

SEIZING OPPORTUNITIES

With greater economic, academic and cultural ties, Canada and Mexico are two mice that together could roar.

Despite sharing the same continent, for many years Canada and Mexico were like two countries the global village had forgotten. As two mice separated by an elephant, they appeared almost incapable of detecting each other over the bigger presence in the middle.

Or so it seemed until a decade ago, when Canada joined the trade negotiations gathering steam between its two closest neighbours and signed on to what would become the North American Free Trade Agreement. As Canada and Mexico celebrate the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations they find themselves ever more closely linked.

There's no doubt that the two countries are moving quickly to make up for lost time, especially through NAFTA and resulting initiatives, which

have spurred not only trade and investment, but tourism, academic exchanges, scientific collaboration and interest in each other's culture.

Ottawa photographer Valerie Burton got a taste of the latter during an exhibition of her photographs depicting Indigenous festivals in both countries at the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City in the fall that was sponsored by Foreign Affairs Canada. "It's been overwhelmingly popular," says Burton, who took the photographs over the past 10 years. "Mexicans are totally fascinated by the Canadian images."

Especially intriguing, she says, was the striking similarity between traditions adopted by Indigenous peoples in Mexico and in Canada, including the fact that, although separated by thousands of kilometres, they chose the same motifs for their rituals, such as using smoke as a communications device and wearing deer heads in traditional hunting dances.

"There is a lot of common ground between Canada and Mexico in terms of Indigenous culture," she says. "Of course, Aboriginal people don't even consider the border; to them it's all one nation."

Burton's findings are only a small slice of the growing cultural interconnection between the two countries. Canadian entertainment icons such as Cirque du Soleil, Diana Krall, Nelly Furtado and Avril Lavigne have performed to large audiences in Mexico. In 2002, Canada was



▲ Historic visit: Mexican President Vicente Fox addressed a joint session of Parliament in October, speaking on a partnership with Canada in "NAFTA-plus" and Canadian employment opportunities for Mexicans.

named country of honour at the prestigious International Cervantino Festival in Guanajuato, Mexico. The following year Canada took centre stage again at Cervantino when the National Arts Centre Orchestra's North American tour culminated in the festival's closing night show.

Of course, the biggest impact of the trade agreement has been in the economic sphere. Canadian investment in Mexico has tripled since 1994, reaching \$2.8 billion in 2003; today some 1,400 Canadian companies operate in Mexico.

Mexico is now Canada's most important merchandise export market in Latin America, and Canada is on the way to becoming Mexico's second most important economic partner.

"I think for a long time both countries have ignored the obvious," says John Kirk, a professor of Spanish at Dalhousie University. He recently organized a series of well-attended lectures on Mexico in Halifax that featured former Mexico City mayor and presidential



▲ Flurry of agreements: (left to right) President Vicente Fox and Prime Minister Paul Martin witness the signing of an agreement by Mexico Foreign Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez Bautista and Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Pierre Pettigrew.

candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas. "Suddenly it's as if a light is going on and we're realizing how strategically important we are to each other."

The light bulb of recognition shone brightest in October during Mexican President Vicente Fox's historic visit to Canada. The former Coca-Cola executive made no secret of the importance he attached to the three-day trip, bringing with him a delegation that included seven cabinet ministers, business leaders and a large contingent of media.

Prime Minister Paul Martin reciprocated by inviting Mr. Fox to speak to a joint session of Parliament, in which the Mexican leader quickly got down to business. He wanted Canada as a partner in the "NAFTA-plus" project, which would see the three countries further integrate their economies. He also asked Canada to increase Canadian employment opportunities for Mexicans in sectors like construction and tourism to build on the success of the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program, which is in its 30th year and brings more than 10,000 Mexican farm workers north annually.

"The time has come to reflect on the best way to build a new community of North America," he

told Parliamentarians. "I am also convinced that Canada and Mexico have much to contribute to the design and operation of this regional cooperation and integration scheme."

That evening at a gala dinner he hosted for President Fox, Mr. Martin echoed the sentiment. "I believe it is a clear signal that the Canada-Mexico partnership is no longer a surprising novelty in North America, but rather an enduring presence and a fundamental part of the domestic and international agendas of our countries."

A flurry of agreements were signed, the most important of which is the Canada-Mexico Partnership, a commitment penned by the leaders themselves to explore economic and political links, and to look for opportunities to expand investment and trade. Mr. Fox also announced the opening of a consulate in Leamington, Ontario, in recognition of the concentration of temporary workers in that farming community.

The Mexican leader is looking for a firm and enthusiastic commitment to work toward closer integration within NAFTA. He believes this is necessary to stave off growing competition from Asia and especially China.

Such an opportunity will not last, say Ken Frankel and John Graham, two

respected Latin American specialists, who in a recent article in *The Globe and Mail* called for Canada to seize the opportunity offered by Mexico's entreaties for closer integration and strategic alliance building. "If Canada dithers in this opportunity to collaborate with Mexico, our political leverage in the hemisphere will dwindle further," they wrote. "Mexico will not continue to wait to find international alliances."

Kirk agrees. It all comes down to the elephant in the middle. He points out that with the U.S. absorbing the vast majority of Canadian and Mexican exports, the two countries on their own are too economically dependent to have much clout in the three-way relationship. Working together, they have a greater chance to exert influence on a wide range of issues.

And on an increasing number of matters—from policies on Iraq and the Kyoto Accord to open borders and Mr. Martin's goal of establishing an "L20" group of world leaders—the two countries are in lockstep.

"I'm convinced this relationship is going to get closer and stronger because it has to," says Kirk. "What we have in common is economic survival." ♣



Common cultural ground: (left to right) Canadian photographer Valerie Burton, at the exhibition of her photos in Mexico City, stands with Gaëtan Lavertu, Canada's Ambassador to Mexico, and his wife Donate.

photo: courtesy of Valerie Burton

photo: Rosario Arenas