

Desperation, Ambitions, and Challenges Mexico and Canada in the Trump Era

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TRUMP'S VICTORY AMONG MEXICO'S GOVERNING CLASS

On November 8, 2016, we witnessed in real time one of the most interesting events of recent history: the victory of Donald Trump. Around midnight, on all the world's news programs, the U.S. electoral map was turning a Republican red, sweeping aside the tremulous blue of the Democrats and their failed candidate.

The media immediately began to disseminate post-truth neologisms in a pitiful attempt to offer an explanation of the unexplainable: How was the traditional wisdom of the U.S. political class pushed aside by the unfettered emotions of the masses?¹ Those same masses who, it should be added, in frank rebellion, dealt a heavy blow to the paradigms of the U.S. political oligarchies and —why not add?— those of a large part of the world.

One of the issues that worked best for Donald Trump for questioning the establishment was free trade, and more specifically, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), when he called it the worst agreement his country ever signed.

That position immediately caused collateral damage among the Mexican governing elite, which, injected since the 1980s with the steroids of liberal rhetoric spouted by their young economists, graduates of U.S. and British universities, saw the very ideological pillars of the Mexican neoliberal model shaken.

The grave problem lay in the fact that this national technocracy had used NAFTA as the example of the good health of relations between Mexico and the United States, shoring up the idea that such complex levels of institutionality had been reached that their functioning was practically guaranteed by inertia. However, the fallacy faded away because the



North American free trade model had been harshly questioned by the new occupant of the White House, leaving NAFTA in a moment of redefinition with a prognosis of a patient in unstable condition in the short and medium term.

This deceptive certainty that free trade in North America was irreversible made the Mexican technocracy smug, satisfied with the country's macro-economic benefits, most of them obtained thanks to NAFTA. And it was precisely this attitude that allowed them to scornfully maintain extremely low wages for Mexican workers, who were offered up from the very start as the cheap labor of the “North American integration” project. To this adverse scenario should be added the current complex technification of production processes, something not completely favorable for workers, not only in Mexico, but also in the United States and Canada.

This irresponsible scornfulness and indifference on the part of the national technocracy and an important segment of Mexico's political class —not to mention a business community enthralled with its profits— were the cause of the fact that by late 2016, Mexico had the lowest minimum wage in all of Latin America, surpassed only by Cuba and Venezuela, while the IMF rated our country as the world's fifteenth largest economy and projected that it would be among the top ten by 2020.² These figures should be unacceptable and shameful for any government and society.

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For this reason, the alternative scenarios —along the lines of George Orwell's novel *1984*, in which his two protagonists' minds are broken and adapted to a stifling reality— seem to be the style adopted by the Trump administration to strike at Mexico and NAFTA: every time he needs to, he manipulates reality —or uses post-truth “facts”— to convince his unreflective supporters.

This strategy has put the Mexican government in a very bad position; completely devoid of any self-critical outlook, it stands naked before the public, since many of Trump's alternative scenarios ended up by creating disquiet and sparking questions among Mexico's population. This is particularly true with regard to how beneficial it had been for the country to bet national development on a single trade mechanism for more than two decades.

Therefore, its first response was to implement a dubious strategy of getting closer to Washington, with Minister of Foreign Relations Luis Videgaray as the main spokesperson.

THE EFFECTS FOR DIFFICULT MEXICO-CANADA RELATIONS AND IMMEDIATE CHALLENGES FOR THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT

Now, as all this was happening in Mexico, the Canadian government swiftly implemented a strategy of getting closer to Trump, based on the two countries' similar living standards, wages and their long history of bilateral accords of all kinds. In the context of these negotiations, it is easier to understand Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's comments that he was open and happy to renegotiate NAFTA as soon as the U.S. Americans wanted to.³

Considering this and the welcome Trump gave him in February 2017 during his visit to Washington, it is clear that the United States measures its two neighbors and partners differently. This is nothing to be surprised at: what is new is that it is only now that this double standard is made visible without friendly diplomatic gestures being brandished at the same time.

This entire scenario has created confusion, anxiety, and instability in the Mexican government. It sees that its Cana-

dian counterpart is suspicious, but at the same time practically begs for a strategic alliance with it to deal with the United States in the NAFTA negotiations. As I pointed out above, regardless of speeches and meetings between Videgaray and his Canadian counterpart Cristina Freeland, the Mexican government is aware that Canada enjoys a different status with Washington and that it will not endanger itself to defend Mexico. In fact, the prime minister has yet to make a clear statement about the construction of the wall between Mexico and the United States.

