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NEWS STORY

Quiet Diplomacy

A day-long private meeting between Canada and Chile

By Sarah McGregor

Two high-level Chilean Ministers, including the country's candidate for the top post of the Organization of American States, slipped into Ottawa this week and met with Foreign Affairs Minister Pierre Pettigrew.

Jose Miguel Insulza, the Chilean Minister of the Interior, took a day away from a heavy lobbying campaign in the Caribbean and elsewhere to meet with political officials in Ottawa on Mar. 7. Chilean Foreign Minister Ignacio Walker joined Mr. Insulza.

The purpose of the Canadian visit hasn't been made entirely clear. Foreign Affairs Canada says it didn't extend the invitation, nevertheless the federal government welcomed the visit. "The Minister was very pleased to hear Minister's Insulza's views on the future of the OAS, in addition to discussing ways in which both countries have always worked together to advance issues of common interest, such as human rights and human security," according to Mr. Pettigrew's spokesperson, James Christoff.

Mr. Christoff wouldn't expand on the meeting. The daylong itinerary was private, and there were no media availabilities or public statements.

The following day, Mr. Insulza was supposed to meet with U.S. officials in Washington, according to some newspaper reports. On Mar. 9, the Council of the Americas in New York is hosting a public session where Mr. Insulza will reiterate his vision for the OAS. The candidate, who has the expressed support of Argentina and Brazil, has called for stronger democratic institutions among the 34-member nations of the OAS.

Speaker of the Senate Dan Hays said he accepted Chilean Ambassador to Canada Jose Miguel Cruz's offer to attend a private lunch with the Ministers. Mr. Hays noted that the conversation was geared toward hemispheric issues. "I was pleased to meet with the two ministers [and discuss] events in the hemisphere," says Mr. Hays. When asked if the topic of the OAS candidacy arose, Mr. Hays commented: "Canada is supporting a different candidate, but you never know who will be successful."

The OAS was left without a secretary general after Costa Rican President Miguel Angel

Rodriguez was forced to resign due to a corruption scandal at home last October. As the race for a replacement started, Canada came out in support of Mexican candidate Foreign Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez Bautista. The U.S. is backing former El Salvador President Francisco Flores. A date hasn't yet been set for a final vote but it is expected to take place before the general assembly in June, and well in advance of the November Summit of the Americas in Argentina.

Eduardo del Buey, executive director of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL), wasn't aware of the visit before being contacted by Embassy. However, he said the trip would be an important bridge-builder in the event that the Chilean candidate wins the secretary-generalship. "It could help him in campaigning to see what political leaders want from the OAS, and what they are going to contribute," he says, noting that Canada provides 12 per cent of the organization's annual budget, in addition to making other voluntary contributions throughout the year.

He says the two countries were wise to engage in "subtle and nuanced dialogue. I think Canada and Chile played it quite right; that they didn't put the government (of Canada) on the spot," he says. "It shows a certain level of maturity."

The Forum of Interparliamentary Associations Chair Don Boudria also learned of the visit through Embassy. "This is the first I heard of it," said the Liberal MP, adding the legislative organization doesn't always know about meetings at the executive level.

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