DEALING WITH 'DESPICABLE DONALD': FIGHTING BACK AND PUTTING OUR HOUSE IN ORDER

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Donald Trump is forcing the Canadian body politic – every level of government and every party – to recalibrate. There is the threat not just of tariffs and economic upheaval but, for the first time since the 19th century, of annexation. Yet the Trump challenge is also a historic opportunity to put our own house in order.

Greater self-reliance will give Canada resiliency. Greater self-reliance will provide strategic autonomy and allow Canada to play, once again, the helpful fixer role it used to do so well, and a role needed now more than ever in the world.

Pierre Trudeau once told me that every prime minister has three files that are permanently in his in-box: national security; national unity; and the U.S. relationship. Mr. Trump dominates all three and, as the recent federal election demonstrated, Canadians are very much aware. Dealing with Uncle Sam will require patience, perseverance and, most importantly, a plan.

A plan will involve concurrent tracks requiring ongoing attention and constant adjustments, including:

- Fighting the tariffs;[1]
- Dismantling internal trade barriers to create freer trade within Canada;
- Building the infrastructure to get our goods to market and improve our productity;

1 www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2025/04/03/canada-announces-new-countermeasures-response-tariffs-from-united-states#:~:text=On%20March%204%2C%202025%2C%20U.S.,the%20U.S.%20came%20into%20effect.

- 'Getting right' coherence, coordination and collaboration between all levels of government;

- Diversifying trade and encouraging provincial governments to market their goods and services and attract foreign investment;

- Re-investing in defence and re-thinking collective security with allies.

FIGHTING BACK

The tariffs are fracturing our economic partnership and forcing us to rethink what has been our most important relationship. We now know this is not about coercing Canada to curb the small flows of fentanyl and illegal migrants or raising our defence spending, all of which we are doing. Rather it's a straight cash grab to pay for Trump's promised tax cuts and force business to manufacture in the United States. Unfortunately, we are probably going to have to adapt to a future of 'managed trade' with tariffs no matter who is in the White House or Congress.

For now, we have responded with counter-tariffs, targeting the Republican congressional leadership on whom Trump must rely to achieve his legislative agenda and his new best friends in the tech 'oligarchy'.

We can't change our geography so our primary goals must continue to be keeping our preferred access to the largest market in the world and to our binational security alliance.

While posted in the U.S., I used to tell visiting legislators not to kid themselves. Ours is an asymmetrical relationship. We need the United States more than it needs Canada. They take three-quarters of our exports and generate about one-third of our economy while we account for about one-sixth of their exports and about two per cent of their economy. We level the playing field through continual negotiation on trade agreements with dispute settlement.

I would also tell legislators that on almost any bilateral issue there are always more Americans who think like Canadians than there are Canadians.

Now we need to mobilize them to complement our current 'top-level' advocacy with a 'bottom-up' approach that asks Americans to lobby their own legislators to persuade President Trump to remove the tariffs. It's time to add a Team America component to Team Canada.

In practise, this means mobilizing Canadians to call their American customers, clients and friends and to tell them that the tariffs are hurting our mutual livelihoods, and that the disruption is going to make us all poorer.

Success will depend on Canadian business – small, medium and big – and Canadian labour, especially those who are affiliated to American counterparts like the Steelworkers, Teamsters and Seafarers, actively reaching out with their ask and in doing so posing some simple questions:

- Do Americans want to pay more for their gas and groceries because of tariffs?

- Do American farmers want to pay more for potash while losing Canada as one of their biggest markets?

– Do we really want to wreck our joint auto industry with a tsunami of tariffs every time a part crosses the border?

Success will depend equally on our provincial and local legislators. The premiers' involvement is critical. Many of them, notably Ontario Premier Doug Ford as chair of the Council of the Federation, are doing excellent work in their own outreach to their state-governor counterparts.

So, too, must provincial legislators, mayors and councillors. They are closer to the realities of trade in their constituencies, and we look to them to push local business and local labour to get involved and make the calls.

