

The Mulroney gamble

by David Leyton-Brown

Canadians have always been ambivalent about their relations with the United States. On the one hand they have sought the benefits of closer relations with their southern neighbor; on the other hand they have sought to preserve the autonomy and identity which might be threatened by such closer relations. Now Brian Mulroney believes that Canadians can have it both ways. He is staking the integrity of Canadian foreign policy and the future of his government on the conviction that pursuit of the closest possible personal and official relationship with the United States will yield for Canada greater economic and other benefits than a more distant or even adversarial posture, and that such a rapport poses no threat to Canada's independence or interests. As a result, the Mulroney government is taking an unprecedented series of actions to demonstrate the reality of its stance, and is gambling that impressive benefits will be received in return.

The essence of the Mulroney policy toward the United States is to give the United States "the benefit of the doubt" in international affairs, and to make good relations, or even "super relations" with the United States the cornerstone of Canada's foreign policy. Brian Mulroney has indeed given the benefit of the doubt to the United States on such international questions as the trade embargo against Nicaragua, even to the extent of publicly repudiating his own Secretary of State for External Affairs, Joe Clark, who had expressed regret that Canada was neither consulted nor informed prior to the imposition of the embargo. Super relations with the United States have been given concrete expression in such actions as the replacement of the Foreign Investment Review Agency (FIRA) by a new body called Investment Canada intended to encourage and attract foreign investment, the decision not to press the United States for quick action on acid rain until Canada has cleaned up its own pollution sources and could come to the table "with clean hands," and the commitment to replace those aspects of the National Energy Program (NEP) to which the United States government has objected.

Some critics have complained that these and other such measures amount to giving up major bargaining chips without receiving, or even asking for, US concessions in return. Brian Mulroney, however, is content that these actions are earnest demonstrations of Canada's good faith in pursuing closer relations with the United States, and in any event are themselves in Canada's interests.

A public embrace

All of these events have taken place amid a carefully constructed public relations campaign designed to symbolize the closeness of the two countries and their two leaders. This reached a peak at the Quebec City summit in March 1985, but has been reinforced in a host of speeches, international conferences and lower level meetings.

The central objective in this entire policy is a more beneficial economic relationship with the United States. At a time when Canada and the United States share the world's largest two-way trade flow, and Canada sells 75 percent of its exports to the United States, there are alarming prospects of protectionist restrictions in the United States. The Mulroney government is determined to make secure Canada's existing access to the United States market, and also to enhance that access. It sees closer relations with the United States as best suited to achieving those broad goals.

Historically, many Canadians have feared that closer economic cooperation with the United States, however attractive it might appear given the logic of geography and economics, would lead to an unhealthy over-reliance on a single market, and would erode Canada's policy-making autonomy in other areas, and possibly even lead to a loss of political independence and sovereignty. Mitchell Sharp, in enunciating his Third Option policy in the pages of this journal in 1972, flatly predicted that closer economic integration with the United States would inevitably lead to political union. Nevertheless, the Mulroney view is that the logic of that connection, if it ever was true, does not hold today.

Strong enough to walk alone

The Mulroney gamble is based on the assumption that Canada has matured — economically, socially and politically. It now possesses the economic strength to thrive under conditions of closer economic ties with the United States and the increased competition and trade opportunities inherent in a continental market, rather than to be distorted or submerged by those conditions. The Canadian identity is sufficiently firm, vigorous and distinct that it will

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