

THE ECONOMIC CLUB

O F W A S H I N G T O N, D. C.

Executive Conversation

H.E. Kirsten Hillman

Speaker

**Her Excellency Kirsten Hillman
Ambassador of Canada to the United States**

Interviewer

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Chair, The Economic Club Global Initiative
CEO, Siemens USA**

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BARBARA HUMPTON: Hello, everyone. And welcome to this executive dialogue, and the first in our series of the Global Initiative. So, so thrilled to have such a vibrant group with us today. And, Ambassador, thank you so much for your hospitality.

AMBASSADOR KIRSTEN HILLMAN Thank you all. Is that working? All right.

MS. HUMPTON: Yes, it is.

AMB. HILLMAN: Well, thank you all for joining us. It's a thrill. I see so many familiar faces. So it's a thrill to have so many of them all together here in our – in our embassy this afternoon.

MS. HUMPTON: Well, I'm Barbara Humpton. I lead the Global Initiative but also serve as the CEO of Siemens USA. And it is such a privilege to be invited to conduct this interview with her excellency, Kirsten Hillman, Ambassador from Canada to the United States. And I'm so delighted that we'll have the chance to get an inside peek into how things are going, because there is so much. And at the Economic Club of Washington, we always love to start with the top news stories. So, the question is, what's happening in the world of trade? Give us a little peek behind the scenes in the U.S.-Canadian trade talks that have been going on.

AMB. HILLMAN: OK. Happy to do that. There certainly is a lot going on. It's a sort of a 24/7 exercise for a lot of our team here, led by Jay, who you met earlier, and, of course, our entire trade and economic team back in Ottawa.

Look, just to state the obvious, we are in a time of enormous transition and change in the trading relationships that we have around the world, in particular in our trading relationship with the United States. The president is implementing what he said he would implement, which is quite a radical – based on, you know, what has existed to date – change in his tariff policy. And that is, by necessity, creating a transformation for us, creating a transformation for our other partners around the world. And we are – we're working to find what the new normal is going to be.

To be a little bit more specific about it, I mean, let's recall we have, for over 30 years between Canada and the U.S. and Mexico, had a very, very open trading environment. We've had virtually no tariffs. We've had very close regulatory cooperation in a number of areas, which has led to very deeply integrated supply chains and very deeply integrated trilateral businesses, many of whom I'm sure are here in this room.

And so there's sort of two categories of things we're working on right now. One is the USMCA.¹ And the USMCA, I will point out, is still abiding in, I think, very important ways in our trilateral relationship. So, the global tariff that the U.S. administration has placed on every country in the world, including Canada and Mexico, in the case of Canada and Mexico it is taking into account USMCA. So, goods that are compliant with that agreement are not tariffed.

¹ The Agreement between the United States of America, the United Mexican States, and Canada is a free trade agreement among the United States, Mexico, and Canada. It replaced NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement.

That's huge. That covers, at least in terms of U.S. exports to Canada, over 90 percent of what you sell to us and about 85 percent of what we sell to you. So, it's a lot.

And we're heading into this review, which I think is – you know, it's starting off in a fairly positive way. Commerce issued its notice of that review yesterday, focusing on what we can do as sort of a bloc of countries to make sure that we're competitive, to make sure that we're protecting ourselves against forces, if you will, outside of our three nations that may be not – that may be implementing economic policies that are nonmarket policies that are subsidizing and undercutting our industries. So that's, I think, a very good vantage point through which to look at what we need to do to ensure that the agreement's fit for purpose.

The more difficult discussions, as I'm sure everyone can appreciate, have to do with specific sectors that the president has identified as strategic. So steel, aluminum, automobiles, semiconductors, lumber, and a variety of others. I think it's absolutely accurate that these are strategic sectors. They're strategic sectors for Canada as well. So, there is no disagreement there. They also, though, happen to be sectors where we are very, very closely coordinated. The United States supplies about 25 percent of the Canadian steel market. Canada supplies about 50 percent of the U.S. primary aluminum market. About 70 percent of the autos and trucks that U.S. exports to the world come to Canada. So, these are sectors where we are very, very deeply intertwined and very much benefiting from each other as customers and partners.