We should also enlist our expatriate 'star-spangled' Canadians living in the U.S, and the one million "snowbirds", who flock south, mostly to red states like Florida and Arizona. They need to tell their neighbours and those they buy services from that this is going to hurt them, particularly as more and more Canadians choose to spend vacation dollars elsewhere.

For this campaign to succeed we need thousands and thousands of individual voices making the case for lifting the tariffs. Our American friends need to contact their elected representatives, speak out at congressional town halls and talk with their neighbours. We need them to argue for growing the pie by taking advantage of what we already do well and making it more resilient. By making things together, we have created mutual prosperity and security.

Our current 'top-down' approach, which worked well in the past, was premised in the belief that our best and easiest entrée into the complex and cacophonous American political and policy system – a multi-ring circus of competing and conflicting interests – was through the administration and especially the president. Since Franklin Roosevelt, presidents whether Democrat or Republican understood the big picture and their attitude to Canada was mostly benign and, often, benevolent.

But now we must endure Donald Trump – a bully if not a wannabe autocrat – who could easily be cast as a Hollywood 'Despicable Donald' with his minions.

Alas, while Trump may behave like a cartoon character, he is still the president of the United States.

And, as president, Trump controls the narrative with his executive orders, and by moving fast and breaking things, he sows confusion and creates chaos, his preferred battlefield conditions. Trump works by feelings and gut instinct. As for trying to predict him, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks put it best: "We've got this perverse situation[2] in which the vast analytic powers of the entire world are being spent trying to understand a guy whose thoughts are often just six fireflies beeping randomly in a jar."

For now, the guardrails, checks and balances of American democracy are under strain as never before. The Republican party controls the legislative branch, with slim majorities in both the House and

2 www.nytimes.com/2017/05/15/opinion/trump-classified-data.html?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email

Senate. They are in thrall to and fear of Trump while the Democrats are still getting their act together. Until the pendulum swings back, we depend on the third branch of government, the judiciary, to uphold the rule of law on, for example, the legitimacy of using the demonstrably false claims against Canada as a source of fentanyl and migrants to justify "national security" tariffs.

Meanwhile, we must look to our own devices.

FREE TRADE WITHIN CANADA

We have begun to get our own house in order with the national government and premiers committing to eliminating internal trade barriers on procurement, accreditation and regulations reflecting the 'narcissism of small differences' between provinces.

GETTING GOVERNMENT RIGHT

The different levels of government need to better coordinate their industrial policies to maximize necessary improvements to our productivity and competitiveness. We have the capacity to be an agri-food and energy superpower. We should be guided by some basic questions:

- Do current regulatory policies help or hinder getting our resources – oil and gas, critical minerals, grains, seafood – to market?
- Is our current infrastructure – ports, grids, pipelines, rail – fit for purpose?
- What level of government should lead?

Answers to these questions should guide our investments and enabling legislation.

This must also include another exercise in getting government right. The best model is that conducted by the government of Jean Chrétien in the early 1990s, which evaluated which level of government was best suited to deliver programs. It reduced the size of government by nearly a third, in contrast to the Justin Trudeau government, which grew government by a third.

Public confidence in governments and institutions is plumbing new depths[3] in all democracies. Governments need to be more transparent in communicating information[4]. If to govern is to choose, it is also about our leadership explaining what our priorities should be, why we make certain choices and what they cost.

TRADE DIVERSIFICATION

We have long sought to diversify our trade but now it is imperative. Fortunately, there is broad support across party lines and with the provinces to achieve diversification.

Efforts must be ramped up, starting with our more-than 50 other free-trade partners[5], recognizing that

3 www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/trust-in-government.html

4 https://globalnews.ca/news/10980946/disinformation-an-existential-threat-to-canadian-democracy-hogue

5 https://pfcollins.com/canadas-free-trade-agreements

we are not utilizing the potential[6] of these agreements. Working with our Trade Commissioner Service, the premiers and provinces need to step up. They are best equipped, working with their business communities, to market their goods and services and expedite closing deals, while never forgetting it is business that does business and that it is customers who create jobs.

