

Mexico and Canada

The Internationalization of Domestic Policies

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Relations between Mexico and Canada, for 45 years characterized by “friendly indifference,” have made an impressive breakthrough in the 1990s. If previously the common fields of interest between the two countries were few and unimportant, they are now numerous and of capital importance for their respective foreign policies.¹

The formalization of this bilateral relation in the diplomatic and business spheres brought with it unexpected effects. Civil society, whether nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or ordinary citizens, did not expect to be invited to this rapprochement and on its own accord created bridges and ties between the two countries.

This official coming together has resulted in what could be called “the internationalization of Mexican and Canadian domestic policies.” What happens in Mexico is increasingly important for Canadians and vice versa; the United States is used as an alternative terrain for domestic political debate.

This phenomenon began seven years ago, with the discussion of the advisability of establishing a free trade agreement that would link up the economies of both countries and that of their common neighbor, the United States. Opponents of free

trade discovered the advantages of working together to attempt to break the consensus achieved at the official negotiating table. Of course, we now know that they were unable to break it, but their work together resulted in permanent organizations and coalitions.

Umbrella organizations opposed to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) were, in Canada, the Action Canada Network (ACN), and in Mexico, the Mexican Action Network on Free Trade (RMALC). In point of fact, the organization of the Mexican network was inspired by its Canadian counterpart. In Canada, the ACN was supported by labor confederations, mainly the Canadian Labor Congress (CLC), nongovernmental organizations and even a political party, the New Democratic Party. In Mexico, the RMALC was supported by a similar coalition of independent unions, mainly the Authentic Labor Front (FAT), nongovernmental organizations and a political party, the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). Representatives of the two coalitions made numerous visits to the other country to disseminate information about the reasons behind their opposition to the agreement and to exchange experiences about their strategies for opposing it.

This bilateral solidarity work, which at times became trilateral in scope, has been widely studied and documented.²

Another important participant in this internationalization of domestic policies

has been the press. If in the not too distant past, coverage concerning Canada in Mexico was scarce and deficient, it is now much more in depth. Previously news coverage was almost exclusively focused on trade, but now includes topics involving social issues, domestic policies, culture, etc. The same can be said of coverage concerning Mexico in Canada. Previously, Mexico was reported in the Canadian media only when catastrophes or scandals occurred. Today, the quantity and quality of articles, television programs and editorials on Mexico has notably increased. More journalists are sent to Mexico permanently as correspondents or to do specific stories; they use more varied informational sources and their interpretations are sounder. The Canadian public interested in Mexico today is larger, better informed and more demanding in terms of fair treatment in the news.

The process of Mexican and Canadian society growing closer has paralleled the development of electronic communication technologies through the Internet and electronic mail. Just a few years ago it was difficult and costly to obtain information about Canada in Mexico and vice versa. Now, with a simple personal computer hook-up to Internet, an almost unlimited amount of information about the other country is obtainable and direct communication can be established with flesh-and-blood people in real time. This communication is horizontal and interactive and undoubtedly has

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avored ordinary citizens of both countries getting to know each other.

The result of all this is growing interest in each country in what happens in the other. In Mexico, the October 1995 Canadian referendum on Quebec sovereignty, which almost led to a reformulation of that province's relations with the rest of the country, was closely followed. In Canada, there was equal interest in the Chiapas events from the beginning of the Zapatista insurrection in January 1994. Several days after the uprising began, two Canadian commissions traveled to the conflict area. One of them was comprised of representatives of the International Center for Hu-

ing drastic cutbacks in its 1996 and 1997 provincial budget which forced the closure of many of its representative offices abroad, the Mexico office not only stayed open, but maintained its status as "General Office" and not a minor commercial representation office or one dealing with immigration questions. For its part, the Canadian government has repeatedly expressed its confidence in the Mexican government's ability to resolve the Chiapas conflict.

Undoubtedly in this parallel effort at prudence, the Canadian government has the more difficult task, due to its traditional foreign policy. Since the end of World War II, Canada has gained a reputation as

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man Rights and Democratic Development—an organization created and financed by the Canadian Parliament—and the Assembly of First Nations, the main indigenous organization in Canada.³ The other commission was made up of representatives of five Canadian churches.⁴ Both expressed critical opinions of Mexican government and army activities in the region.

Both the Canadian and Mexican governments have made sure these questions of domestic politics do not influence the definition of the bilateral agenda. In addition, the Mexican government has systematically avoided ceding to the Quebec government's insistence on having a similar status to that of Canada in its relations with Mexico. Recognition by Mexico is an important element in Quebec's international strategy. Proof of this is that follow-

a mediator par excellence in resolving conflicts throughout the world, either through participating in peace negotiations or by sending personnel to supervise truces and agreements between the contending sides. The very idea of "maintaining the peace" is a Canadian invention, which moreover won its promoter, then-Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Lester Bowles, a Nobel Peace Prize. Canada has participated in all missions of this nature sponsored by the United Nations; therefore, it is not strange for many Canadians to consider their country's role in the world as one of the elements of their own identity.

