

# *Interview with Pamela Wallin*

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*A former journalist, Pamela Wallin is Canadian Consul General in New York City. She was in Ottawa to give the Ruth Dick and Judy Bell Lecture at Carleton University. While in Ottawa she was interviewed by Andrew Cohen of Carleton University's School of Journalism. This is a edited version of that interview on October 21, 2004.*

**On a personal level have you found the transition from journalist to diplomat difficult as they seem to require completely different instincts and qualities?**

Not really. The mission of the journalist is to inform minds, to give people information and context to that information so they can make informed decisions about how democracy functions. The job of the diplomat is exactly the same. You need to provide good credible information about your host country to your own country and vice versa. When I bring the right people together around the dinner table to have a conversation about that relationship it is not notably different from bringing the right people together for an interview in a television studio.

The one notable exception is that as a diplomat I often have to bite my tongue and keep my opinions to myself. Private conversations tend to be very candid and the more honest we are with each other the more

business will be done and the better will be the relationship. It may be counter productive to say things publicly.

However, as part of my job, I am often asked to appear on US media and I do so because I think it is important. I know from my experience as a journalist that reporters are not interested in happy talk, good news and press releases. If you are not prepared to participate in a frank discussion with the American media you might as well stay home.

**How does one raise awareness about Canada in New York?**

It is a tremendous challenge because there are at least 192 countries represented in New York aside from those at the United Nations. We are competing for attention. We cannot think that just because we are a neighbour and have a long-standing relationship, they should pay attention to us. The thing New Yorkers care about is what is the best, what is the most interesting,

what is the most original and if it is they embrace it willingly.

So the task is to overcome the snow bunny image we have and to do it a very concrete way. To some extent we are responsible for that image when we promote our pristine country with mountains and maple syrup. One of my colleagues suggested we should use a photograph of a Mountie holding a blackberry in order to send the message that we are high tech and we can help you. We have to look for opportunities large and small to say "we have the answer to your needs and desires."

We also need to recognize that we are not a super power. We are never going to have the largest military might. What we have to offer is that we are smart, interesting and creative. So I try to make an invitation to the Canadian Consulate, be it to dinner or meeting, something that cannot be missed. For example I had someone speaking to US investors about why they should be putting

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their money in Canada. When people come to an event at the Canadian Consulate I want them to know that they are going to get value for their time spent with us.

**What is your sense of the perception Canadians have of the United States?**

I am very concerned about anti-Americanism in Canada which I hear espoused from various quarters. This is a very sensitive time. I cannot say loudly enough or clearly enough that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 changed our reference points on everything. Lots of people seem to think it is time for the Americans to get over it. Other countries have had terrorism or problems on their home soil and have moved on. This is dangerous thinking in many respects.

We should not be lulled into a false sense of security that something magical goes up at the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel and we are protected. If we do not understand how important security is to the Americans we will never understand what would happen to our border if, God forbid, there is ever another incident.

I want the Americans to understand our needs as a sovereign country. We have a different culture. We will not sign onto everything. But the flip side is that we have to understand their needs. The key to a relationship, and it does not matter if it is in a family or between countries is that you have to understand what makes the other party tick and if you do not understand that you cannot really have a relationship. So we need to realise they have been badly scarred by the event of 9/11 and we need to care about this.

**Does anti-Americanism affect your job?**

Well I tend to be answerable for it. Unlike the old days when what was said in Ottawa was never heard in New York now everything is instantaneous so if there is a statement that is unfairly provocative, and I understand everyone is entitled to his or her opinion, but there are repercussions and I am asked to go on TV and explain why someone referred to the President as a moron. So I go and try to explain the context and I try to stop misunderstandings before things go too far. The stakes are so high.

**Has security replaced trade as the critical issue in Canadian-American relations?**

There is nothing as massive as the trade relationship between our two countries. About 87% of everything we export goes south of the border. About 25% of their exports go to Canada. But you cannot talk about trade without also talking about security. A truck filled with goods crosses the border every two and a half seconds. Papers, documents, ideas, people and intellectual property cross just as easily.

But we must understand that Americans do not think they can protect their homeland unless we are partners in that process. Not only do we have this five thousand mile unprotected land border but there are nine thousand miles of coastline. We have to look at this together or we are tilting at windmills.

**Do you share the concern in some quarters about provinces getting involved in international relations?**

From where I sit this is not a problem. It is very important for us to

have the provinces come through our Consulate. They are experts in their own areas and one of the biggest issues between our two countries is energy. I point out over and over that Canada, not Iraq, or Saudi Arabia, is the biggest supplier of energy — oil, gas and electricity — to the United States. The provinces are on the front lines in this and many other areas involving trade and security.

Recently I hosted a meeting bringing together officials from New York State, Ontario, and the cities of New York and Toronto. They have so much in common ranging from transit systems to harbour issues. The more connections involving people from all levels of government the better as far as relations between our countries is concerned.

**What is your biggest challenge in New York?**

I think it is managing the economic relationship. If our Ambassador in Washington is the representative of Canadian interests on Capital Hill the Consul General in New York is a kind of ambassador to Wall Street. I try to help the federal, provincial and territorial governments as well as the private sector in doing business in the US. We are also active in many cultural activities. These used to be separate from our trade relationship but I see it as a whole. We are all multi dimensional persons and we function on many levels. Do not think of Canada as just a place to do business or a place to go for a holiday, We also have the cirque du soleil and many writers and artists, That is part of who we are and I try to present the whole picture to Americans.