

# Interview with Pierre Alarie, Canadian Ambassador to Mexico<sup>1</sup>

Leonardo Curzio\*

**Leonardo Curzio (LC):** What is the state of Mexican-Canadian relations?

**Ambassador Pierre Alarie (PA):** Excellent. The relationship, which goes beyond just the diplomatic sphere, is over 71 years old, and its quality and diversification is optimal. As you know, last October 19, we elected a new government, and Mr. Enrique Peña Nieto was the first foreign head of government to call the prime minister to congratulate him, so the relationship immediately began to renew itself.

**LC:** Mr. Ambassador, I was in Ottawa by chance when we were celebrating the 60 years of our bilateral relations. Then-President Vicente Fox's speech in Parliament was euphoric, showing our great proximity. Later, I was able to attend the celebration of the seventieth anniversary, although that was perhaps a little less euphoric. Taking that date as a reference, until the commemoration of the eightieth anniversary, do you think that Canadians and Mexicans, both partners in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and now also in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), see each other differently now?

**PA:** Yes, our new government has clearly stated that Mexico is of foremost importance for Canada. Today the continental relationship with the United States and Mexico is at the center of everything we're going to do in matters of diplomatic and international relations. I feel that new life has been breathed into this relationship, let's say, although it is true that we had a few difficult years recently.

**LC:** A bit cold, don't you think?

**PA:** Cold. Yes, I agree. And I'd like to touch on the issue of the visa, a limitation in our bilateral relations, we have to say



openly. Justin Trudeau, our new prime minister, announced that we're going to eliminate that requirement, and we're working together with the Mexican government on a plan to do just that.

**LC:** And in the future, we'll have something similar to what the Europeans have *vis-à-vis* the United States, won't we? They call it the ESTA, don't they?

**PA:** Yes, the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA). We're initiating that program March 15, but not with all countries because it's a pilot project, though eventually we will include everyone. We have to be very clear about this: this is not an instrument we're going to impose on the Mexicans, but all countries will have to go through this short two- or three-minute-long procedure on line.

**LC:** In effect, the imposition of the visa was an irritant; we can't get away from that. It also slowed down our stupendous cooperation in the flow of students and tourists. But beyond the visa issue, which we have talked about on several occasions, I have the impression that it affected the trilateral vision we had when we celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of our relations; that is, the project of turning the region of North America into the most competitive in the world, when

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we had the famous partnerships that included joint work by government, private sector, and universities. In other words, the idea that we were building a region was firmly established, Ambassador Alarie, and the impression I have now is that we have two very strong bilateral relationships: Canada and the United States and the United States and Mexico. On key issues like security, drug trafficking, etc., we each come to understandings with the United States.

So, from a region made up of three countries, we have turned into two strong bilateral relationships. The heart of the issue is to know if, at the end of the day, the three countries (Canada, the United States, and Mexico), despite what Donald Trump might say, are still on the same road, or, Mr. Ambassador, if each pair will go off on their own.

**PA:** No, no; I think you're right, Leonardo: we are coming back to a relationship of three. A few weeks ago we held a meeting of the foreign ministers of Canada, the United States, and Mexico in Quebec, and they got along very well. This doesn't mean we can't also have very good relations between two of the three parties. Yes, it is true that we have two bilateral relationships, but we also have a continent-wide vision again with regard to climate change, the use of clean fuels, and in terms of security.

**LC:** So that means that the Canada we have always known is on its way back...

**PA:** Absolutely. As Prime Minister Trudeau said, "We're back."

**LC:** Which makes us all happy. Explain something to me, if you would. If there are three of us and we're immersed in a process of reevaluating how much we depend on each other in matters of competitiveness and security, what are we doing with all the guest participants in the TPP? Our family seems to have grown, Mr. Ambassador. How are we going to harmonize all of this?

**PA:** The truth is that we just signed the TPP with Mexico in New Zealand. Obviously, the ratification process is a challenge for all of us, including Canada. We'll have to have an open, very democratic debate in the Canadian Parliament. I know that the same thing is going to happen here in the Senate. And another pertinent question is what the United States is going to do. Because, naturally, they're at the center of the TPP and it's an electoral year for them. We'll have to see how

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they're going to ratify the TPP. Naturally, Canada firmly believes in free trade, and obviously the debate on this issue in Parliament is going to be very important, but we're already there together with Mexico.

In addition to the TPP negotiations, Mexico and Canada are collaborating vigorously in the automobile sector; this is reflected in some chapters of NAFTA. We work together very well.