So, we are trying to chart a course where we recognize the strategic imperative in certain sectors, but we also – Canada would most certainly posit that national security resilience, strategic strength comes from continuing to work together, maybe under slightly different rules, slightly different paradigm. But it doesn't – that resilience and strength doesn't come from some sort of a rupture in these areas. So that's what we're working on, trying to navigate. We're not there yet. [Laughs.] But I do believe that there is a very common understanding between Canada and the United States that there is a competitive advantage between us, working between us. And that the real threats, if you will, to our businesses are from others who are not, let's say, playing on the same playing fields, that are making the playing field uneven for us. And that is largely nonmarket economies.

So that seems to be kind of – I know this is not extremely precise. Perhaps you'd like me to say, well, we had this meeting with so and so and talked about that, but I'm not going to do that. [Laughter.] But at the broadest – in the broadest terms, that's what we're doing. We're working to keep the foundation of our relationship under USMCA strong and fit for purpose. And we're working to address this issue around strategic sectors that we agree are strategic, where we want the resilience we need each of us domestically. But we want to do that in a way that doesn't, as they say, throw the baby out with the bath water.

MS. HUMPTON: Yeah. And let me just pull this thread a little bit, because we're talking U.S. and Canada. But the USMCA, of course, includes our southern friends in Mexico. If you were thinking about win-win-win opportunities that exist today for us that might help build the momentum toward a successful agreement, what are the things you look to?

AMB. HILLMAN: Well, there are quite a few. And it's, you know, a lot of what I was mentioning in the earlier question. I would say – first, if I can just say this. And I do think it's important to put this on the record, if you will. The USMCA is a win for the United States. Since 2019, when that new agreement came into force, exports to our country have gone up 20 percent, and largely driven by manufacturing. So, machinery and cars and equipment, the kinds of things that the government here, the administration here, really wants to focus on. Stuff people make, right, that give good jobs for your citizens. So, it's already a win. And it's a win for us, make no mistake.

Win-win-win, I think is recognizing that around the world there are blocs of countries, there are blocs of trading countries. And that is created because different countries bring different advantages to a commercial dynamic. They have different assets. Canada has an enormous amount of natural resource assets. We have a highly educated workforce. We have a fairly active and growing workforce. The United States has everything that you have, including a lot of capital, and including a lot of very interesting investment environments for the world. And Mexico has its assets that – you know, that are important for companies.

So I think that what we want to be doing is, again, focusing on making sure – and governments are always going to do this – focusing on making sure that at home jobs are being created, prices are being kept down, folks are able to have an affordable life. At the same time, that doesn't mean negating the sort of benefits that we get from working together. So I would say things like common rules around common threats, common rules – we found ourselves in COVID, as people know, being cut off from the world, and recognizing that we didn't have the resilience that we needed in certain sectors for certain products that are essential to our lifestyle, that are essential to our industries. We're working on that. But we all have to work on it together. And I think that that is something that we – the USMCA can be the core for our three countries to get that right.

MS. HUMPTON: At Siemens we've been focused on what we've been calling glocalization, this idea that you can innovate globally, but you can produce more locally or regionally. And I'd propose that USMCA is a brilliant example of glocalization. And you've mentioned security now a couple of times. The fact that countries like this working together in a region, shortening supply chains, getting more, you know, cooperative growth going, can be very effective. I'd love to hear your thoughts just on the – you know, how that relates to security as well.

AMB. HILLMAN: Well, you know, I mean, there's so many ways in which to view security. But I would say that since – perhaps we always should have known this, but it became so obvious during COVID. The sort of – the curtain was open to the fact that economic security and national security and energy security and health security, let's say in that context, are completely intertwined. You cannot look at one without looking at the other. And so for us, what we seek to do, as a learning experience from COVID and also from the – you know, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the disruptions that happened to our European friends there – is to try to do two things at once.

Domestic resilience. And I know that resonates very much with the U.S. administration, but it is a very big part of what Canada is trying to do right now. We are trying to lower our

barriers within our country to trade. We are working on major infrastructure projects – ports and bridges and pipelines and rail – increasing rail, so that we can sort of supercharge our own domestic economy and our trade within our own country. When you look at the data, a lot of Canadians and Americans trade north-south between each other a lot more than east-west. And it's understandable and it's good. But I think it's also important, and certainly our government believes so, to take care of our country as its own entity. So, resilience and what we're doing to kind of meet the moment.

