

# Seventy Years Of Mexican-Canadian Relations A Vision for the Future

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Following an Arabic proverb that says, “For every glance behind us, we have to look twice to the future,” after 70 years it is imperative that Mexico and Canada take advantage of the opportunity to reflect on the journey we have taken together, pondering the achievements and difficulties that undoubtedly point to important commonalities between our two nations stemming from their vocation for peace and cooperation.

While the facts tell us that the economy and trade have been the areas that have concentrated our attention in our relations, from my perspective, the negotiations and entry into effect of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) two decades ago show that the ties between us have become more complex because of the influence and visibility of new actors in the public sphere. These, together with government and business, have contributed since then to stimulating interaction in key areas like the academy and civil society organizations, not to mention the interaction among sub-national governments.

Allow me to mention that I am a hopeless optimist. This comes of working day to day with young people at Mexico’s National Autonomous University, the largest public university in the country, with more than 300 000 students. This contact forces me to recognize the diligent critics of our bilateral relationship when they say that it has lost dynamism and to emphasize that the framework of institutional cooperation must go much further.

My comments will focus on looking at specific issues that illustrate a positive alliance between Mexico and Canada, as well as others that I think we should pay more attention to, regardless of any differences or those thrust upon us by the asymmetry in our development levels and the demographic contrasts between our countries.



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In today’s world, both our countries are known for their opposition to protectionism, their support for free trade, and particularly for their dedication to strengthening democratic governance. From this flows, among other things, the importance our respective governments give to access to information, and that we agree on the need to work together on issues of security and justice, to promote development, human rights, the protection of personal data, and cultural and educational exchange in order to achieve multilateral cooperation.

Based on constructive dialogue, it is important that all of us who are directly involved in strengthening relations between Mexico and Canada should be capable of “de-familiarizing the familiar and making familiar what is unknown,” as the Polish scholar Zygmunt Bauman says. This means that, beyond agreements about the economy, trade, and politics,

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deepening our social and cultural interaction is indispensable for continuing to cultivate trust between our nations.

The 2010-2012 Mexico-Canada Joint Action Plan has emphasized sustainable development of our economies as the model for fostering competitiveness (agribusiness, human capital, trade, investment and innovation, energy, the environment, and labor mobility). But clearly, given the relevance for improving the well-being of the population of both countries, issues like public health and gender equality should be pushed forward through many more actions than those carried out until now.

In this vein, Canada's collaboration can be particularly significant in helping to close the gender gap in Mexico. Just as an illustration, we should note that Canada occupied eleventh place on the 2012 Human Development Index and Mexico, sixty-first. In terms of the Gender Inequality Index, Canada is in eighteenth place and Mexico, seventy-second.<sup>1</sup> Our respective teen fertility rates were 11.3 for Canada and 65.5 for Mexico. In 2012, Canada's legislature included 28 women and Mexico's, 36. In terms of women in the work force, by 2011, almost 62 out of every 100 Canadian women had a job outside the home and in Mexico, that number was 44.3.

I would like to insert a parenthetical comment here: opening the way for promoting the study of Canada in Mexico has been a rocky, but highly gratifying road. At the Center for Research on North America, we have never ceased our efforts to broaden and strengthen our research projects about Canada, recognizing their structural weaknesses 19 years ago when we began. We have designed mechanisms to systematically evaluate our progress and have managed to carry out 25 academic activities over the last four years linked to initiatives that include the study of Canada as one of their crosscutting themes.

We came to understand how important our relationship with Canada is, and we are convinced that only with a long-term vision will the seed we have planted bloom.

The emphasis we have put on the study of Canada includes research, teaching, and dissemination. This has been thanks to several factors, among them our successful efforts to obtain funds from the Canadian government through the Development Program Grant during 2010 and 2011, which gave us the opportunity to enjoy the participation of several renowned Canadian academics. Another factor is the trust placed in us by the former Canadian ambassador to Mexico, Guillermo E. Rishchynski, and current Ambassador Sara Hradecky, who have participated directly in some of our ac-

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tivities. The CISAN was also favored with the collaboration of the film-maker, the Honorable Jean-Daniel Lafond, who headed the forum "The Importance of Art and Diversity in Contemporary Society," co-organized with the Canadian Embassy in late 2009 in the framework of the official visit to Mexico of then-Governor General Michaëlle Jean.

Without any doubt, allowing our audience of professors and students to get to know these public figures has been very stimulating both for them and for all of us.

