

Canada at home in the hemisphere?

By Carlo Dade, Executive Director

Twenty years ago, Canada joined the Organization of American States (OAS); it was a decision to turn away from Europe to face and seize the opportunities and responsibilities of being part of this hemisphere.

Contrary to initial expectations of steady progress in realizing mutual and comparative advantage in trade and diplomacy, Canada's relationship with the Americas has been more stop-start and half-hearted. Canada has done well when it has devoted the necessary attention and resources to its engagement in the hemisphere and has suffered when it lost focus.

Looking back, it appears that our shift away from Europe may have been less about the Americas and more about America. The view from below the Rio Grande is telling in this regard; though an active OAS member, outside of its orbit, Canada appears as a curiosity, popping up from behind the American behemoth from time to time. The region's frustration with Canada is not with what it does, but that it does not do more and do so more consistently.

When it has focused attention and resources, Canada has done well in the hemisphere. The 2001 Summit of the Americas hosted by Canada in Quebec City is considered a high point in these heads of state meetings and a high water mark for inter-American relations. Behind the scenes, Canada has also shepherded the Summit process through rough patches that put its survival in question.

There are many other examples. For instance, there is now an annual Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Americas Conference. This event has become a keystone for advancing corporate social responsibility practices in the Americas and globally. However, it is an oft-forgotten fact that Canada single-handedly rescued this event from becoming an unmet Quebec City Summit mandate. Without Canada's leadership, prodding and insistence in front of the inter-American community, that first conference would not have happened and the practice of corporate social responsibility in the hemisphere would be a few steps back.

The rest of the CSR Americas story is telling. After organizing the conference, Canada lacked the resources and institutional connection to the Americas to leave a "Canadian" imprint on the event. Worse, Canada all but disappeared from the event the next and subsequent years. A strong U.S., Brazilian and Latin American presence has made this event continue to grow in importance, yet Canada is absent. The current government is re-discovering CSR's importance and is moving to build support to do more, especially in the Americas. Yet, the region has already made great strides without Canada and the real question is whether Canada has more to learn than what it can contribute.

From the promotion of democracy to trade to cutting edge development work in areas such as the protection of the disabled, Canada perpetually seems to be trying to catch up.

The current government has done much to close some of this ground. The appointment of a Minister for the Americas, well-liked and respected in the region, is hugely important and a significant asset. But he faces the twin burdens of overcoming suspicion of seriousness based on Canada's past history and the lack of something new and compelling from Canada toward the hemisphere.

There is the perception, perhaps unfair, among academics, business leaders, NGOs, and multilateral officials in the region and outside of Ottawa that Canada's current engagement is yet another government again discovering the obvious – the hemisphere is our home and is important.

Polling by FOCAL, DFAIT and others confirms that Canadians instinctively feel the Americas are important—in FOCAL's polling it is more so than China, India or Afghanistan. Worries over transnational crime within the hemisphere have edged out concern about nuclear missiles from Russia and trade with our neighbors is seen as a safer and more sane venture than elsewhere. What has been lacking is a way to capture the *zeitgeist* and make it transformative. We need to have a big idea or, at the very least, the resources for public diplomacy to better sell all that we are doing.

Serious foreign policy cannot be done on the cheap. Increased development spending in Haiti and the Caribbean will not be seen as a substitute for rigorous diplomatic engagement. We also lack the funding for the institutional connections that allow countries to remain connected should governments lose focus. Engagement in Haiti and the Caribbean, as important as they are, does not create the perception that Canada is a serious actor amongst the rest of the hemisphere.

That the current government has not done more is not surprising: inability to devote significant resources to foreign policy is not surprising to see in any minority government. In fact, that we have gotten this much engagement in the hemisphere by a government so preoccupied with its own survival is no small achievement.

The simple reality is that, unless someone takes a hacksaw to the 49th parallel, Canada is not going anywhere; we are tied to this hemisphere.

Beyond this, the United States is becoming more Hispanic, with more Mexicans alone in the U.S. than there are Canadians in Canada. More Canadians are traveling and working in the region and more Latin Americans and Caribbeans are immigrating to Canada. Spanish is now the third most spoken language in Canada.

With these changes, eventually Canada will probably not need the government to take the lead. Until then strong government leadership is needed to ensure that we are able to seize the opportunities and defend the economic, security and political interests that come with being part of this hemisphere and grow more important each day.

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