Focusing on making sure we've got our own house in order – infrastructure, trade barriers within our own country, the technologies of the future, that we're ready for, AI, with robotics. That we're using our brain power of our brilliant people to make business better, more efficient, more competitive. And, at the same time, here with our NAFTA, our USMCA friends, getting that agreement fit for purpose.

But also for us, just like the United States, we're an Atlantic and a Pacific country. We're an Arctic country as well. We have free trade agreements with Europe, with Asia, within the hemisphere. Generally, maybe not as used as they should be, you know? So, orienting our businesses – which doesn't get to your glocal part, but it does get to resilience. Like, I think that we need to make sure that we are – we have the relationships that we need for when disruptions come along. The relationships at home, the relationships internationally. So, we're pretty focused on that.

MS. HUMPTON: Yeah. At the lunch table the ambassador and I were talking about the power of diversified supply chains so that, frankly, we just reduce the levers that can be used in geopolitics. So, businesses here can play a huge role in driving overall security by helping to build those more resilient supply chains.

Now, energy. Here in the U.S. this is the topic of the year because we're building out AI infrastructure. We need more power. Canada has been an exporter of power to the United States. Give me a glimpse into what's going on in the energy sector.

AMB. HILLMAN: Well, in fact, a third of what we sell to the U.S. is energy products. A third. Which is – so your main – your main – the main sector of the economy that you sell to us, the main product group, is manufactured products. And the main thing we sell to you is energy. Which is not surprising. And we're proud of that. We consider ourselves an energy superpower. We are seeking to solidify that. We have, obviously, a lot of conventional energy, oil and gas. There's a pipeline called the Trans Mountain Pipeline that goes from Canada into the United States. It was expanded last year and increased about a third of the – three times the volume that can now be transmitted through that pipeline.

We have LNG ports now off of our west coast. So, we're exporting LNG off the west coast of Canada. Those are also going to be expanded. We have some very significant hydroelectric projects from Quebec into New York and New England. Also room to grow there. We have a very vibrant nuclear sector, world's second-largest uranium producer. And we have some small modular reactors coming online soon, some of the first in the world. So, we are sort

of – what do they call it – all options open and firing on all cylinders. Pick your metaphor.
[Laughter.]

So, we are doing that. And we are doing that for ourselves. And we are doing that for our own AI agenda, because we have a vibrant AI set of ecosystems across the country, from Edmonton to Montreal to Toronto. And so we also have a – we have our own goals with respect to developing that technology and developing the infrastructure necessary for the data centers that are required. But we will have more energy than we need. We are 41 million people. We won't need as much energy as we will be able to produce. And we are eager, for economic reasons but for geostrategic reasons and for innovation reasons, to be, you know, a deep partner with, with the U.S. on this, and others.

MS. HUMPTON: Well, you've seen the U.S.'s – I won't call it reliance, but in many, many places we count on that power from Canada. And so thank you. Thank you for that. And power is prosperity. This is what drives our economy. So, we have exciting times ahead of us. Now, I haven't looked at my phone in the last hour or so, but we have President Trump actually in the U.K. right now. And I'd asked Jay a little bit earlier whether we think there are any Commonwealth discussions going on that may actually bring some benefits to Canada. What do you think?

AMB. HILLMAN: You mean, between us and the U.K.?

MS. HUMPTON: Yes.

AMB. HILLMAN: Oh, we're always talking –

MS. HUMPTON: As these discussions go on, is it – will it be a Commonwealth discussion?

AMB. HILLMAN: Well, you know, interestingly enough, the U.K. has been quite eager to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership. So that is one area where we find – the U.K., having left the EU, I think is very interested in finding their partnerships and solidifying them in a variety of different ways. As between Canada, U.K., and the United States. I don't know. Let's see what happens.

MS. HUMPTON: Let's watch the news.

AMB. HILLMAN: Let's watch the news.

