

Mexico-Cuba Relations: Lessons for Canada?

Why Mexico?

At first glance the idea of employing any lessons gleaned from Mexico's relations with Cuba—which reached their nadir in May 2004—in an analysis of Canadian-Cuban relations appears somewhat fanciful. After all, what is there in common between Canada and Mexico? We have vastly different histories, are descended from radically diverse political systems and cultures, speak different languages, and traditionally have had at best limited bilateral relationships.

At the same time in the last decade we have both (finally) been discovering one another. We are both active members of NAFTA—and in fact depend upon our shared, powerful neighbour as our major trading partner. Obviously this makes for an occasionally difficult dynamic, with a number of trade problems still unsettled. Perhaps more importantly, the reference by Pierre Trudeau to the challenges of living next to the United States, applies equally to both Mexico and Canada.¹ Our economies are thus becoming (increasingly) inextricably linked—bilateral trade was \$12 billion in 2002, with a million Canadian tourists visiting Mexico. But so too are our foreign policies, since we both aspire to major roles within the Americas, while on the global stage both are medium-sized players. Increasingly we also are identifying common goals in our foreign policy—and are developing an increased sense of self-awareness.

Our in many ways similar relationship with the world's only superpower clearly makes for an interesting dynamic. Most recently, to take one example where we adopted a common position despite significant pressure from our powerful neighbour, both Canada and Mexico decided to favour the U.N. approach to the Iraq question, and turned down U.S. requests to join with them against the regime of Saddam Hussein. (Mexico was a member of the Security Council at the time, and thus bore the brunt of even greater U.S. government pressure).

In terms of each country's relations with Cuba, there is a great deal in common—although the rationale for Mexican policy differs substantially from that of Canada. Mexico and Canada have traditionally had a balanced, normal relationship with Cuba—differing radically with Havana on many areas, but consistently preferring a policy of dialogue over confrontation. The differences of opinion (often over profound matters of substance) with Havana have occasionally been heated. These differences should not be underestimated, and as recently as the spring of 2004 there were protestations in both Ottawa and Mexico City about the human rights situation in Cuba. Two weeks later, following strong criticisms of this decision by President Castro, the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Relations recalled Ambassador Lajous from Havana, and gave her Cuban counterpart 48 hours to leave Mexico. It is, however, instructive to see how Mexico, even then, has handled the low points in the bilateral relationship.

Both countries, in general, have maintained cordial, correct relations with Havana—and in fact both have recently celebrated the 100th anniversary of a reasonably productive relationship with Cuba. Moreover, in the early 1960s, Mexico and Canada were the only countries of the Americas **not** to break relations with Cuba—again despite significant pressure from Washington.