

Former B.C. premier Campbell to defend oilsands as envoy in U.K.

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Former premier Gordon Campbell, known in B.C. as the father of the unpopular Harmonized Sales Tax but viewed warmly in the Canadian business community as a staunch free trade advocate, was confirmed Monday for one of the most prestigious posts in the Canadian diplomatic corps.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper named the ex-Liberal leader as high commissioner to the United Kingdom, making him one of the key Canadian diplomatic players promoting Canada-Europe free trade and opposing alleged European discrimination against Canada's oilsands industry.

The announcement marked the latest example of Harper's interest in finding diplomatic talent at the provincial level.

Ex-Manitoba New Democratic Party premier Gary Doer was named Washington ambassador in 2009, and in 2007 Harper named Pat Binns, the former Tory premier of Prince Edward Island, as ambassador to Ireland.

Campbell, who wasn't available for an interview, was described Monday as a strong advocate of the Harper government's trade policy.

Ottawa is in the late rounds of a negotiating marathon with the

European Union on a deal known as the Canada-European Union Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement.

At the same time, the Canadian and Albertan governments have been waging an intense lobbying battle in European capitals to fight a proposed EU directive that would effectively label oilsands oil as “dirty” oil.

That would represent a huge marketing blow to the industry’s often-maligned image.

The confirmation of Campbell’s appointment was described as “excellent” news by Jason Langrish, executive director of the Canada Europe Roundtable for Business.

“B.C. has been the most ambitious of all the provinces in the CETA negotiations, and while their focus is primarily Asia, the former premier recognizes the need to further open markets with all trade partners and increase investment,” Langrish said in an e-mail.

“His presence should further reassure Europeans that the provinces are committed to the CETA.”

Campbell will be particularly useful in opposing the EU’s Fuel Quality Directive, which would declare that oilsands oil leaves a significantly heavier carbon footprint than conventional oil imports.

“He has ‘green’ credentials, having introduced a carbon tax and other related initiatives during his tenure as premier, which will sit well with the Brits and Europeans and position him as an honest broker in this debate between Canada and the EU,” Langrish noted.

Alykhan Velshi, executive director of the Ethical Oil website, said he hopes Campbell will “confront head-on the hypocritical, self-congratulatory moral preening of those EU politicians who attack Canada’s oilsands but are silent about the EU’s dependence on conflict oil from regimes like Libya and Saudi Arabia.”

Campbell won’t have much of a challenge on the oilsands front in London, pointed out Council of Canadians spokeswoman Andrea Harden-Donahue, since Britain is one of the few EU countries that has opposed the Fuel Quality Directive.

But she agreed that Campbell, who burnished his free trade credentials by signing with Alberta the Trade, Investment and Labour Mobility Agreement (TILMA) in 2006, will be a powerful spokesman for the Harper government’s free trade agenda.

“Campbell is . . . a clear supporter of trade liberalization in any form. This experience, along with his charm, will help Harper’s agenda in the critical last stages of CETA,” she said in an e-mail.

“We will continue to actively work here in Canada and with others in the EU to counteract this influence, challenging the serious lack of public consultation and highlighting the consequences of what is being negotiated away.”

Campbell’s successor, Premier Christy Clark, issued a statement Monday praising her former leader.

“Gordon Campbell has contributed much to public life in British Columbia, serving as mayor of Vancouver and premier of British Columbia with distinction,” she said.

“In particular, he always took into account the needs of the entire country and worked to build Canada and unite Canadians.”

NDP leader Adrian Dix had similar kind words in June when the appointment was first disclosed, saying: “I wish him well. It’s no secret I totally disagree with him about B.C. politics, but I think he will work very hard” representing Canada in the United Kingdom.

Campbell, B.C. premier for a decade starting in 2001, ended the long tradition of fed-bashing popularized by premiers ranging from Social Credit premier W.A.C. Bennett to the New Democratic Party’s Glen Clark.

He was considered a political asset in Ottawa by Harper as well as Harper’s predecessor, Liberal prime minister Paul Martin, because of Campbell’s general refusal to attack Ottawa.

While federal-provincial relations was one of Campbell’s political strengths, resulting in a number of major federal investments in major B.C. infrastructure projects, his surprise postelection deal in 2009 with Ottawa to harmonize the provincial sales tax with the federal Goods and Services Tax was a political disaster.

He retired earlier this year with his popularity at record low levels, and the province is currently awaiting the results of a referendum to determine whether the 12-per-cent tax will be abolished.