

CANADA INSIDE THE OAS

*We've taken the plunge, so now what?
At least one Latin American who ought to know
believes we could be essential to reviving
a moribund institution.*

BY G. LANDAU

THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES (OAS) is an institution in quest of a purpose. It is definitely not the effective instrument for hemispheric cooperation it purports to be. Its importance as a forum is marginal. For the US it is of residual value – more of a hindrance to unilateral action than a willing tool of US foreign policy towards Latin America. For the countries of the region, it has been superseded by the Latin American Economic System (SELA) as a caucus for collective action vis-à-vis the North on economic issues, and is less than effective in the solution of regional conflict. Therefore, from Canada's viewpoint as a new member of this body, the question is: what needs to be done to give the OAS a new lease on life?

The Organization's activities are grouped into three areas: legal, political and security; developmental; and cultural. Progress has been very uneven on these various fronts. In the face of a dwindling budget and mounting deficits, the deliberative bodies of the OAS have continued to add functions and assign programmes to a harassed and technically insufficient staff. The result is wholesale internal demoralization and a growing irrelevance of the institution for most member countries, despite the strenuous efforts of the current Secretary-General, Baena Soares.

The principle of one country, one vote, with the presence of an array of micro-States, has led to an often irresponsible voting pattern, reminiscent of the UN General Assembly but without the safeguards provided by the Security Council. Multilateralism in international affairs has receded under the onslaught of unbridled unilateralism; the institutions that have survived are those able to display a technical proficiency that cannot be matched by the member states, or those blessed with charters enabling them to adapt without trauma to the evolving requirements of their members.

In the case of the OAS, neither condition was fulfilled. A charter reform is therefore necessary to meet the challenge, and tactically this can only be achieved if one member country – in this case the newest member, Canada – lobbies diplomatically for the adoption of the broad parameters of a new design, and succeeds in obtaining a consensus. The following attempts to shed some light on a basic outline for reform.

THE FUNCTION OF THE OAS AS A FORUM FOR negotiations on political and economic development issues between the US and Latin

America-the Caribbean has been overtaken by events: it has failed to prevent unilateral action by the US (for example in Grenada), it has not been able to resolve festering regional conflicts (Central America, Panama), it has not resulted in new policy directions for the most profound economic crisis in the hemisphere (debt and its corollary of social disintegration, drugs). Despite the ponderous machinery for policy-making, the OAS has failed to come to grips with the most relevant issues facing the regional community.

There is in the Americas a centrifugal tendency, with countries divided on many issues – the treatment of external debt for example – on which logically there should be convergent positions. Rather than a gradual expansion of sub-regional integration arrangements, we are witnessing their disintegration. For the Caribbean nations associated with the European Community through the Lomé Convention, the magnet of economic aid from Brussels pulls them ever farther away from their Latin American brothers.

To sum up, there is a need for a genuinely regional institution that, without evoking the danger (and taboo) of political interference in the internal affairs of the hemisphere's republics, would provide a forum and the attendant technical infrastructure to achieve closer cooperation – a sort of Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) for the Americas.

THIS IDEA IS NOT QUITE ORIGINAL. IT WAS PUT forward in 1971 by the then Chairman of the Inter-American Committee on the Alliance for Progress (CIAP), Carlos Sanz de Santamaria. At the time, the disarray within the OAS was already such that the proposal was not acted upon at all. The essential concept is that the OAS be converted into an organization where the supreme body would be a Council of Ministers representing all the member states, and where the Ministers, sitting ex officio, would be rotated according to the portfolio being dis-

cussed; thus, there would be a Council consisting of foreign ministers, or ministers of agriculture, or transport, or whatever other subject might come under scrutiny.

LIKE THE OECD AND ITS DEVELOPMENT Centre, the OAS should devote itself primarily to policy formulation on hemispheric cooperation and the research function underpinning it. A careful evaluation should be made of the continued need for some of the specialized agencies, such as the Inter-American Defense Board, the Children's Institute and analogous bodies. The powers of the Secretary-General should be strengthened, notably as regards the right of initiative.

The Organization should be streamlined, made tighter, more productive, and above all, more relevant to its membership. In this context, certain functions could be added. The old Pan American Union, until 1948, filled an important role as the drafter and trustee of a large number of technical covenants among its member states. In Europe, a similar function has been performed for the last forty years by the Council of Europe, whose seminal role in the development of both human rights and a network of technical conventions, is widely recognized. There is a pressing need for legal harmonization in Latin America and the Caribbean, and the OAS could be entrusted with this responsibility.

I have attempted here to chart a course for the OAS that would restore its legitimate and important role in the Inter-American system – loosely patterned after the OECD, with some ideas based on the past performance of the Council of Europe. There is no substitute for creativity and imagination, but sober realism must preside, lest the exercise succumb (as have so many other attempts at the management of hemispheric relations), to an overdose of fantasy and unfounded expectations.

Canada has a pragmatic, self-interest in making a significant intellectual contribution to a revised structure for the regional system. In the event Canada succeeds in developing a consensus for such a blueprint, at the end of the exercise we may be able to say – like Balboa in his letter to the King of Spain upon reaching the shores of the Pacific Ocean – “Hasta que en fin, Señor, hemos descubierto algo nuevo!” Finally, sir, we have discovered something new! □

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