when I first took office.

Why focus on American Governors?

Governors are particularly important political players and key to Canada's economic and trade interests.

In the last five or six years we have met and developed working relationships with more than 50 of the U.S. Governors including Edward Rendell (Pennsylvania), currently Chairman of the

National Governors Conference, Bill Richardson (New Mexico), George Pataki (former Governor of New York), Tim Pawlenty (Minnesota), Mike Huckabee (former Governor of Arkansas), Jim Douglas (Vermont), Brian Schweitzer (Montana), John Baldacci (Maine), Haley Barbour (Mississippi), Timothy Kaine (Virginia), Jon Huntsman (Utah), Jennifer Granholm (Michigan), Mark Sanford (South Carolina), Martin O'Malley (Maryland), Sarah Palin (Alaska), and Christine Gregoire (Washington State). These Governors represent States that have an active trading relationship with Canada.

Are there Canadian parliamentarians on the House side who have been as active as you?

I have worked with four House co-chairs. For several years it was Joe Comuzzi. He had a particular interest in transportation and issues relating to the St. Lawrence Seaway. He was succeeded by Greg Thompson of New Brunswick who was later appointed to Cabinet. Rob Merrifield brought a western perspective to

the job of co-chair and he was very knowledgeable about energy and oil sands issues. He was also appointed to Cabinet and once you are in Cabinet you can no longer attend meetings of the Group. The most recent Canadian co-chair is Gord Brown, elected in March 2009. He comes from a riding that is on the US border so I am sure he will be very active and energetic in the work of the Group.

Aside from the co-chairs, Wayne Easter has been a long-time member and one of his main areas of interest is agriculture. He has become very good friends with Representative Collin Peterson of Minnesota, Chair of the House Agriculture Committee. Over the years with the Group, I have seen many Canadian and American legislators develop close personal relationships. I believe this can only help their professional working relationship as well.

Who have been the most influential Americans in the Group?

Two Senators from Alaska, Frank Murkowski and Ted Stevens have both been very active in the Group serving as Chairs of the US Section. Other Senate Chairs during my time include Daniel Akaka of Hawaii, Mike Crapo of Idaho and Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota. From the House of Representatives I have worked with Donald Manzullo of Illinois, Amo Houghton of New York and James Oberstar of Minnesota. Mr. Oberstar has been involved with the Group for almost 27 years making him the Doyen of our Association.

A frequent participant, although never Chair, was Sam Gibbons of Florida. He attended twenty meetings over three decades and during much of this time he was Chair of the Trade sub-committee of the US House

Committee on Foreign Relations. At any point, there could be many protectionist bills at various stages of Congress and he exercised a degree of control over which of these pieces of legislation reached the floor of the House. He was a friend of Canada and a self-proclaimed free trader.

Sam Gibbons was also somewhat of a mentor to me when I was a young Canadian Senator trying to figure out how the US Congress worked. He told me that cordiality, collegiality and respectfulness were the key to a successful career. He emphasized the importance of social interaction in getting things done in Washington. West Virginia Senator Robert Byrd emphasized the same approach.

Dante Fascell, also of Florida, was a frequent participant. His knowledge of foreign policy was phenomenal. Another Floridian, Porter Goss, made a great impression on me. He was a brilliant individual and was later appointed Head of the Central Intelligence Agency. I also met Joe Biden at one of the meetings of the Group. He was a Senator from Delaware and now is Vice President of the United States. Other American legislators who have taken a special interest in Canada during my time include Cliff Stearns of Florida, George Voinovich of Ohio, Patrick Leahy of Vermont, Fred Upton of Michigan, Mark Souder of Indiana, Louise Slaughter of New York and David Drier of California. It is a long, long list.

Sometimes Canadians complain that Americans are ignorant about Canada and this may be true to some extent but we must also remember there are a number of American legislators who are very well informed about Canada and we must make every attempt to engage them.

Surely there are some Congressmen who not so friendly to Canada?

Of course there are many areas where the interests of the two countries are opposed. We have some animated discussions where we can only agree to disagree. Softwood lumber is one such issue. You must keep in mind that members of the US House have to face election every two years. Some are under tremendous pressure to defend the US position of softwood lumber. We were unable to completely resolve the softwood lumber dispute but so were numerous governments, quasi judicial tribunals and arbitrators. Our efforts eventually helped bring about a "softwood agreement".

I want to emphasize, however, that it is extremely important that we not just associate with friends of Canada. I tried for years to arrange a meeting with Jesse Helms of South Carolina, who was Chair of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee. He was author of the Helms-Burton law that made it an offence for companies, even Canadian ones, to do business with Cuba. Neither my office nor the Embassy could arrange a meeting with him.

