

EMBASSY

Canada-Mexico Visas: What Were We Thinking?

by Carlo Dade

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The first question that comes to mind with Immigration Minister Jason Kenney's surprise announcement that Mexicans will suddenly need a visa to enter Canada is: why? It's a question that also has people in Washington, D.C., and throughout the hemisphere scratching their heads.

The Canadian problem of a backlog of refugee claims has been a longstanding issue in relations with other countries stretching over many years from Chile to Costa Rica and now Mexico and the Czech Republic.

Long delays in processing claims create the impression that if one manages to get to Canada, one will be handed a job and a health card and, eventually years down the road, one may be, politely, asked to consider leaving. Slapping visa restrictions on countries has not, and will not, fix this issue; fixing the refugee system will. If refugee claims were processed swiftly then the incentive to abuse the system would all but disappear.

But that requires money and resources. Trying to have a world-class refugee system on the cheap obviously, as we are seeing, does not work. And putting visa restrictions on countries like Mexico actually makes the problem worse.

The immensity and importance of travel from Mexico to Canada—15 direct flights from Mexico City to Canada—means that an inordinate number of Canadian immigration officials and resources must suddenly be deployed to process Mexico visas.

Had the government really been concerned about the refugee backlog it would have devoted resources to dealing with the 9,000 Mexicans already in the refugee queue.

Instead, the already suffering Canadian tourism industry gets a kick while it's down—Mexico is one of the few countries from which tourism to Canada has been increasing—while one of our more robust and growing economic relationships is damaged and a pall of doubt is cast over the government's second foreign policy, our Americas engagement strategy.

One can only imagine what Latin America is thinking. On one hand, Canada says it wants closer ties, more trade, more cultural exchanges and better relations. Then, on the other hand, it unilaterally and without warning enacts a measure to do just the opposite with its closest ally and strongest relationship in the region. All for 9,000 refugee claimants.

If there were a grave threat or clear and easily understood rationale, the visa requirement would be understandable. But, in the case of visa restrictions for Mexico and the Czech Republic, we are punishing countries for a long-standing problem that is of our own making and wholly within our power to fix.

Why, then, enact the visa requirements? Surely 9,000 claimants out of hundreds of thousands of visitors a year is not a reason. There has not been an outcry from Canadian voters nor from international organizations. And no one believes that the Americans are concerned about Mexicans in Canada.

In the background paper released by Citizenship and Immigration Canada to coincide with the visa announcement, it is noted that, "The requirement is in line with the U.S., which has had a long-standing visa policy on Mexico."

Perhaps then the goal was harmonization of Canadian and U.S. immigration policies. One can only hope that this is not the case. But in any case that is what has happened; we now look looper than do the Americans.

Though it would have been better to think about mitigation and perception before the announcement was made, it is not too late.

First, CIC needs to explain to Canadian business what exactly it will do with regards to Mexicans in the Temporary Foreign Worker program. Given the way the visa issue has been mishandled so far, (try calling the 800- number or visiting the web site) assurances that CIC "will take steps" is not reassuring.

Second, creative thinking is needed to mitigate damage to the Canadian tourism industry, a subject that has gone unmentioned from CIC.

And finally, we need to consider a secure traveller program. We each have such a program with the U.S.-NEXUS in Canada and SENTRI in Mexico. It would be a marginal incremental cost to port these programs into a Canada-Mexico program. This would help mitigate the damage that has been done and allow something positive to come from this.

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