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## Mulroney's Discovery of the Americas

Prime Minister Mulroney's off-hand comment during his recent visit (August 30-31) with President George Bush that Canada might seek membership in the OAS fueled speculation that this country would upgrade diplomatic and political links with Latin America. The San Jose meeting of Western Hemisphere heads of government October 27-28 was the ideal occasion: hosted by Nobel Peace Prize winner Oscar Arias and marking the Prime Minister's first official visit to Latin America, the Conference offered the necessary pomp and ceremony for a Mulroney foreign policy announcement.

By itself, of course, Canadian membership in so feeble an outfit as the Organization of American States means little. Marginalized by its Cold War mandate, scorned as Washington's 'Ministry of Colonies' for its early support for US military intervention culminating in the invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965, and unable to recast its purpose as an instrument of development, the OAS has long lost its legitimacy.

For one thing, the US budgetary contribution is over \$50 million in arrears. While some specialized agencies, such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, do valuable work, the overhaul required to revive the OAS is of Herculean dimensions. The somewhat more positive climate in US-Latin America relations since the election of George Bush should not obscure the challenge — in which Canada's contribution will be modest at best. Both the risks and potential benefits of full membership (as opposed to status as a permanent observer) have been exaggerated. Only the price tag is certain: \$6 million.

But the Mulroney initiative to revitalize Canada's Latin linkages is urgently required. Its significance should not be confused with the narrow issue of OAS membership or inter-american institutions. Instead, major structural change at the global level is re-ordering hemispheric relations, deepening our involvement and interests in this region. The Canada-US Free Trade Agreement is transforming our economic relations with Mexico; migration from Latin America and the Caribbean will certainly intensify; the inter-american narcotics trade will not stop at the US border. Growing Latin and Caribbean constituencies are already established within the Canadian political system.

We are becoming a country of the Americas in fact rather than in rhetoric. Consequently, we require a policy for the Americans — and concrete initiatives rather than more speeches. Neglected in his first government, Latin America finally has entered the Mulroney foreign policy agenda. If OAS membership is the political price required for restoring balance to Canadian foreign policy, then it may well be acceptable.

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