

## The Rationale for the Mexican Position

There are several reasons for Mexico to have adopted traditionally an independent position on Cuba—some of which have a parallel with the Canada-Cuba relationship. Some of these have been referred to in passing in the previous section. Perhaps the underlying factor is related to cultural and historical factors. The nationalist question is particularly significant in this equation, as is the desire to show that the government is “standing up to the Americans” and pursuing a made-in-Mexico foreign policy. This is extremely important in Mexico, given the strong nationalist sentiment and the historical memory (All Mexican children are taught in elementary school that the United States took one-half of national territory in the late 1840s, a act which they remember well).

The concept of national sovereignty is thus extremely important. When the Helms-Burton legislation was being discussed,<sup>9</sup> or at a time when NAFTA and FTAA discussions were hotly debated in Mexico, for example, the “Cuban connection” was helpful in emphasizing the image of Mexico’s political independence from Washington. The objective was to convince Mexicans that the government was not “selling out” to the Americans, but instead was pursuing a policy that was ultimately advantageous to Mexicans. As proof positive of this goal often the Cuban case was trotted out to illustrate the independent foreign policy of the government.

Also related is the idea of revolutionary connections, and the nationalist sentiment that is never far from the surface in political discourse. In particular the seven decades of the PRI governments (with the “R” standing for “Revolutionary,” it is worth remembering) were important in establishing and strengthening this “revolutionary connection”.<sup>10</sup> President López Portillo had made a point of emphasizing this relationship—significantly during the Reagan years—and even in times of political strain (such as during the more conservative Salinas and Zedillo presidencies), Mexico maintained this image. (The advent of Vicente Fox and the PAN would break with this tradition, as he moved the Mexican government away from the traditional bilateral “abrazo”. Even then, however, the popular reaction against this novel tendency after the first two years would lead him to revert at least somewhat towards the traditional posture).

By maintaining good diplomatic relations with Cuba, Mexico also managed to coopt left-wing groups within the country, groups which had long claimed (with some justification) that Mexico had betrayed its revolutionary heritage. Not so, claimed generations of PRI politicians, eager to curry favour in Havana—while convincing guerrilla movements in Mexico that they were in fact mindful of the revolutionary aspirations of yore.

Much of the connections between Cuban and Mexican government leaders were indeed based upon genuine friendship, many shared cultural factors, mutually beneficial business arrangements and a—deeply and naturally—felt fear of US expansionism. At the same time the ability of the government to gain Havana’s pledge not to support revolutionary groups in Mexico, and to show domestic left-wing political groups that they were indeed realizing the revolutionary goals of Zapata, Villa et al., were useful byproducts of the relationship.