

# INTERVIEW WITH AMBASSADOR RAYMOND CHRÉTIEN

Canada's new Ambassador to the United States, Raymond Chrétien, arrived in Washington in late January, and presented his credentials to President Clinton on February 14. A career foreign service officer who has served as associate deputy minister in Canada's foreign affairs ministry, Chrétien also served as Ambassador to Mexico from 1985 to 1988 and came to Washington directly from his previous posting as Ambassador in Brussels. In his office in March, Ambassador Chrétien shared his early impressions of his new job and the challenges ahead.

**Q.** How does Washington compare with other cities you've served in?

**Ambassador Chrétien:** It's always difficult to compare one posting with another. Belgium is a country with which Canada has enjoyed very close relations because of the war efforts. We lost 12,000 of our young men in Flanders Field during the two World Wars. There is a feeling that we helped liberate them from the Nazi yoke, one that is still referred to this day. Therefore, as a Canadian, I enjoyed extraordinary access everywhere I went in Belgium. In that sense, Brussels and Washington are probably more alike than Washington and Mexico. Brussels is very, very open to us; so is Washington.

**Q.** What's your sense, then, of Canada's access in Washington, the level at which Canada is received and the way the messages are received?

**Ambassador Chrétien:** Here, for different reasons, our access is also excellent. The importance of the relationship is such that it is in the U.S. interest to deal with us on a very large number of items. We share a very long border. We share many of the same values. The links are extraordinarily close.

I've been here barely a month. However, I am already confident that our access to American decision-makers will be excellent.

**Q.** Canadians, if one could put it this way, have a kind of a schizophrenic sense of the relationship with the U.S. On the one hand, they don't want to be ignored by the Americans, and on the other hand, they don't want them to interfere.

What's your sense of how the Embassy has to walk the line between the two in representing Canada's interests here?

**Ambassador Chrétien:** Well, you say that there is a danger that we will be ignored. I can understand that danger. It's simply because the relationship, despite its magnitude, does not create serious problems for the Americans. Their northern neighbour is peaceful, quiet. Democracy flourishes on the northern border, with enormous trade flows in both directions. What doesn't create problems doesn't get mentioned. So that's perhaps the reason why we are not overwhelmingly present in their major stories. There are, of course, many good sides to this quietness in the relationship. We certainly enjoy a standard of living that is due, to a great extent, to the close integration of our economies.

**Q.** What's your sense of the framing of the bilateral relationship, Canada-U.S., in the larger, multilateral context?

**Ambassador Chrétien:** I think that we could work more closely with the U.S. on multilateral issues, in multilateral organizations where our interests coincide. As you know, the U.N. has always been a key pillar of our foreign policy. This has not been true to the same extent for our American friends. I suspect—based upon my own experience with the U.N., where I served in the '60s—our links with the U.S. there were not as close as they were with a number of other countries. The links that exist between Canada and the Nordic countries, the links between Canada, Australia, and New Zealand in multilateral fora, are quite often of a different quality, on a different level, than those existing between Canada and the U.S.

My view is that we could assist the U.S. in engaging in multilateral organizations by working more closely with them on areas of mutual concern, much as we have done in multilateral trade negotiations under the GATT and in the G-7. Canada's multilateral reputation is one of the many pluses we bring to this bilateral relationship.

**Q.** Redefining the mission of NATO, for example, and peacekeeping?

**Ambassador Chrétien:** Yes. Of course, Canada is a member of NATO. Despite the fact that we had to withdraw our forces from Europe, we're still an ally, an ally that has always been present when the need arose. Our troops can be redeployed rapidly to Europe in times of crisis. Indeed, our presence in the former Yugoslavia, as we speak, is an indication that we're not losing interest in European affairs. We have close to 2,000 people on

the ground. Therefore, it's a clear indication that we match our words with our deeds. We're there. We're there on the ground, but we also want to participate in the discussions where the issues of war and peace are discussed.

**Q.** What about the size and importance of the commercial relationship between Canada and the U.S.?

**Ambassador Chrétien:** This post is certainly by far the most important one from that point of view. As you know, the Embassy is constantly dealing with issues that affect the well-being of our fellow citizens. It has always been our most important trade and economic relationship, and it seems to be moving to an even higher level. The very large increase in bilateral trade that we witnessed last year is an indication—a solid indication—of the importance of that aspect of the relationship. It has not diminished, but increased in importance.

**Q.** There's a hit parade of trade irritants, as you know, sometimes referred to as "hogs and logs, suds and spuds." Do these irritants sometimes receive more prominence than they deserve, or not enough? Are they always going to be there, something we'll have to live with?

**Ambassador Chrétien:** I think that they rightly get attention. The disputes are important and should be resolved. But, in fact, they represent only a relatively small percentage of our overall trade relationship—approximately 5 per cent.

I think that even though the trade relationship is generally excellent, we have to fight to make sure that those irritants are carefully managed and, we hope, solved. We can never lower our guard. This is a constant battle, and I certainly intend to make our positions very clearly known to the Administration, to ensure that the U.S. government is abiding by its obligations under the NAFTA and to work toward the resolution of these problems.

I suspect that they will always be there—if not the present ones, new ones. It's almost inevitable in this kind of enormous trade relationship.

**Q.** Moving from the Canada-U.S. trade relationship into the NAFTA, an area that you had an early look at even before it came to pass when you were