**LC:** In the political sphere, how are bilateral relations moving ahead now? You were saying that President Peña Nieto called Trudeau to congratulate him. We should remember that in 2005, the three leaders of North America signed the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPP), which, among other things, stipulates that Canada's prime minister and the presidents of Mexico and the United States will meet once a year. That hasn't happened. I would ask you, is it worthwhile for them to meet? Is there a date set? I understand that Canada is now the country responsible for calling for the meeting.

**PA:** Of course, relations have intensified after President Peña Nieto's call to Trudeau on election night. They also met up in Turkey at the G-20 meeting and after the APEC meeting in Manila. Our foreign ministers also met three times, in Manila, Paris, and Quebec, and Pedro Joaquín Coldwell has been to Canada twice in the last two months. Minister of Agriculture José Calzada has visited, and Ministers [of the Economy] Guajardo and [of the Environment and Natural Resources] Pacchiano will make a trip in a month. So, there *are* more intense relations; they have intensified on a high level.

And, yes, the leaders' meeting is worthwhile. Clearly, 2015 was not a very favorable year because of the long [Canadian] electoral campaign, and that's why we haven't held it yet. Since the Quebec meeting of Secretary John Kerry, Minister Claudia Ruiz Massieu, and Minister Stephan Dion, we have been thinking that they should meet perhaps this year in the United States, next year in Canada because it will be the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Canadian Confederation, and in 2018 in Mexico. So, the intention exists at the highest level for the leaders to meet.

**LC:** Tell us what the priorities are for the Canadian ambassador in Mexico with regard to trade, in the cultural sphere, and for consolidating political dialogue.

**PA:** I think trade relations are extremely important; we already do Can\$36 billion in trade. Mexico and Canada are each other's third trade partner worldwide, so this is a fundamental aspect of our relations. That's why I'll focus my work on supporting Canadian exporters who also invest in Mexico. For example, almost 70 percent of Canadian investment is in mining.

**LC:** Although they've been having a rough time of it lately...

**PA:** Of course, there are limitations. In any relationship there are always problems. However, I think that in general relations are excellent, although we do have some challenges, for example, in the area of taxes, access, right-of-way, just to name a few. Another is the gas pipeline that we're building. Nevertheless, generally speaking the relationship is excellent. Two million Canadians visit Mexico every year. Considering that Canada has 35 million inhabitants, this means that 6 percent of our population vacations in Mexico every year. So, we have a very important consular program. Obviously, people have accidents; they lose their passports, etc. So that's when the consular program kicks in in Mexico. But we also want to make ourselves over and make Canada more attractive for Mexicans, who we want to visit us more. We received 200 000 Mexican visitors in 2015 alone.

**LC:** And before the visa requirement, how many went?

**PA:** More or less the same number. It has taken us eight or nine years to return to the same level. It was a very irritating issue, as I mentioned, but I also think—and it has to be said—that since the slight fall in the Canadian dollar and the Mexican peso *vis-à-vis* the U.S. dollar, Canada is very attractive for Mexicans. So, I supposed that once we eliminate the visa requirement...

**LC:** Has the red tape become more flexible or is it still very complicated?

**PA:** It's faster now. The process takes very little time. We have around a 95-percent acceptance rate and you get your visa in four or five days. Also, it's for multiple entries and lasts several years.

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**LC:** What can you tell us about students? This was thought to be very beneficial for building North America and for better understanding between Canadians and Mexicans. There were those who were going to study high school and also an important number—though quite a bit smaller—of university students. Are you also looking at this issue? Are you working on it, Mr. Ambassador?

**PA:** Yes, we're pushing this forward very rapidly. It's a priority for our government. Every year, 15 000 Mexican students go to study in Canada.

**LC:** It's a big educational system.

**PA:** With a very high level and great quality.

**LC:** You learn a lot of things. Of course, I'm not going to tell you my family business, but in Canada, you even learn about your way of living together, about community work, about taking others into account, things that young Mexican men and women have not experienced or cultivated by a certain age. Lots can be learned from the way Canadians get along.

**PA:** Yes, of course. You know that Canada is a multicultural country. We have to develop high levels of tolerance and understanding of other people. That's part of the curriculum in all Canadian schools.

**LC:** Ambassador Alarie, I want to thank you for this interview, and I must add that it's great news for the international community that the Canadians are back.

**PA:** Thank you very much. **MM**

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This interview was broadcast on Mexico City's *Enfoque Noticias* radio program, February 19, 2016.