

# EMBASSY

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NEWS STORY

## Venezuela, Colombia Priorities Revealed

By Lee Berthiaume

Documents to Canada's ambassadors in Venezuela and Colombia have revealed a little more thinking on the Conservative government's decision to make re-engagement with the Americas a foreign policy priority.

When a Canadian ambassador or high commissioner is appointed, he or she is given a mandate letter that outlines the nature of their new assignment.

On Dec. 13, 2007, a mandate letter was issued to the new Canadian ambassador to Venezuela, Perry Calderwood, by the deputy ministers of foreign affairs and international trade, Len Edwards and Marie-Lucie Morin.

Obtained under Access to Information, the document, parts of which are blacked out, notes that North America and the Western Hemisphere are among the key priorities for Canada under Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

"[Mr. Harper] has committed Canada to show leadership in the region on three key priorities: promote our key values of freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law; advance our economic interests; and enhance regional security."

Canada's relationship, at least publicly, with Venezuela has been largely non-existent. However, in the mandate letter, Mr. Calderwood is told that "Canada's presence in Venezuela is increasingly important to our broader strategic interests."

Exactly what those "strategic interests" are is unclear, possibly because the relevant sections are blacked out.

Canada had about \$112 billion in direct investment in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2007, third only to North America (\$231 billion) and Europe (\$135 billion), according to the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, bolstered by surging oil prices, has been pushing a populist style of government that is considered a threat by some, including the United States, in part because other countries in the region are following suit.

Carlo Dade, executive director of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL), says Mr. Chavez's represents a potentially destabilizing influence in Latin America, and in the Caribbean in particular.

"The ability to simply buy influence with oil and things like that is troublesome," he said. "Given our involvement and engagement in the Caribbean, I think it would have to be an issue of some, maybe not necessarily concern, but it's something you would have to watch and follow and incorporate as you consider how to engage in the Caribbean."

Mr. Dade described Canadian-Venezuelan relations as "very quiet"; the country received \$650,000 in aid in 2006-07, while Canadian investment totalled \$783 million.

Aside from his attempts to spread populism, Mr. Chavez's animosity towards the U.S. and his efforts to ally his country with such countries as Iran, Cuba and Russia, have also raised concerns.

However, Mr. Dade felt Canada "ain't got a dog in this fight and we need to stay out of it."

"Obviously condemn and worry about issues of democracy, fairness of elections, etcetera," he said, but Canada should not be "taking a really hard line."

### **Priorities in Colombia**

On June 24, 2005, Matthew Levin was appointed Canada's ambassador to Colombia. At the time, a Liberal government was in power and its priorities were more focused on Africa than Latin America.

Since the Conservatives have come into power, however, and Latin America has been identified as a priority region, Colombia has emerged as a major country of interest, capped by the successful conclusion of free trade negotiations in June.

Every fiscal year, heads of mission are given a performance management agreement setting down his or her goals for the next 12 months, and how success will be measured.

According to Mr. Levin's performance management agreement for April 1, 2007 to March 31, 2008, the ambassador was to strengthen Canada's support for Colombia's efforts to promote peace and human rights, "with focus on concrete results in support of Canadian values and interests."

To that end, Mr. Levin (who was replaced by Geneviève des Rivières in September) was to oversee the design and implementation of an expanded Global Peace and Security

Fund program. Then-foreign affairs minister Maxime Bernier announced in February Canada would be contributing \$6 million through the fund to support peace efforts, the protection of victims' rights, and the fight against impunity in Colombia.

Mr. Levin was also ordered to advance Canadian leadership in protecting children and youth affected by conflict and violence and to raise awareness of Canadian peace-building and human rights efforts.

Another goal for the ambassador was to strengthen commercial relations between the two countries, support the then-ongoing free trade talks, and launch negotiations on a double-taxation agreement.

While one of the measurements for this objective is blacked out, another states that Mr. Levin is to "Sustain Canadian profile and engagement and increased Canadian investment in priority sectors of oil and gas and mining, and promote opportunities in new sectors." Canada currently has about \$6 billion in direct investment in Colombia, primarily in oil, gas and mining.

Jean Symes, program manager at the civil society group Inter Pares, said Mr. Levin was "very strong on promoting peace and human rights, and did a lot of work around peacebuilding and for that he should be congratulated."

However, she expressed concern that Canada's major economic priority in Colombia, which is still considered a conflict zone, is expanding investment in the oil, gas and mining sectors.

"If you're a company, you're going in and you don't actually necessarily know the history of, for instance, the land that you're starting to mine on," Ms. Symes said

Millions of Colombians have been displaced by violence, while paramilitaries and rebel groups are said to control large tracts of arable land, and even more non-arable land, which they've gained through coercion, threats of violence and other means.

"There's a fair bit of land that could be land that mining companies go in and get the concession from and have agreements with the owners on paper, but actually that land was stolen," Ms. Symes said. "And once that land that has been stolen from people is used for mining, well those people are never going to be able to get it back."

Ms. Symes is currently conducting a study of the effects of Canadian mining activities in Colombia, and said she is not surprised a major priority for Canada's engagement is promotion of oil, gas and mining investment.

"Canadian investment has been going into Latin America extremely aggressively over the past 10 years," she said. "It doesn't surprise me because Canada, for about a decade now, Canadian companies and the Canadian government, the previous government as well as this one, has been promoting Canadian mining. This current government has been

especially enthusiastic about promoting mining and oil."

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