On one trip to Washington I made a courtesy call to Senator Frank Murkowski. He asked me if there was anything he could do for me. I said, "Yes, see if you can arrange a meeting with Senator Helms." A few minutes later he called me to say I should be in Senator Helms office at 2:00. "Anything else", he asked? "Yes", I said, "Get a photographer because no one will believe me."

How was the meeting with Senator Helms?

He was an imposing figure although he was over 80 years old

and on crutches, the day I met him. He immediately asked me if I was the author of the so called "anti-Helms" Bill which tried to undo some of the provisions of the Helms-Burton legislation insofar as Canadian companies dealing with Cuba were concerned. He expressed a grudging admiration for the Act and asked me what I wanted. I told him I did not want anything except to help him and his state.

He was somewhat taken aback by this opening. Then I told him Ontario was South Carolina's leading trade partner and pulled out some cards prepared by the Canadian Embassy that showed the figures. He called in his Chief of Staff, the person who had been refusing my requests for a meeting for years, and asked him if these figures were true. I told him that we should work together to organize some exchanges and build upon the huge trading relationship between Ontario and South Carolina. He liked the idea and I think some such exchanges actually took place.

I also asked him to consider coming to one of our Canada-US meetings and although he never did, I knew the five minute meeting was worth the effort. We must be able to interact civilly with our adversaries.

How much of your time is devoted to the Canada-US Inter-Parliamentary Group?

I do not compartmentalize my time like that. Let me give you an example. After the events of 9/11 I organized a "Canada Loves NY" rally in New York City. It was intended to show Canadian solidarity with New Yorkers in the face of their difficulties. I booked the Roseland Ballroom in mid town Manhattan which holds about 3,500 people. We invited

a number of famous Canadians. Even Prime Minister Chrétien came to New York for the event at the last minute.

The idea took on a life of its own and between 25,000 and 30,000 Canadians showed up. A huge screen was set up on 53rd Street to accommodate the overflow crowd. My friend from the Canada-United States Group, Amo Houghton, helped me to get the Governor of New York, George Pataki, and Mayor Rudy Giuliani to address the rally. The Mayor presented us with a declaration called: "Canada Loves New York Day". I even convinced the White House to get President Bush to send our volunteer group a letter.

It was a tremendous, moving experience. History buffs quipped that it was the largest invasion of the USA since the War of 1812. Was it part of the Canada-US Inter Parliamentary Group? No. Could it have been done without the contacts and knowledge I had picked up as a result of my work with the Group? I do not think so.

The Canada-US Inter-Parliamentary Group combines official business and personal friendships in a way that is unique among legislators from different countries, that is why it would be very hard to single out or isolate what percentage of my time is devoted to it.

How have your efforts been recognized?

I have received a number of honours. One of the greatest were being made an Honourary Commandant of the US Marine Corps and given the Marine Commandant's coveted hat. Another was being made an Honourary Fire Chief of the New York Fire Department and given the Chief's fire hat. I do not think many Canadians can say they are both an Honourary Marine Commandant and an Honourary NYPD Fire Chief!

Do you think Canadian interests are known and appreciated in the US?

No. But it is up to us to make them known. I read US newspapers every day and regularly watch U.S. TV news channels. I speak, and e-mail to Americans about issues affecting Canada/US affairs almost daily, seven days a week. That is the only way to keep up with issues large and small in the United States affecting Canada.

Even my activities in other international organizations like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe has widened Congressional contacts and helped advocate Canada's interests with Congressmen like Steny Hoyer (Maryland) now House Majority Leader; Alcee Hastings (Florida), Ben Cardin (Maryland),

Chris Smith (New Jersey), Diane Watson (California) and former Congresswoman Hilda Solis now Labor Secretary in the Obama Cabinet.

At other meetings I have met Gary Ackerman and Eliot Engel of New York; Barney Frank of Massachusetts; Bart Stupak of Michigan; Henry Brown of South Carolina; John Dingle and Thaddeus McCotter of Michigan; Henry Waxman and Loretta Sanchez of California, all senior Democrats in the House.

I have met with key members of the Congressional Black Caucus including its Chair, Carolyn Kilpatrick of Michigan and Democratic House Majority Whip, James Clyburn from South Carolina.

I always seek out men and women from across America who can be counted upon to be sympathetic recipients of arguments affecting Canada's vital interests. For example, at a recent international meeting in Vienna attended by American Members of Congress, I was invited to join them in a spirited discussion hosted by their Ambassador about the future policy of Afghanistan where, once again, a wider circle of Congressmen, both members and staff, were debating a foreign policy question deeply affecting Canada.



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