Therefore, broad sectors of domestic public opinion are pressuring the Canadian government to adopt an active role promoting human rights worldwide. Given the increasing importance of

Mexico among the Canadian public, it is easy to understand why they are demanding greater activism from Ottawa in its relations with Mexico.

This is the meaning of important Canadian delegations being sent to observe the 1994 and 1997 Mexican elections, missions with Canadian government backing.⁵ Since then, close cooperation has developed between Mexico's Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) and its Canadian counterpart, Elections Canada. In 1996, the two agencies formalized their exchanges through the adoption of a memorandum of understanding for electoral cooperation.

Recently a chance incident again placed Mexico on the front pages of the Canadian press. On April 20, 1998, two young Canadians, Julie Marquette and Sarah Mireille Baillargeon, were expelled from Mexico, accused of involvement in domestic political affairs. Upon arriving in Canada, the two women made statements to the effect that the Mexican government does not want witnesses to what is happening in Chiapas, and that the Canadian government should adopt a more active approach in the defense of human rights in Mexico. The issue was debated in the Canadian parliament, where the opposition questioned the government's policy toward Mexico.⁶ From the floor, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien indicated that he had discussed the matter with President Ernesto Zedillo, offering to send a parliamentary delegation to gather evidence on the Chiapas situation, investigate the Acteal events⁷ and better inform the Canadian government on these issues. Days later the Mexican government agreed to the request.

As a result, from May 8 to 11, 1998,⁸ Mexico was visited by a multipartisan delegation of five members of parliament:

Jacques Saada, who headed the mission, and David Ifody, both of the governing Liberal Party;⁹ Diane St. Jacques, of the Conservative Party; Dick Proctor, of the New Democratic Party; and Daniel Turp, of the Quebec Bloc. During a brief, four-day visit with a tight schedule drawn up by the Canadian Embassy in Mexico, the five parliamentarians met with academic specialists, government officials—including Chiapas Governor Roberto Albores and Interior Minister Francisco Labastida—leaders of NGOs, the Coadjutor Bishop of Chiapas, Raúl Vera López, representatives of the main political parties, etc. They visited the conflict zone, refugee camps and hospitals that provide care for victims of violence. In other words, they were able to hear the opinions of different participants in the conflict, with the notable exceptions of representatives of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) and Bishop Samuel Ruiz.

Four of the five parliamentarians were present at the press conference the delegation held in the Canadian Embassy in Mexico at the end of their visit (Turp returned to Canada before the meeting with the press).¹⁰ The Liberal Party legislators used the bulk of the time available; the other two MPs made only brief and sporadic contributions. The delegation's conclusions were cautious and nuanced, but reflected the anxiety Chiapas is experiencing (fear, mistrust, poverty, etc.). They indicated that the military's presence is controversial because the government argues that soldiers are stationed there to protect the population, but residents fear them and see them as a source of tension. The paramilitary groups in the region, Proctor said, endanger the peace more than the troops. Saada said that the human rights violations the dele-

gation witnessed contravene the convictions upheld by Canada and that the Achteal events had not been adequately investigated nor the guilty parties punished. He added that there is distrust about the usefulness of the negotiations because the government has not complied with previous agreements.

The delegation members did not wish to comment on the recent events leading to the deportation of foreigners from Mexico. However, they obtained a promise from the Ministry of the Interior that the self-declared autonomous municipalities would not be forcibly dismantled—as long as they do not violate human rights and no new ones are set up—because, they said,

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for the Minister the use of force is not a solution. They stated that they were returning to Canada with a sad account of the events and a message of hope that the government's promises of negotiation and not to use force will be complied with.

Questioned by reporters concerning the concrete measures that they will adopt, the parliamentarians expressed divergent opinions. Liberal Party member Jacques Saada felt that their role was to open the road to dialogue, an opinion backed by Conservative Diane St. Jacques. Saada mentioned that an agreement between Canada and Mexico has been in effect since 1996 to improve the living conditions of their respective indigenous communities, expressing the hope that this accord will be strengthened. David Ifody offered the view that Ottawa's experience

in resolving its differences with the indigenous communities through dialogue could be useful, and therefore suggested that the Canadian government's advisors for indigenous issues could "in a respectful manner" advise the Mexican people in formulating policy on Chiapas.