Based on our experience, we have been able to verify that, despite its contradictions, NAFTA sparked the interest of Mexico's researchers, professors, and students in learning more and thinking more about Canada in the framework of the agreement. This was decisive in multiplying intellectual exchanges with our Canadian peers, who felt the same way. It is in this context that, with the support of the Canadian Embassy, our institution created the Margaret Atwood and Gabriëlle Roy Chair in Canadian Cultural Studies. The chair has created a space of academic excellence to foster high-level teaching and interdisciplinary research, where literary issues and reflection about the transcendence of translation have been the outstanding notes. However, the sharpening of today's economic crisis has surprised us with Canada's distancing itself from the model of cultural diplomacy that used to characterize it. We think that both our governments should go back to that model as one of the strategic axes for re-launching our bilateral relationship.

Because culture includes language, for the new generations of Mexicans, learning English is one of our educational system's priorities, not only because of its importance in today's knowledge society, but also because speaking it will strengthen our ability to interact with our northern neighbors. Promoting the learning of Spanish based on our geographical proximity, together with the growing number of Spanish-speaking immigrants in Canada, gives us a glimpse of the horizons for bridging the language gap.

In a global world characterized by increasing insecurity, Mexico and Canada are forced to face the challenge of deepening our ties in the search of mutually beneficial answers.

It is here that it is essential to bolster education as a key for building the future. Today, Canada is one of the three main destinations for Mexican tertiary-level students, after the United States and Spain.

Let us not forget, however, that motivating young people is no simple task. That is why we should continually ask ourselves what capacities we must reinforce in teachers and professors at the secondary and tertiary level so that the young people of Mexico and Canada can grow to truly know each other. What tools do we already have to do this, and what others should we create together?

If we take into account that the dynamics of our era are stamped with the velocity of events, of the visual media, and with how we can not only move from place to place, but even communicate instantaneously, using a kind of micro-language (Twitter), we have to recognize that we are experiencing a scientific-technological and cultural revolution. Some thinkers today are already warning that the new generations tend to disregard the past, defining themselves mainly by the road they want to take, but without asking themselves where they came from and how it is they arrived where they are.

From this stems the importance of returning to the historical significance of our bilateral relationship, beyond these seven decades, taking the moment to propose that this task be carried out by a bi-national research team. With more joint educational, research, and dissemination projects, we will contribute to creating synergies among the new generations. Even though they come from different cultural milieus, they will be nourished through their interaction to move toward building empathy.

Reclaiming this shared history, regardless of its length, and knowing the history of the “other” situates us at the center of humanist thought. As a result, those of us who have the good fortune of being able to contribute to the formative education of young people interested in the study of international relations in general and, in particular, in the ties between Mexico and Canada, have the obligation to fight ignorance of the past, since it is not only the result of a lack

of information, but of indifference. This makes it essential that we move ahead toward a future that must be better than what we have known before.

Mexico and Canada undoubtedly have unfinished business in terms of exploring new formulas and stepping up our commitments, forging a strategy so that the new generations of both countries can learn about the “other” and understand each other better. More scholarships for students or new internship programs will always be important, but never enough to solve the imbalances between the two countries if they are not accompanied by policies that encourage a larger number of young Canadians to go to study in Mexico and guarantee that Mexican or Canadian talent can swell the ranks of the human capital Mexico needs for its development.

Nevertheless any plan for continuing to positively broaden our relationship has to take into account the United States, since geography, trade, and human mobility have accelerated our interdependence in many ways, many of which are irreversible. However, it is worthwhile underlining the premise that the relationship that is celebrating its seventh decade has one fundamental attribute in this context: the boon of having arisen without being darkened by the shadows of power and domination of one over the other, or the shadows of resentment or discrimination.

Mexicans and Canadians share common values like hard work and solidarity and are foreordained by our proximity to be unable to turn our backs to each other.

Congratulations are in order because Mexico and Canada find themselves at a decisive moment to be able to deepen relations in the framework of such a significant anniversary. Regardless of the agreements that the leaders of both countries, Enrique Peña Nieto and Stephen Harper come to, Canadian and Mexican societies must demand firm steps forward toward the construction of prosperity. And we must also not forget, as Willy Brandt said, that “international cooperation is too important to leave it exclusively in the hands of governments.” **MM**

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Table 4: Gender Inequality Index, UNDP, <https://data.undp.org/data-set/Table-4-Gender-Inequality-Index/pq34-nwq7>, accessed February 12, 2014.