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NEWS STORY

Governor General's Brazil Visit a Protocol Issue

Michaëlle Jean was invited to Brazil months ago, and there is speculation she will ask for a long over due reciprocal visit.

By Brian Adeba

Governor General Michaëlle Jean was invited to Brazil months ago, confirms the Brazilian embassy, and a former chief of protocol says she might use the visit to invite the Brazilian president for a reciprocal visit.

Murilo Gabrielli, counsellor at the Brazilian embassy, confirmed that the invitation to Ms. Jean was sent some months ago, although he couldn't be specific about the exact date.

However, Lawrence Lederman, a former chief of protocol at Foreign Affairs Canada, says the governor general might use the visit as an opportunity invite Brazilian President Luiz Lula da Silva to visit Canada, with the prime minister's permission.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper will not be stopping in Brazil during a planned trip to Latin American and the Caribbean later this month. The fact that Mr. Harper is not visiting Brazil could be attributed to protocol issues, said Carlo Dade, executive director of Focal. Former prime ministers Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin paid bilateral visits to Brazil in 1998 and 2004, respectively. But since then, neither visit has been reciprocated and Mr. Harper's visit to the country would probably not be proper, Mr. Dade said. Fernando Henrique Cardoso in 1997 was the last Brazilian president to make an official state visit to Ottawa.

Liberal foreign affairs critic Ujjal Dosanjh did not believe the prime minister's decision to by pass Brazil represented a tensing of relations. "I understand the prime minister is visiting several countries and I don't think that raises any issues," Mr. Dosanjh said.

Mr. Harper is expected to visit Colombia, Chile, Barbados and Haiti in a five-day tour that will start on July 15. The tour is seen as an attempt to re-engage Canada with both regions.

Ms. Jean, meanwhile, will be in Brazil from July 6 to 15 where she will attend a number of educational and cultural events.

In the Caribbean, Mr. Harper's visit is being welcomed as a sign that Canada is once again serious about re-engaging with a region that feels it has been neglected. Last week, at a celebration to mark the 34th anniversary of the founding of CARICOM, a 15-member regional body of Caribbean nations, Rajnarine Singh, high commissioner for Guyana and the dean of CARICOM in Ottawa, welcomed Canada's renewed interest in the Caribbean as a positive gesture because it has "failed to focus" on the region for the past decade.

The telltale signs of a slide in the relationship between Canada and its Caribbean counterparts are quite visible, he said. Every two years, Canada and CARICOM used to hold a bilateral meeting that discusses issues of mutual concern.

"The summit allows leaders on both sides to know each other's views, especially on the international scene, where Caribbean leaders get a peak of Canada's positions on things," said Mr. Singh. But the summit hasn't been held since 2001. Equally worrying to CARICOM leaders had been the fact that preliminary talks about a free trade deal had been stalled since 2001.

Lack of Co-ordination on Region

Last year, officials at the Department of Foreign Affairs commissioned Focal, the Canadian Foundation for the Americas, to study Canada's involvement in the Caribbean.

The report noted that Canada's once robust focus in the region has drifted to the margins of foreign policy. It also noted that Canada's diminished role in the region will lead to other countries gaining influence with CARICOM. China, Venezuela and Cuba were identified as the competitors, while the United States, Mexico and the United Kingdom were identified as having minimal influence in the region.

While noting that there are 16 government departments and agencies with programs that deal with the Caribbean, the report said lack of collaboration and co-ordination has contributed to a diminished impact of these programs in the region. The report also noted that Canadian disaster relief to the region has been modest and slow in reaching victims.

While falling short of calling for a revival of talks on a free trade agreement, the report said such a deal would facilitate the entry of Canadian goods into the CARICOM market. Among the many suggestions the report outlined on re-engaging the Caribbean, it called for the reinstatement of the Canada-CARICOM heads of government summit. In addition, the report called for such a summit to be preceded by a meeting of foreign affairs ministers. The report noted that Caribbean leaders should also be accorded greater access to Canadian ministers.

Harper Looking for Diaspora Votes

Mr. Dade said the chances of actually reviving the talks are quite slim, stressing that

other free trade discussions with countries in Latin America, including Peru and Colombia, will take precedence. While on the surface it would appear that Mr. Harper's visit is intended to re-engage with the region, Mr. Dade said it is also seen as a way of reaching out to Caribbean voters in Canada.

"There are half a million people of Caribbean descent living in Canada, mostly in large urban centres," said Mr. Dade.

Given that in the last election the Conservatives performed poorly in large urban areas like Toronto and Montreal, Mr. Dade said, this could be an opportunity to reach out to the Caribbean diaspora, most of whom live in Toronto and Montreal.

But whatever the reasons of the visit, Mr. Dade said it is important that Canada revives its presence in the region because after the U.S. and Europe, the Caribbean falls under Canada's sphere of influence, noting that it is an important market and a stable one too.

"Part of the issue with the Caribbean and the Americas, is not just that Foreign Affairs hasn't been instructed to act on it, or that the prime minister hasn't been, but we don't have the institutions to support the engagement," he said.