Our key trading partners will see the value in collaboration as Trump is coming after them, too. So, better we hang together or, surely, we will hang separately.

RETHINKING COLLECTIVE SECURITY

While our preference must be to sustain and strengthen both NATO and NORAD with particular attention and investment in our Arctic frontier, Mr. Trump has made explicit his contempt for allies and alliances. It means we can no longer assume the U.S. is a reliable ally to deter the threats posed by China and Russia and others that reject our rules-based order. With fellow allies, including our Indo-Pacific partners, we must also reconsider our reliance on U.S. defence goods and services.

In the meantime, we need to look to new collective security and economic arrangements, as NATO was originally intended. Such an agenda would include currencies, foreign direct investment, industrial policies, defence production and procurement as well as trade. It is an agenda particularly suited to Mark Carney's experience where Canada can play the role of helpful fixer.

ON NEGOTIATING WITH UNCLE SAM

Three things to keep in mind as we consider any new security and trade arrangement[7].

First, as I learned when advocating for Canada on Capitol Hill, start every conversation by underlining our bona fides on defence and security, reminding Americans that 'we have their back', before moving the conversation to trade and our other issues. While we have work to do, American self-interest will encourage useful collaboration. The U.S. preoccupation with security also means that any conversation between leaders always starts with a discussion of global geo-politics. We are a G7 nation with a global network, but we need to invest in it and bring ideas and initiatives if we want to be a constructive player at the top table.

Second, know our ask(s) but be circumspect and careful about revealing too early our gives and takes. With Trump it is all about the art of the deal, based on us giving and him taking. If Trump wants his USMCA renegotiated let him, not us, put it on the table. Meanwhile we should keep close with our Mexican partners, whose experience with the 'yanqui' gives them innate caution.

Third, the Americans will push us to move in lockstep on China as we did with EV tariffs. In the English debate PM Carney identified China as Canada's biggest security threat. Yeah, we need

6 https://international.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/corporate/transparency/reports-publications/chief-economist/impacts/2022-09-ceta-trade-benefits

7 www.bbc.com/news/articles/c14xydjzn5eo

our eyes wide open as we "coexist," "compete," "co-operate," and "challenge."[8] But we also have to engage with China on climate, pandemics and proliferataion as well as trade and people-to-people ties.

Finally, we will need to exercise strategic patience; continuing preparation and ongoing advocacy with American allies works to our advantage. The polling after Trump's first 100 days suggests he is overreaching and that he is not immune from the political laws of gravity, especially when it comes to the economy. So ragging the puck, a time-honoured negotiating tactic, could work to our advantage.

LOOKING FORWARD

The tariffs have unified Canadians as never before. Our vociferous response to Trump's delusion has given Canada more U.S. media coverage than ever. Given our declining dollar, it's an opportunity to launch a 'Visit Canada' tourism blitz and show Americans who we are.

We need to emphasize, as political leaders have done, that our quarrel is not with the American people with whom we are friends, allies and neighbours, but with Donald Trump, whose behaviour is downright un-American. 'Despicable Donald' is as much a threat to them as he is to us and our democratic allies.

Ours is more than a trade war. It's an attempt by Donald Trump to reorder the rules-based order into a great concert of powers where the big dictate to the rest. For Trump, it is an attempt to restore American primacy as the AI-enabled manufacturing hub with Canada as a source of resources, including water.

We can avoid this fate by actively pushing back and mobilizing our U.S. allies while at the same time putting our own house in order. This includes creating free trade within Canada, trade diversification and rethinking our collective security arrangements with like-minded partners.

Developing Canadian strategic autonomy, based on a strong economy, will also enable us to play a more useful role internationally. It is a fight worth having.

8 www.cbc.ca/news/politics/garneau-kovrig-spavor-1.6190100