

# EMBASSY

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## More than Just a Cottage Weekend With the Kids

**Officials and experts say Canada and Mexico are becoming closer friends than ever, thanks to like-minded leaders and heading off U.S. unilateralism.**

By Lee Berthiaume

It was a weekend visit that was overshadowed by anti-globalization protests and the pending arrival of the world's most powerful leader, but which observers say holds vital importance for Canada.

Days before American President George W. Bush arrived on Aug. 20 to kick off the two-day Security and Prosperity Partnership leaders' summit in Montebello, Que., Mexican President Felipe Calderon and his family spent a weekend with Prime Minister Stephen Harper's family at the prime minister's summer residence at Harrington Lake.

It was the third time the two leaders, whose countries lie on the same continent but are separated by the most powerful nation in the world, have had a chance to spend any real time together.

The first was Mr. Calderon's visit to Canada last October after he was elected president, but prior to his inauguration. The visit continued a tradition of Mexican presidents-elect visiting Canada.

A month later, Mr. Harper attended Mr. Calderon's inauguration in Mexico City at a time when many other world leaders were staying away because of controversy surrounding the Mexican presidential election.

With this third meeting, it appears clear that the relationship between the two leaders is much more than casual.

In a speech earlier this year, former Canadian ambassador to Mexico Gaëtan Lavertu said "the rapidity is surprising with which the relationship between both men has developed.

"I can affirm, without fear of being mistaken, that both are cut with the same scissors. Each one has focused to his respective government in a concise list of priorities key and share a common vision of the world, focused, primarily, on the American continent."

#### Leaders 'Getting Closer': Official

There have been a succession of high-level meetings between ministers and bureaucrats, helped in part by the Canada-Mexico Partnership, a series of working groups that was launched in October 2004 under former prime minister Paul Martin. But the dialogue appears to have reached new levels.

Mauricio Guerrero, a spokesman for the Mexican Embassy in Ottawa, said the two leaders often speak by phone and he described the relationship between the two leaders, and the two countries, as "getting closer."

"They have many things in common," he said, noting that both are close to the same age, have young families, and are conservatives.

The fact that both Mr. Harper and Mr. Calderon are fairly new to their posts and, at the moment, appear to be set to continue leading their countries for some time, at a time when Mr. Bush is on his way out, is also important.

"I know the government of Canada might change at any time, but the way we all see it is it won't change soon. So they can plan for the future together," Mr. Guerrero said.

"So it's an intelligent strategy to get closer to the leader you know is going to be there for the long run. I think they took this chance to get to know each other since they share many things in common, one is that they are in the early stages of their leadership."

It doesn't hurt that there are about 1,700 Canadian companies in Mexico, amounting to almost \$19 billion in investment and making Canada Mexico's fourth largest investor.

Trade is also increasing, with \$7.4 billion worth of Canadian goods exported to the country, according to Mexican figures, making Mexico the fifth-largest destination of Canadian products. Mexico was Canada's third largest supplier, exporting almost \$16 billion in goods.

Before the North American Free Trade Agreement was signed in 1994, relations between Canada and Mexico were minimal. Afterwards, both parties showed some interest, but it was limited.

"People have always said the weak leg in the stool is the Canada-Mexico relationship, and without a real Canada-Mexico relationship, you can't expect a real North American identity or partnership to develop," said Laura Macdonald, an expert on North American affairs and head of the political science department at Carleton University.

Part of the problem was geography and history. Not only does the U.S. dominate North America in trade and political terms, but Canada was loathe to get involved in the numerous contentious disputes between its two North American partners, such as drug trafficking and illegal immigration.

"There's been a reluctance in Canada to become associated with those issues," said Carlo Dade, executive director of the Canadian Federation of the Americas.

"So on the one hand, there's some thinking that we want to avoid some of the more problematic issues. On the other, there's always been a feel that we can get a better deal out of the United States because of our historically close relation and cultural ties."

That approach was doubly applied after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Ms. Macdonald said.

"There was a distancing by Canada from Mexico," she said, adding Canadian officials told the U.S. "that we have so much in common, we can work together to overcome these security issues quickly and efficiently."

That didn't work, and there's an increasing fear that Canada may have lost a good chunk of its privileged status with the U.S. as it has moved ahead with plans to tighten border security, impose new travel requirements and establish other measures intended to boost security.

### 'Much More in Common'

Mexico has also suffered in recent years, including tough talk and opinions in the U.S. about illegal immigration that has served to cool relations between the two countries, even as America is pre-occupied with Iraq.

With Mexico having put "all of its eggs in the NAFTA basket," as Ms. Macdonald described it, and needing to show average Mexicans the agreement's benefits, and the Harper government setting its sights on the Americas, the stage was set for a partnership.

It helps, she added, that the two men are similar in many ways: Both are technocrats and conservatives with neo-liberal tendencies, in a region that is seeing an increased number of leftist governments coming to power.

In addition, the experts say Canada and Mexico are both interested in promoting multilateral and regional organizations, and heading off American unilateralism.

"All of those things are in favour of a good relationship," said Andrés Rozental, a former deputy minister at Mexico's foreign ministry and an advisor to Mr. Calderon during his election campaign and transition period.

"At the end of the day, Canada and Mexico probably have much more in common with each other on those issues than we have between us with the U.S.," Mr. Rozental said.

The experts predict Canada and Mexico working much more closely on domestic affairs, with labour mobility continues to be a major topic and has expanded from only seasonal farmers to now include workers from Mexico's state-owned oil company working in Alberta.

But they foresee the two countries also co-operating on the regional stage.

"It takes a conscious political decision [to grow the relationship]," Mr. Rozental said, "and I think that's been taken by Prime Minister Harper and President Calderon.

"Mexico feels much more comfortable with Canada in many ways...which makes it a natural partner in many things."

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