New Democratic Party MP Dick Proctor, in expressing the view that among friends and partners one should speak frankly, called for toughening Canadian policy toward Mexico if the promises of reconciliation are not concretized. He said that in that event, commercial sanctions should be applied because "the Canadian government should be honest in its poli-

cies toward Mexico." This view was nuanced by his three colleagues. Saada repeated the Canadian government's official position that the best way to encourage human rights in Mexico is by increasing trade to foster prosperity. He added, however, that Canada has the right to monitor the behavior of its trade partners to demand respect for human rights and guarantee that the wealth created by trade effectively reach all citizens. Ifody added that with commercial embargoes, those who suffer most are the people, not the governments, and therefore such measures can be counterproductive for the objectives sought. He indicated that the delegation invited Emilio Rabasa, Mexican government peace commissioner, to explain the Mexican government's position to the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Commons. Diane

St. Jacques argued that trade sanctions are dangerous, since they can place the country in question in a more critical position.

Finally, Saada concluded that the only solution is to rebuild bridges between civil society and the government, since although the Canadian MPs want to help, resolving the Chiapas problem is the exclusive responsibility of Mexico's government and civil society.

In conclusion, the Canadian government is subject to dual pressure, on the one hand from its people, who demand that it play a more active role in promoting human rights in Mexico, and on the other, for respect for the principle of non-intervention proclaimed by the Mexican government. The various political currents in Canada perceive the conflict differently and extrapolate their

divergences when discussing the concrete measures to be adopted. It remains to be seen which of these tendencies will win out and what the results will be. **MM**

NOTES

¹ See Carlos Rico, "Mexico-Canada: A Growing Relationship," in *Voices of Mexico* no. 45 (October-December 1998), pp. 99-101.

² See Jeffrey Ayres, *Defying Conventional Wisdom: Political Movements and Popular Contention against North American Free Trade* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998); Leslie Howard, "Transnational Civil Society, Neoliberal Hegemony, and Resistance: The Role of Mexican-Canadian Civil Linkages," paper presented at the congress of the Canadian Association for Mexican Studies, Vancouver, March 1998. Also see two papers presented at the biennial congress of the Association for Canadian Studies in the United States, Minneapolis, November 1997: Scott Littlehale, "Batling over the Borders of Power: Strategic Responses of Canadian Trade Union Organizations to the FTA" and Ian Robinson "Neoliberal Integration and Labour Movement Power in Canada and the United States: A Three Dimensional Analysis."

³ This commission's report was published as *L'Insurrection d'un peuple oublié* (Montreal: Centre International des

Droits de la Personne et du Développement Démocratique, January 1994).

⁴ Anne Marie Mergier, "Condenar los abusos en Chiapas y condicionar el TLC, piden a Canadá," in *Proceso*, 24 January 1994, pp. 59-63.

⁵ The monitoring of the 1994 elections was critically reported in Teresa Healy, ed., *Canadian NGO/Church-Labour/Women's Delegation. International Visitors/Civil Alliance Observation. 1994 Mexican Election Final Report* (November 1994, mimeographed).

⁶ Both the opinions of the young women deported as well as the debate in the House of Commons can be consulted on the Canadian parliament's Internet page: <http://www.parl.gc.ca/36/1/parlbus/chambus/house/debates>, for April 21, and May 6 and 14, 1998.

⁷ In December 1997, 45 persons were killed in this village with high power firearms by a paramilitary group, without the Chiapas state police or the Mexican army doing anything to prevent it.

⁸ "Canadians to Probe Massacre in Mexico" in *The Globe and Mail*, 7 May 1998.

⁹ Saada was also parliamentary secretary of Canada's then-Solicitor General Andy Scott; that is, Saada belongs to Chrétien's inner circle.

¹⁰ The author was present at the press conference. The information quoted here was transcribed directly from the tape recording of the event.

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**PODER Y DESVIACIONES:
 GÉNESIS DE UNA SOCIEDAD MESTIZA EN
 MESOAMÉRICA**
 GEORGES BAUDOT (COORD.)

Entre la conquista y la independencia de la América hispánica se extiende, durante tres siglos, un periodo decisivo para la formación —y la comprensión— de la América contemporánea. Después del choque inicial de civilizaciones se organiza, en medio de dificultades y contingencias, una comunidad compleja cuyas conductas familiares, religiosas y políticas oscilan entre la adaptación y la resistencia al nuevo orden colonial. Los cuatro capítulos que componen la obra ofrecen diversas apreciaciones del posicionamiento de las élites sociales amerindias e hispano-americanas con relación a la estructura estatal española, en sus componentes metropolitano y colonial. Según nuestros autores, las prácticas de los "vencedores" o los comportamientos de los "vencidos" son reflejo de las tensiones sociopolíticas que atraviesan la nueva sociedad mestiza en gestación.

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