

FOREIGN POLICY

The quiet Americans

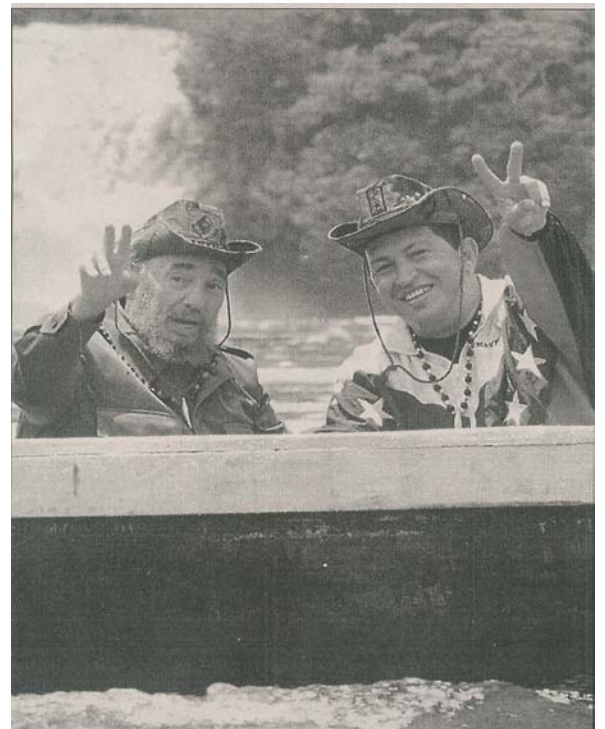
Canada is losing its influence in Latin America and the Caribbean because it won't spend enough to support the work of our diplomats.

By John W. Graham

There is something deeply ironic about the conduct of Canadian foreign policy in the Americas -- or, to be more precise, toward Latin America and the Caribbean. While the federal government has achieved an important diplomatic victory in the followup to the 2001 Summit of the Americas in Quebec City, it has failed to understand that implementation of key Canadian summit objectives is not possible if the central executing department -- the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade -- suffers debilitating underfunding, and now a cut in its operating budget.

The Canadian government is rightly concerned that the momentum to address major hemispheric challenges on poverty and democratic governance generated by the Quebec summit is slipping. So the recent announcement that a special summit will take place in Mexico this October is a victory for Canadian diplomacy, which helped to wring agreement from an initially reluctant President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil to press on with it. The price he extracted was to downplay free trade and focus on governance and poverty, something Canada is not unhappy about because it allows a return to the basic priorities set by the Quebec Summit. So far so good.

However, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and Finance Minister John Manley do not seem to realize that money spent on summits promotes Canadian initiatives and profile, but that the profile fades without adequate backup for implementation. Modest replenishment for CIDA helps, but the robust advocacy intended to reverse the declining effectiveness of Canada's Armed Forces needs to be applied to Canada's diplomatic service, too.



Cuts to the Foreign Affairs budget are hurting our efforts to nurture democracy in the Americas be it Fidel Castro's Cuba or Hugo Chavez's Venezuela

Without a minimally resourced Foreign Affairs Department, we lose our competitive edge in all of the three "pillars" of our foreign policy: trade, peace and the projection of our values and identity. Yet judging by the last federal budget, the government has absorbed little about the relevance of foreign affairs to our national goals -- and about what works and what doesn't in reaching them.

Canada is not a great power with great power resources, but we have not shed our G8 pretensions, so we have tried to maintain a global profile with a miniature budget. Although foreign policy as a whole needs revitalization, why not begin by sharpening our priorities in the Americas, where we have the potential to make a difference that we clearly don't have in most other parts of the world?

A Canadian ambassador in Latin America and the Caribbean has the chance to be among the six or seven most influential ambassadors to his or her country of accreditation? That chance does not exist (with rare exceptions) in the rest of the world?

For more than a decade, we have been a major player in inter-American affairs.? Canada and a handful of other states in the Organization of American States were the architects of policies designed to defend democracy in a region where the high walls of sovereignty had long sheltered illegal and dictatorial governments from censure.?Twenty-five years ago, most of the region was controlled by military regimes, but by the early 1990s, all but Cuba could be painted in democratic colours.

The countries of Latin America and the Caribbean have become political as well as geographical sister nations. These relationships have been cemented by intense interaction at the OAS, a more vigorous institution than its somnambulant image suggests.?No regional organization outside western Europe has struck out so boldly for the values of democratic governance.?The OAS, with Canada's active participation, has created a fabric of rules and jurisprudence that has helped to insulate member countries from the perils and temptations of military coups and change the pattern of governance.

Over the past 12 years, there have been no successful military coups in the region, but the institutional foundations of democracy are now in trouble.

The democratic prospects for some countries, such as Haiti and Paraguay, were never bright.?More recently and dramatically, the Latin American country with the second best record of unbroken constitutional democracy -- Venezuela -- has shown signs of coming off the democratic rails, while Colombia remains mired in civil war.?Argentines are dazed by the freefall of their economy.?Simmering grievances of indigenous peoples in Bolivia have sputtered into violence.?Expectations in Peru that the government of President Alejandro Toledo would rebuild confidence in institutions shattered by the exiled president Alberto Fujimori have stalled.?The figures across the region for crime-related violence are climbing. Citizens are losing faith in political parties and judicial systems are losing credibility. Political entrenchment by elites, corruption, resistance to effective taxation and inadequate expenditures on health care and education combine to lower confidence in the democratic process.?In many urban settings where the quality of life is eroding, tolerance for the abuse of human rights is seen as an acceptable trade-off for more police action.?

These are all issues for the next summit.?Many of the 33 countries involved are powerful trading partners of Canada. Their economic and political well-being is a factor in our prosperity, which is an important reason why Canada should provide appropriate help to meet these challenges.

Traditionally, this region has been the backyard of the United States more than it has been ours. Setting aside some real problems and disquiet about the U.S.'s new muscular unilateralism, American influence over the past 20 years

has been generally positive, pressing for health, judicial and education reform, democracy and the empowering of local government. But distractions in other parts of the world have left Latin America and the Caribbean as low priorities for the Bush administration.

Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham's review of Canadian foreign policy provides an opportunity to refocus our priorities and to recognize that the Americas is a region where leverage and mutual benefits are within our grasp. That review should be looking to increase Canadian support to the Inter-American system. We should have adequate resources to prepare for the Mexico summit; we should strengthen the OAS Office of Summit Follow-Up, reinforce the efforts of the OAS to address the special challenges of small economies and earmark more resources for the Unit for the Promotion of Democracy (UPD), a Canadian invention, that manages governance issues and election monitoring. Yet of OAS countries that can afford contributions that make agencies such as the UPD work, Canada is often the most niggardly.

Opportunities will be wasted if an already under-nourished foreign ministry is required to spend more time tightening its belt instead of building on its strengths.

*John W. Graham is chairman
of FOCAL, the Canadian
Foundation for the Americas.*

© Copyright 2003 The Ottawa Citizen