

# What sort of amigo are we?

Mexican President Vicente Fox's visit may be our last, best chance to bolster a valuable friendship, warn Latin America specialists **KEN FRANKEL** and **JOHN GRAHAM**

Imagine the chaos in an unsupervised classroom while a teacher is outside on a prolonged cigarette break. Parents have nightmares over such images; Canadians ought to be concerned about a foreign policy conducted along similar lines.

Vicente Fox, Mexico's beleaguered President, was scheduled to arrive in Ottawa last night in what must be his final attempt to prod Canada to deepen relations between the two countries. NAFTA has powered the economic relationship, but Mr. Fox's visit and the presence of seven cabinet ministers in his delegation signal Mexico's continued desire for a more far-reaching relationship. As Canada splashes about in the changing international landscape, only one of four emerging economic powers — China, India, Brazil and Mexico — is actively courting us. It's the country with which we have the most natural opportunities for collaboration.

Mr. Fox and his predecessor, Ernesto Zedillo, have previously attempted to draw Canada closer. To underscore their commitment to the relationship, both made their first trips as president (Mr. Fox as president-elect) to Canada. These demarches peaked in 2000 when Mr. Fox strode confidently into Ottawa barely a month after his historic electoral victory over the PRI party with grand visions of establishing a North American union akin to the European Union.

His visions may have been grandiose and premature, particularly given Washington's lack of interest in such ideas. But, it seemed clear that he was trying to bring Mexico into the forefront of the regional

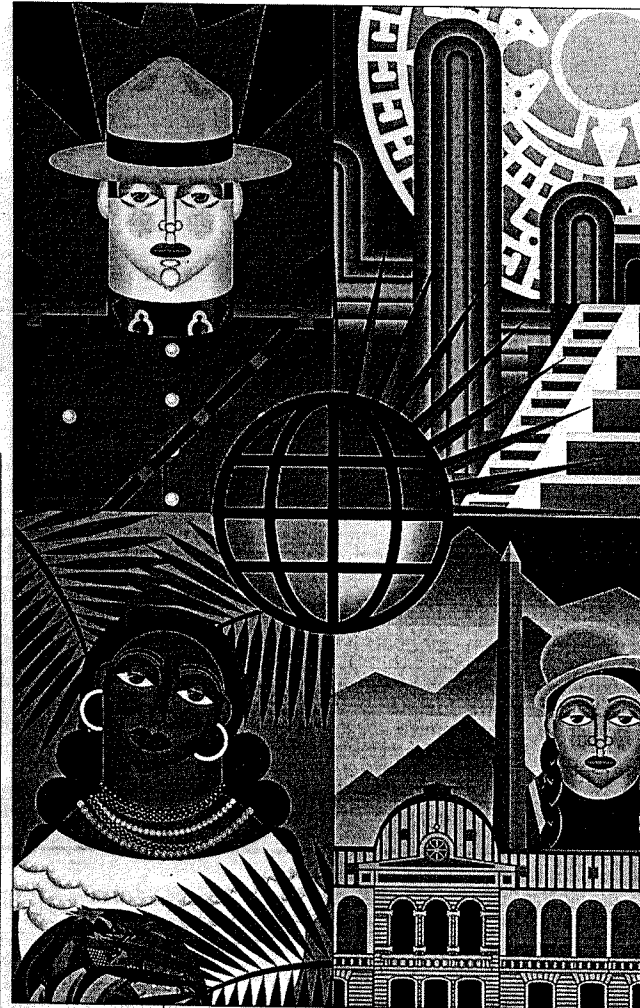
conversation surrounding economic liberalism, democracy and human rights. He also seemed to want to effect democratic reform in Mexico (an endeavour in which he has failed for reasons partially of his own making).

Mr. Fox believed that both of these factors would make Mexico a credible strategic partner for Canada. Ottawa demurred, believing through tortured logic that bettering its relations with Mexico would weaken its ties with the Americans. Mr. Fox tried again post-9/11 when the United States disengaged from discussion about anything other than terrorism and security. Many in Mexico hoped that Canada would step in and engage them in the key issues affecting their country and the hemisphere. Canada demurred again, consumed by its relationship with the U.S.

To mollify critics, particularly the Mexicans, Canada pointed to the growing low- and mid-level government contacts on issues such as electoral reform, environmental protection and cultural exchanges. The dual problem is that these disparate, lower-level contacts have meagre cumulative impact at senior levels, and they do not adequately encompass dialogue on regional matters.

Joint strategizing and action to defend against hemispheric threats to democracy should anchor a deepened collaboration between the two countries. There is plenty of work to do, and now.

Widespread disenchantment and anger in the region with the failure of democratically elected governments to alleviate growing poverty and other social problems has led to the rise of strong popu-



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list strains, lightly tethered to democratic principles, Hugo Chavez's Venezuela being the most visible.

Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru are also in precarious positions. Haiti is a "failed state" in need of creative thinking and sustained action. The Organization of American States, the region's designated body for addressing the crises of democratic governance and much else, is in disarray.

Joint collaboration has several valuable qualities. The first is that it is vital that it be developed independently from the U.S. because the United States' credibility on these issues is at an all-time low. In many cases, non-American-led initiatives stand a better chance.

The second virtue of this collaboration is that it fits squarely within the foreign policy vision of both countries, and has worked well in the past. Mexico and Canada worked closely and effectively in the 1980s as key players in solving Central America's violent political turmoil. Strong Mexico/Canada collaboration on common hemispheric concerns would advance the interests and the productive problem-solving leverage of both.

For Canada, collaboration also presents an opportunity to begin rebuilding a foreign policy relevant to Canadian needs. Prime Minister Paul Martin has proclaimed the doctrine of "responsibility to protect," but unfortunately Canada

lacks the leverage, credibility and sustained capacity to effect meaningful change in places such as Darfur.

Although our reservoir of good will is dwindling in the Americas, we have the potential to make a difference. This is called "niche" diplomacy and it is high time that Canada had a go at it. Success in niche diplomacy requires that Ottawa reverse its decade-long habit of drastically underfunding our diplomatic, military and aid machinery. It should nourish strong strategic alliances.

For Mexico, collaboration is a natural step in its progression out of obsessive non-interventionism and into a policy of involvement in the hemispheric challenges of peacekeeping, democracy, poverty, and human rights. Mexico was involved in policing efforts in the delicate transition to democracy in El Salvador and has been involved in the mediation efforts in Colombia and Venezuela. It recently stepped down after serving on the Security Council, and has designs to regain the seat in 2009. Although Mr. Fox has only two years left on his mandate, it does not appear that any of his three possible successors at the moment would undo his efforts in this area.

If Canada dithers in this opportunity to collaborate with Mexico, our political leverage in the Hemisphere will dwindle further. Mexico will not continue to wait to find international alliances. Brazil, the primary regional power in South America (with whom we have only mediocre relations) is playing a leading role. It is managing the dialogue with Mr. Chavez in Venezuela and has committed the largest contingent of troops in Haiti.

China is taking an increasingly active economic interest. It has invested heavily in oil fields in Ecuador and actively seeks to expand its oil investments throughout the Andean region. Where there are economic interests, political interests are sure to follow. China has deployed police as part of the international peacekeeping mission in Haiti.

Although we have been here before, we may not have this opportunity again.

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