

Harper planning summer tour of Latin America

U.S. President George Bush reaches out to shake hands with Prime Minister Stephen Harper, left, as Mexico's President Vicente Fox looks on after they toured Mayan ruins at Chichen Itza on March 30, 2006. (AP Photo/Charles Dharapak)



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OTTAWA — George Bush just did it.

Stephen Harper wants to do it, but better.

The prime minister is planning a high-profile trip to Latin America and the Caribbean this summer, government sources say, in a bid to raise Canada's profile and strengthen ties with a host of new leaders in the region.

Gov. Gen. Michaëlle Jean will be part of the re-engagement project and, between the two, they will potentially touch down in capitals such as Santiago, Brasilia, Montevideo, Bogota and Mexico City. The Caribbean will likely also figure in the tour, planned tentatively for July, with Haiti a possible stop. But insiders and observers say a Harper trip would have an entirely different feel than that of the U.S. president earlier this month, who was dogged by protesters everywhere he went. Washington is widely perceived to have ignored relations with the hemisphere in the aftermath of Sept. 11.

Canada has a singular opportunity to come across as an alternative partner in the region _ one that values the role of the state, public health care, and a strong civil society, says Carlo Dade of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas.

"There are opportunities for people to engage," said Dade, who has worked for the U.S. government and the World Bank in the region. "People want to see alternatives, and we've got a strong alternative to the States. Now is a time more than ever where that's popular and of interest to people."

The Conservative government has left broad hints about its intentions for outreach in Latin America and the Caribbean. One such signal was in a major speech Harper delivered in early February to the Canadian Club, where he underlined that Canada was not solely fixated on its relationship with the United States.

"That's why we will seek to re-engage relationships throughout the Americas, with our partners in Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central and South America," he explained. Harper made an important symbolic move last year when he attended the inauguration of Mexican president Felipe Calderon, whose victory was being disputed by the second-place candidate.

Senior officials have been duly instructed that Latin America is a priority. Foreign Affairs Minister Peter MacKay was dispatched to the general assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS) last summer in the Dominican Republic, and last month visited counterparts in Mexico City and Sao Paulo. The Clerk of the Privy Council, Kevin Lynch, and Harper's foreign affairs adviser Susan Cartwright were both in Mexico City two weeks ago meeting with officials and building an agenda.

Free trade an issue

One of the nagging issues on the table remains two unresolved free-trade deals, between Canada and Central America and Canada and the Caribbean. The Liberal government under Jean Chretien began negotiating those discussions, but talks have slowed to a trickle.

Canadian business, meanwhile, has only put more fingers in the hemispheric pie, with a growth rate of investments there far exceeding that of Asia or the EU. Scotiabank President Rick Waugh weighed in on the issue in a recent opinion piece, arguing that with international trade negotiations faltering, Canada should start focusing on attainable, regional deals.

"We should place a particular focus on trade and investment opportunities in the Americas because of our historic cultural and political ties, our existing corporate links, and the tremendous growth potential and proximity of these markets," Waugh wrote in the FOCAL Point newsletter.

Indeed, Dade and others underline that Canada can punch at its own weight in Latin America, not wildly overshadowed by trade competitors from the European Union and the United States. Judith Hellman of York University says tone will be key to any talks with Latin American and Caribbean countries, and Canada must approach bigger players such as Brazil, Chile and Mexico as equals. She cautions that being embraced as an alternative to the United States means Canada will also have to act the part.

"We have to be there for some reason other than to get the most money out of every deal," said Hellman, who teaches about Latin America as a political science professor. "There has to be some component of the Canadian concern for social equality, that is the difference between us and the United States, that informs the trip and informs the relationship that Harper and any other Canadian leader is going to build with Latin American countries."