

## Blakes gets into Western swing; Calgary lawyer leads one of Canada's top 10

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Brock Gibson is making legal history this month. The Calgary corporate partner at Blake, Cassels & Graydon is the first lawyer to chair a top 10 Canadian law firm from his western base, reflecting the shifting strength of the country's economy and the role western offices play in the development of today's large law firms.

Western offices tend to be smaller than their Toronto counterparts, but deal activity in a resource economy makes them a cornerstone for growth.

While Fraser Milner Casgrain has a Montreal-based chief executive, and Borden Ladner Gervais has an "honorary" co-chairman from Calgary, none of law firms in the top 10 according to size, have a similar role as Mr. Gibson.

Rather, key management positions tend to reside in Toronto, supported by local man-aging partners. That's because national law firms are still in their infancy and arose following a 1989 Supreme Court of Canada decision that allowed firms to expand across provincial borders. Since then, Canada has seen the gradual rise of national law firms, either through mergers or, as in the case of Blakes, through greenfield, and lateral hires.

Mr. Gibson takes reins from Jim Christie, who served as chairman for the past eight years and was national managing partner before that. Mr. Christie, based in Toronto, becomes a senior counsel and will work with key clients and on special projects.

Mr. Christie and current national managing partner Robert Granatstein, also based in Toronto, built Blakes into a legal powerhouse.

The firm regularly scores near the top of the Financial Post corporate finance tables and M&A rankings.

Under Mr. Christie's leadership, Blakes expanded its offices in Ottawa, Toronto, Calgary, Vancouver and London and opened offices in Montreal, New York, Chicago and Beijing.

So Mr. Gibson has big shoes to fill, but the married father of three says he's up for the challenge and wants to continue the momentum.

"Our goal is to be Canada's truly national law firm," says Mr. Gibson, who has worked on a wide range of energy deals, including the merger of Enerplus Resources Fund and Focus Energy Trust and Canetic

Resources Trust's merger with Penn West Energy.

He says his role is to "mainly set the vision and to help develop our strategy and work with partners to implement that strategy most effectively for the benefits of our clients and the partners who own the business."

He arrives at an interesting time. From a succession-planning standpoint, the 550-lawyer firm announced last spring that Mr. Gibson would be assuming the role effective on Jan. 1, and he has spent the past nine months being groomed by Mr. Christie.

"Brock is a worthy successor and the firm is in great hands," says Mr. Christie.

At the time, the economy was humming and U. S. investment banks existed as standalone entities. Now, Canada faces a major recession and the U. S. financial markets are in the dumps.

"The world is changing all the time and currently it is changing dramatically in ways we haven't seen in the last 10 years," he says. "Our goal is to adapt the service we provide so we can help our clients effectively manage their way through, and excel, in choppy economic waters."

He attributes his firm's success to its culture. "Our whole firm culture is team-consensus building. We are a single partnership and always have been."

Mr. Gibson, 49, plans to keep practising law and "manage some of our large client relationships," although he'll be splitting his time commuting between Calgary and Toronto.

One of the bigger challenges he may face is the role of foreign offices, which some see as key to landing lucrative cross-border work. Right now, Blakes has representative offices on foreign soil, where Canadian law is practised.

However, if you look at New York, their Canadian competitors -- such firms as Osler, Hoskin & Harcourt, Davies Ward Phillips & Vineberg and Torsys -- have expanded to include U. S. legal advice and in London, Fasken Martineau DuMoulin, McCarthy Tetrault and Gowling Lafleur Henderson provide legal advice using U. K.-qualified attorneys. Will Blakes have to follow suit?

Mr. Gibson doesn't think so, taking a veiled swipe at

his competitors' strategy, although he also hedges his bet.

"We like our strategy. The New York market is a large one and is well served by many powerful U. S. firms that practice U. S. law and do not practice Canadian law. We do not practice U. S. law in their backyard and we believe that to be a winning model at this time."

As for future growth, Mr. Gibson adds: "We have well-developed strategies for all parts of the world. Those strategies we will implement with an eye to the most effective way to serve our clients and prospective clients."

So what does he see for the coming year? "The challenge in the current fiscal regime is liquidity and access to cash for all of our clients. We're going to see less financially driven M&A. We're going to see more distressed M&A. We're going to see more strategic M&A. I think we're well-positioned."

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