MS. HUMPTON: Good. We'll keep an eye on this. Now, listen, I want to just pause for a moment and think about this environment we're in. Because as businesspeople, of course, we have seen a year with rapid transformation. We've had to respond to changes in the blink of an eye. I've got to believe the same thing has been happening in the diplomatic world. Give us some insight into what that pace of change is like and how the community is adapting.

AMB. HILLMAN: That's a really good question. That's a really good question. I'd be super eager to understand how you guys are living in this rapid period of change. Look, I'll be honest, it takes a bit of time to get your feet, and to figure out how you're going to as an organization – if

you think about this organization here, it's our embassy. About 400 people here at the embassy. We have 12 offices across the country headed by consuls general. They have their whole teams. And so, we work as sort of one team, as much as we can, across this country. And we have a fairly specific mandate, right? Our mandate is to advance and protect Canadian interests in the United States, to express our values in this country.

And that sounds very amorphous. It's not. In the practice, it's extremely specific. It's helping a particular country. It's making a particular connection on a particular national security issue. It's working at the border on a particular investigation that our federal police are working with U.S. federal police on. So, these are very specific things, but they all kind of fit into those categories. We have projects that are very pointed in time, but we have long-term projects as well between our two countries.

When everything seems to be changing, one thing that I say to my team and that we work on a lot is our mission actually doesn't change. And the important thing is actually to think about what our mission is and recognize that the goal is to get from here to there in achieving the mission. The environment around us will change. The federal policy will change. The global geostrategic environment will change. And that may require us to adjust and sort of curve our path a little bit. But the ultimate destination doesn't change. And I think that people – I mean, they can tell you, I hope. I hope that the people – that, you know, our team finds that somewhat comforting, because there are lots of things we can't control.

We cannot control the decisions of the U.S. administration. We cannot control the decisions of Vladimir Putin. We cannot control, you know, a business choice that a U.S. company is going to make to choose a provider from Mexico instead of Canada, or whatever the case may be. But we can continue down the path that we're on and do everything in our power to get to ultimately where we're trying to go. And I think that that is all you can do. It's a lot. But getting distracted by the distractions is counterproductive and, frankly, maybe something that can weaken our sense of resolve. And that – and we don't want that to happen. You know, we want a Canadian representation here that is very much focused on mission Canada.

MS. HUMPTON: Well, this is actually a brilliant message for all of the organizations represented here, this idea that we have objectives that we're seeking to fulfill over the long haul, knowing that the day-to-day circumstances are going to change. We're going to have to use tactics as we go. But keeping focused on what we have control over, keeping focused on making progress toward that objective, frankly, saves us from wasting a lot of energy, I think, right, worrying about the things that are out of our control.

So, speaking of which, AI and the and the pace of change. And I love to ask, I'll often finish a meeting at Siemens about five minutes early and turn to the team and say, how are you using AI in in your role? And I get some of the most amazing answers back from people. So, I just am dying to know, how are you and the embassy using AI?

AMB. HILLMAN: We use it for research, a bit. I can't speak to whether or not people are using it for memos and things that they write. I don't know. [Laughter.] Maybe they are. You'll have to ask them. I don't know if they are. Seems good. But we use it for research. And that can be

useful, but I have to say, even yesterday, there was something we had to double check because it wasn't – we had to actually, like, open the statistical book and go through the data, because somebody clever on the team said, huh, that seems a bit – it doesn't seem quite right. And sure enough, it was a glitch. So useful, to a point. I'm very cautious about, depending on what you're using it for, relying on it too, too much. But useful, to a point.

MS. HUMPTON: Yeah, yeah. Well, we'll get there.

AMB. HILLMAN: I think we use it in public affairs, too. I can look at my colleague. I think we use it in public affairs sometimes for images of, like, the beautiful waving flag and the gorgeous Canadian couple having a wonderful time, and inviting you to come and spend time with them in the Rockies, or something like that.

MS. HUMPTON: You mean, that's not what Canada actually looks like? [Laughter.]

AMB. HILLMAN: Of course, it does. I mean, of course it does. I suspect we use that as well in our public – our public affairs.

MS. HUMPTON: That is brilliant use of it. But I will just tell you that I Grokked you. [Laughter.] So, and this is what I want to do with our members now is take us back to, so we can learn a little more about you, the person.

