

How Canada can Help Latin America Grow

In 1990, with great fanfare, Canada joined the Organization of American States, the primary forum for intergovernmental dialogue in Latin America and the Caribbean. It was a clear signal Canada wanted to play a more active role in the hemisphere. There was hope Canada would emerge as a leader and counterbalance to the United States, with none of the acrimonious history of intervention.

Sixteen years later, Canada is still an active player, but its influence and visibility are on the wane. Canadian investment in Latin America and the Caribbean is two-and-a-half times greater than in the Asia-Pacific region (\$86-billion versus \$36-billion), and many more Canadian snowbirds flock south for a beach vacation than to China or India. One in 13 Canadians visits Latin America and the Caribbean every year.

Yet Canada's profile is greatly diminished. Ottawa has failed to put forward a coherent vision for the region, which encompasses 35 countries, including the emerging economic powerhouses of Brazil and Mexico, and 550 million people. Long-promised free-trade agreements with Central America, the Dominican Republic and Caricom (the Caribbean Community and Common Market) have not materialized. Despite the success of the 2001 Quebec Summit of the Americas, the hemisphere is no closer to agreeing on what the Free Trade Area of the Americas should look like than it was in 1994, when the FTAA was launched by then-U.S. president Bill Clinton.

Last week in Ottawa, two think tanks, the National Capital Branch of the Canadian Institute of International Affairs and the Canadian Foundation for the Americas, hosted a conference called: "Where can Canada Really Make a Difference? A Critical Look at Neglect and Opportunity in Latin America and the Caribbean." Former prime minister Joe Clark, several Canadian ambassadors and assistant deputy ministers, academics, mining executives and a former president of Bolivia gathered to make the case that Canada should revitalize its role in the hemisphere. "There is a feeling in Latin America and the Caribbean that we have taken them for granted," said John Graham, the chair of Canadian Foundation for the Americas and a former ambassador to Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, Guyana and Suriname. "And yet the timing is good for Canada. The U.S. is so focused on Iraq, and its influence in the region has never been as low as it is now."

If Canada doesn't move to fill the leadership vacuum, others will. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has already mounted a serious attempt to become a pan-American leader, exploiting anti-U.S. sentiment and offering countries such as Cuba and Haiti subsidized oil. Spain invests heavily in the region and has revitalized the Ibero-American Summit, with 21 member countries, including Cuba and Portugal. China is also a big investor in Latin America.

Canada could play a useful role in the region, promoting democracy, free trade and free markets without carrying the baggage the United States does. Latin America needs help on all counts. The OAS Democratic Charter, which Canada helped to establish as a tool to strengthen democratic institutions, is needed now more than ever, as more and more Latin American countries elect populist leaders with little experience in governance. The problem of drugs, weapons and migrants flowing freely across borders also remains.

Canada is already deeply involved in Haiti, which will receive \$180-million in aid in the next two years to help address social ills. More than 100 Canadian police officers are participating in the UN stabilization mission and Canada also helped to monitor February's elections. But the new Conservative government should consider extending its leverage to other countries, including Brazil and Colombia, where the payoff may be greater.

Whether to spread its democratic and social ideals or to find new markets for its businesses, Canada should act quickly to build a *gran familia* in Latin America and the Caribbean.