The Mexican government's big problem is not that Canada has taken too long to express its empathy or solidarity with Mexico, a country that it perceives as corrupt, violent, and unstable; what is truly serious has been the Mexican government's manifest inability to offer a positive image of the country internationally. Since the National Action Party (PAN) administration of Felipe Calderón, its image has been terrible because of the unmitigated corruption galloping through all spheres of national life.

As a result, the Mexican authorities have not found a way to get Canada to publically take a frank position with Mexico and with regard to the future of NAFTA: it is not clear what position Canada will take in the negotiations. By contrast, Mexico could be expected to demand clarity from its Canadian counterparts. It can and must do this given the fact that the two countries enjoy very active trade that puts each one among the other's three main partners, following only the United States and China.⁴

Taking this into account, everything seems to indicate that trilateralism is about to sleep the sleep of the just with regard to different regional issues, at least for a while. This is because it seems that that is the scenario that is most convincing right now for the U.S. and Canadian governments; and this is without saying that it is something the Canadians have been pushing for with Washington for years. One example of that are the Wikileaks cables released in 2011, in which U.S. officials reported to their government their Canadian counterparts' anger and frustration at the Mexican authorities being incorporated into discussions on North American issues.⁵

Therefore, Mexico has to make an effort to manage its losses at the lowest possible cost. Canada, meanwhile, will attempt to insure that its pragmatism and the express sympathy of the Trump administration not expose the profound contradiction of welcoming controversial projects like the conclusion of the Keystone XL pipeline, which seriously

compromises the image around climate change and the environment that Canada harvested after the Paris accords.

The issue of building oil pipelines in Canada is enormously polemical among environmentalist groups, academics, native communities, and students. Despite that, survey results announced in early March 2017 show that almost 50 percent of Canadians are in favor of building them, while 33 percent are opposed; in the United States, 50 percent of those polled are opposed.⁶ These numbers show that the traditional paradigm of the Canadian as a defender of the environment seems to be giving way to the pragmatist who puts more emphasis on his/her economic well-being. It might well be worthwhile to ask ourselves when this change took place in the collective imaginary of a large part of Canadian society. The answer seems to lie in the effects of nine years of government by former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, a conservative evangelist who, supported by his country's energy industry, promised to change the face of Canada when he finished his administration. He seems to have kept his word.

To this must be added, of course, the current Liberal prime minister's greater flexibility on energy issues. Justin Trudeau has not only welcomed the completion of the Keystone XL pipeline that Trump requested through his January 2017 executive order, but openly declared himself a supporter of this and other pipelines in his country. In fact, in a late-2016 interview with the British daily *The Guardian*, he justified his support for new pipeline projects in Canada and even said he was aware that the issue stirred up passions in his country. However, he added that if people did not have the opportunity of having a decent job to feed their children, they would not be concerned about protecting the air they breathed or the water they drank.⁷

Having said all this, we must recognize that the current scenario is not simple for the Trudeau government either. He will owe a debt for the rest of his term on environmental issues due to the exploitation of tar sands in Alberta and its terrible consequences for the environment. Added to that is the construction of pipelines to the Pacific, the Northern Gateway, that will import natural gas from Asia and export oil from Alberta's tar sands. This project includes the construction of 1 177 kilometers of gas and oil pipelines.⁸

In terms of domestic politics, the Trudeau government will have to deal with the non-compliance with the reforms to the Canada's polemical first-past-the-post electoral system; he committed himself to the idea that the 2015 general elections would be the last to be held under this format, but he

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has reneged on this promise, arguing that there is no national consensus around it. However, the fact is that it will not happen because it would mean a profound democratization of Canada's political system, which has operated for 150 years in favor of a duopoly of Liberals and Conservatives. That is, changing it would open up the doors to the New Democratic Party or even the Green Party broadening out their weight in Parliament because the voting system would be more equitable. And that would mean that those two parties would have more political assets for negotiating their agendas with the Liberal and Conservative elites that control Canada's Parliament.

Democratizing the Senate is undoubtedly yet another debt Trudeau will have to carry. These and other issues undoubtedly threaten the continuity of a majority Liberal government beyond the next general elections in 2019; and to that has to be added the Trump factor and his chameleon-like personality.