AMB. HILLMAN: Oh, God.

MS. HUMPTON: And our favorite question, you all know what it is, did you ever consider mankind's highest calling, private equity? [Laughter.] We ask all our guests this.

AMB. HILLMAN: Not really, no, I didn't. [Laughter.] I started in a private law firm, a corporate law firm. I was doing commercial litigation, which I enjoyed. But I had been working briefly on a case against the federal government, and it was a constitutional case. It was a public law case. And I found that very interesting. And then just over time had an opportunity to work for our Federal Department of Justice. And I did that, and practiced as a lawyer for quite a while around the time that the NAFTA and the WTO were created. And they needed lawyers, because all of a sudden we had dispute settlement. So that was the – sort of my entrée into both public life and trade.

And I am a trade – I am not a diplomat. I'm sure I seem extremely diplomatic – [laughter] – but I am actually not a diplomat. I am a trade negotiator and trade lawyer. I was running the branch or agency of our government in Canada that's equivalent to you your USTR before I came here. And so, I came during the first Trump administration, for the NAFTA renegotiations. And I have never left. That's what's happened. I was here doing those negotiations. And then ultimately the ambassador that we had at the time departed. And I was asked to serve as ambassador. And I've been honored to do so for five years, officially, six years including the time I was acting. So, it's a – I've been here a while.

MS. HUMPTON: And don't kid yourself, you are a diplomat. [Laughter.] But, listen, coincidence or brilliant strategy that there is a trade expert in the role?

AMB. HILLMAN: Right. I suspect it was a conscious choice.

MS. HUMPTON: Lovely. Lovely. You know, we will have a moment for the members to ask your questions, and I know you're itching to ask questions, but I just want to probe a few other things. One of the things that Mary asked you as we were seated at lunch was about the experiences you've had in the United States. And I would love for you to share what you consider to be one of the most memorable experiences you've had.

AMB. HILLMAN: Yeah. I would be delighted to share this with you. So, I've had many, many. I have had the great honor of having meetings in the Oval Office several times, and meeting three presidents. And I've had – I can't even begin to express how many wonderful experiences, honors I've had. But for me, what touches me the most in this job are opportunities that I have to represent my country and to express our identity here in the United States. And particularly sweet are those moments where I get to do that in the context of supporting Canada-U.S. friendship and partnership and history.

So, a handful of years ago it was the 20th anniversary of 9/11. And on 9/11 there were two pretty interesting things that are very directed with Canada that happened. One was there was a commander, a Canadian commander of NORAD, which is our joint air command with the United States, who happened to be commanding NORAD that day. And it was, indeed, a Canadian who worked with the FAA to close U.S. airspace. Which I find remarkable, because it's the only joint command in the world. And it was a Canadian who made, you know, with the FAA, this very consequential decision. And as part of that consequential decision, there were 70 aircraft that were rerouted and landed in a small town called Gander, Newfoundland. Gander, Newfoundland welcomed 7,000 passengers that day. Gander, Newfoundland is, I think, about 4,500 people. And there was a play, a Broadway play, called "Come From Away," that told the story of this amazing friendship, experience, support in tragedy and worry and concern.

So, on the 20th anniversary of 9/11, I was invited to give some opening remarks at a public presentation that the Ford's Theater was putting on, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, of "Come From Away." So, the Broadway cast of "Come From Away" came to D.C. and performed the music, not all of the staging but a fair bit of it, and all the music in a public concert. Of course, that was a wonderful thing. I was very excited to do that. I had been away a few days before 9/11 and hadn't really thought a lot about this particular event. I'd worked on my remarks with a colleague of mine. In fact, our Armed Forces speechwriter who's a brilliant young man. And we worked up this very emotional address that spoke a lot about our friendship, and spoke a lot about our values, and spoke a lot about the best of friends coming to each other's aid. It was really nice.

