

Looking south: Canada-Mexico Relations

For most Canadians, Mexico is little more than warm beaches and spicy food. But in the last two weeks, Mexican President Felipe Calderon Hinojosa was in Ottawa for a two-day state visit, and the Canadian International Council's report *Open Canada: A Global Positioning Strategy for a Networked Age* devoted an important chapter to Canada-Mexico relations. For once, Mexico is beginning to matter in Canada.

And so it should. It matters because it's big – already well over 110 million people and growing fast. It matters, as the CIC's *Open Canada* notes, because its per capita income is more than twice that of China and four times that of India. Canada already has a market for \$24 billion worth of goods and services there, making Mexico our fifth largest export market, and this, surely, can and will grow much larger. Moreover, Mexico is much nearer than the emerging Asian economies on which Canadian governments and businesses focus so much of their attention.

There is no denying that Mexico faces serious problems. Its vicious drug cartels sometimes seem on the verge of taking over some of Mexico's northern states, and the police seem all but incapable of bringing the heavily armed drug gangs under control. Calderon has sent in the national army, but so far the cartels are holding their own, continuing the campaign of murder that has killed 23,000 people in the last three years. And the cartels have their tendrils stretching far into the United States and, law enforcement officials are all too aware, into Canada's West Coast.

While Mexico is a democracy, it's not all that democratic. Calderon's government treats labour unions brutally, smashing workers' attempts to organize and to strike. So bad is the situation in the mining industry that, at the same time Calderon was in Ottawa, a high-powered international commission (with Jeffrey Sack, a distinguished Canadian labour lawyer as one of its members) was in Mexico investigating possible breaches of International Labour Organization conventions.

Then there is the visa issue. In July 2009, Immigration minister Jason Kenney imposed a visa requirement on visitors from Mexico. In 2009 alone, Mexican "visitors" filed some 9000 refugee claims in Canada, the vast majority of them bogus. Kenney declared that the cost of processing and investigating claims was \$400 million, and his visa requirement, admittedly a blunt instrument, demonstrably shut down the flow. Unfortunately, the visas also slashed legitimate Mexican business, student, and tourist trips by at least one hundred thousand visitors a year – Calderon says the drop was 40 percent – and reduced tourist spending by substantial amounts. While granting that Canada had the right to its own immigration and refugee rules, President Calderon nonetheless complained bitterly in his address to Parliament about the visas. The only way to fix this problem is for Parliament to pass Kenney's bill (he has the necessary votes) that would bar refugee claimants from designated "safe" countries from appealing when their applications are rejected. Whether Mexico qualifies as "safe" remains to be determined.

What is certain is that Mexico is not going away. The North American Free Trade Agreement ties the three North American nations together and facilitates their trade. Unfortunately, it also forces the United States to treat its neighbours with a spurious equality. The Mexican border sees thousands of Mexicans and Latinos flooding across every week despite the efforts of border patrols, the National Guard, and Arizona's draconian efforts to make individuals, read Hispanics, subject to identification checks. There is no similar flow of migrants across the U.S.'s northern border, but that boundary has been tightened nonetheless, much to the rage of truckers, tourists, and airline passengers.

But as the Canadian International Council's report properly and bluntly notes, "If the U.S. is already distracted by Mexico to the detriment of Canada, a Mexico beset by political and economic disorder will only make matters worse. That would really give Homeland Security a license to tighten the screws." In other words, it is very much in Canada's long term interests to help Mexico make the transition to a better, safer democracy. A democratic Mexico would not generate refugees desperately seeking entry to Canada; nor would it have so many of its poor trying frantically to enter the United States.

Quite properly, Canada's national interests require us to give priority to our own territory. But secondarily, our interests demand that we look next to our continent and hemisphere. Just as it is right for Canadians to seek to help Haiti, so too should Canada work to make Mexico into a stronger, democratic North American partner. That will help both Mexicans and Canadians.

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