CHALLENGES FOR MEXICO VIS-À-VIS TRUMP'S ADMINISTRATION

The following is a list of some of the tasks Mexico should undertake given the current situation:

- 1) Reconsider the Mexican government's traditional submissiveness with regard to the United States around different bilateral issues, and dare to negotiate intelligently with Washington in order to sensitize the U.S. Americans to the need to maintain good relations. In this sense, Mexico could take advantage of the political moment created by the proposal to legalize consumption and limited cultivation of marijuana in Canada. This could be a very good bargaining chip for the Mexican authorities in their discussion with their U.S. counterparts;
- 2) Make public the negotiations with the United States, as well as the steps taken, eliminating the discretionary, hermetically-sealed style characteristic of Mexican Foreign Relations Minister Luis Videgaray;

- 3) Grow up and diversify our trade and cultural relations with the rest of the world, giving preference to the European Union, Great Britain, Asia (especially China), and, of course, the rest of Latin America;
- 4) Reestablish Mexico's strategic position in Central America, which has gradually been eroded;
- 5) Take actions to ensure jobs in the event of the forced return of deportees;
- 6) Stimulate the domestic market as the driving force of development;
- 7) Redirect productive investment to the countryside to recover food security; and,
- 8) Above all, take advantage of the overall moment today in which the hegemon is confused and its institutions are concentrated on containing an out-of-control executive branch.

And Mexican academia could

- 1) Reinforce now more than ever the study of English on all levels, but also foster the learning of other languages, such as Mandarin, German, or Korean, just to cite a few, at the level of higher and middle education in an organized, systematic way;
- 2) Reevaluate the way in which mathematics is taught, since it is a shame that thousands of students choose certain majors based on the fact that they do not include math courses;
- 3) Energize both public and private universities and institutions of higher learning, considering them the natural seedbeds of development and innovation;
- 4) Take advantage of the potential of being the country with the largest number of Spanish speakers to increase the voice and presence of Mexico in international forums; and,
- 5) Strengthen the use of Spanish in academia, putting to one side the trend established by those in power of giving priority to products written in English in order to achieve more economic benefits, both for institutions and for individuals.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

In the end, beyond the tragedy that the renegotiation of NAFTA has represented for Mexico's governing class, we

should reconsider the current moment as an unbeatable opportunity for the country to reinvent itself and take on new, more pro-active positions.

The government must assume its historic role, reposition itself, and design more equitable development programs that are less exclusionary for the most vulnerable sector of society. This is the only way it can put the brakes on its other great nightmare: what those in Mexico's circles of power point to with a flaming finger as "populism," considered a great threat to the country.

While recent governments and their hordes of technocrats have never stopped alerting the population to the risk of populism, neither have they dared to offer concrete proposals or even thought about the living conditions of the most vulnerable sectors of society. Those are the people that the class in power in Mexico have abused and cynically cheated for decades. ■■■

NOTES

¹ The *Oxford Dictionary* online defines "post-truth" as "Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief: 'in this era of post-truth politics, it's easy to cherry-pick data and come to whatever conclusion you desire. . . . Some commentators have observed that we are living in a post-truth age,'" <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/post-truth>, accessed April 28, 2017. [Editor's Note.]

² For more information, see International Monetary Fund, "Mexico and the IMF," <https://www.imf.org/external/country/MEX/index.htm>, accessed in March 2017.

³ Jesse Winter, "Trudeau 'Happy to Talk' about NAFTA with Trump," *thestar.com*, <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2016/11/10/trudeau-happy-to-talk-about-nafta-with-trump.html>.

⁴ Carlos A. Heredia, "La relación Canadá-México en una configuración latinoamericana y transpacífica," in Alex Bugailiskis and Andrés Rosental, eds., *México y Canadá, la agenda pendiente* (Mexico City: Comexi/CISAN, 2012), p. 220.

⁵ Steven Chase, "Sorry, Amigo: WikiLeaks Shows Canada Prefers Meeting U.S. without Mexico," *The Globe and Mail*, March 2, 2011, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/sorry-amigo-wikileaks-shows-canada-prefers-meeting-us-without-mexico/article569094/>.

⁶ Nicole Gibillini, BNN News, "Half of Canadians in Favour of Keystone XL Revival while U.S. Support Declines: Poll," <http://www.bnn.ca/half-of-canadians-in-favour-of-keystone-xl-revival-while-u-s-support-declines-poll-1.691251>.

⁷ Ashifa Kassam and Laurence Mathieu-Léger, "Justin Trudeau: Globalisation Isn't Working for Ordinary People," *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/15/justin-trudeau-interview-globalisation-climate-change-trump>.

⁸ For more about the Northern Gateway project, see <http://www.gatewayfacts.ca/>, accessed in March 2017.