But I hadn't really thought about it much more than that. And the morning of the event, I came in and I met with my team, some of whom put this together today. And they sort of walked me through, as one does, the run of show of the event. And they said, yes, so you'll be standing on the Lincoln Memorial. And you'll be facing out over the reflecting pool. And you'll be

giving your remarks. And I'm like, wow, right, of course, that's going to be incredible. And then I got there. And I hadn't really realized, public concert, right? There were over 10,000 people that had come to watch this concert. There were jumbotrons. My face – [laughter] – was bigger than anyone ever wants it to be. [Laughter.] And I had this lovely fellow from the Park Service who was standing beside me before I went up onto the stage. And he said, I'm pretty sure you're the first foreign representative who's ever given a speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. And I thought, OK. That may or may not be true. That was his perspective.

It was incredible. It was an incredible moment. It was so touching. It was so important to me in that moment to be with so many Americans, to be talking about this moment of friendship, to be talking about this tragedy. But sometimes, as always, these moments of humanity come out in the worst moments of tragedy. It is an experience of my life that is – I could never have imagined being able to have the privilege to do something like that. And it meant an awful lot to me.

MS. HUMPTON: To receive a standing ovation on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Yes. [Applause.]

MS. HUMPTON: Now, listen, we are going to transition to you. But first, I do want to ask a question I ask all of my interview guests. Which is, what advice do you have for this Economic Club community? These are the leaders of sectors across our vibrant economy in the region. We'd love to hear your advice.

AMB. HILLMAN: Well, I have to say, I'm somewhat shy to provide advice to such a group of leaders. I'm not sure exactly that that's my place. But since you've asked, I will do my best. [Laughs.]

MS. HUMPTON: Does that sound like a diplomat? That sounds like a diplomat, doesn't it?

AMB. HILLMAN: I'll tell you something I think a lot about. We have public sector leaders. We have elected officials, we have people like me, we have all the wonderful people that work in the U.S. public sector who are responsible for a lot of the ways in which our countries are governed. But the engines of our country, the jobs, the prosperity, the things that matter to people in their day-to-day lives, their ability to sort of be safe and secure and fulfilled, a lot of that's down to you. A lot of it's down to those of you who are creating those communities, creating those jobs, creating that stability, giving an opportunity for those innovators, driving our young people forward in the world. Like, we have our part to play, but a lot of it is you.

And I would say, as in my job, with responsibility comes a certain amount of duty to the system that enables us to do what we do. I think the same is true for the private sector. I think that the private sector benefits greatly from the systems that are put in place and maintained by institutions and governments, that allow them to do what they do, and all of the fantastic contributions that you make. But I think it goes in both ways. I think that there is a responsibility for all of us to care for, and nurture, and speak up about the kind of world we want to live in, the kind of, you know, values that are important to us, and the kind of ways we want to

treat each other, and the kind of country we want to live in, and the kind of environment we want to have.

I mean, you pick your value. But I do think that those values are also – you are also the custodians of those values, is what I would say.



**Her Excellency Kirsten Hillman
Ambassador of Canada to the United States**

Kirsten Hillman has been serving as Canada's Ambassador to the United States of America in Washington D.C. since 2020.

The first woman to be appointed to this position, Ambassador Hillman has stewarded the bilateral relationship through three administrations and the COVID-19 pandemic, managing a wide range of bilateral and global files, advocating for Canada's interests, and advancing shared priorities.

Through her 30-year career with the Government of Canada, Ambassador Hillman has held various senior diplomatic, policy, and legal positions at home and abroad. She has played critical roles in negotiating important trade agreements for Canada, including the modernization of the North America Free Trade

Agreement (NAFTA), and served as Canada's Chief Negotiator for the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Prior to this, Ambassador Hillman practiced law at the Department of Justice in Ottawa and at a private law firm in Montréal.

Ambassador Hillman grew up in Calgary and Winnipeg and holds a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Manitoba and Bachelors of Civil Law and of Common Law from McGill University. She also holds a Doctor of Laws – honoris causa – from the Royal Military College of Canada.

She was recognized in the Maclean's magazine 2022 Power List – 50 Canadians who are forging paths, leading the debate and shaping how we think and live – and named one of Washington's most powerful women by the Washingtonian in 2021 and 2023. In 2025, Ambassador Hillman was awarded the King Charles III Coronation Medal, recognizing individuals who have made outstanding contributions to Canada.