

Canada's Place in the Hemisphere

Canada's mission to the Organization of American States is turning 20 at a busy time for the hemisphere and its relations.

Tucked into a modest corner of the sprawling Canadian embassy in Washington, D.C., Canada's Permanent Mission to the OAS (PRMOAS) could be mistaken for a sleepy "second" mission. But given the activities the Inter-American system has been involved in over the past year or so, it's anything but quiet.

In April 2009, the successful 5th Summit of the Americas was held in Trinidad and Tobago, providing a positive introduction to the region for U.S. President Barack Obama. That was followed in June by the OAS General Assembly in Honduras, featuring round-the-clock negotiations that led to the lifting of Cuba's long-standing suspension from the OAS. Later that month there was a coup in Honduras that saw President Manuel Zelaya removed from power. The coup kept PRMOAS running, given the OAS's role in promoting a democratic resolution to the crisis. Add the tragic earthquakes earlier this year in Haiti and Chile, the recent re-election of OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza to another five-year term, and a number of national elections, and it has been a busy time for the hemisphere—and for Canada within it!

The OAS is the world's oldest regional organization. It originated in 1890 as the International Union of American Republics, becoming the OAS in 1948. Canada joined the organization as a permanent observer in 1972 and became a full member in 1990.

Working at PRMOAS is like having one foot in Washington and the other in Latin America and the Caribbean. At the mission and around town, all is typically North American. Stepping into the ornate OAS headquarters, on the edge of the National Mall at 17th Street and Constitution Avenue, is like travelling thousands of miles south. In fact, meetings are more often held in Spanish than English. Speeches are peppered with as many references to Marcus Garvey, Simón Bolívar and Toussaint Louverture as to Franklin D. Roosevelt or Pierre Trudeau.

Another idiosyncratic twist to working with the OAS is its culture of consensus. The vast majority of decisions are arrived at through the agreement of all member states. With more than 30 countries around the table—each with its own competing, and sometimes conflicting, priorities—trying to arrive at a unanimous decision can be challenging. Heated discussions sometimes arise as member states promote their respective positions.

The OAS is often a microcosm of what's happening in the hemisphere. Newspaper headlines about one country's bilateral gripes with another are sometimes acted out on a representative-to-representative level at the council. Fortunately, any tensions that exist around the negotiating table tend to evaporate outside the meeting rooms, and a feeling of camaraderie prevails. This also extends to OAS social events and formal occasions. Gatherings hosted by member states are as likely to feature mariachi and calypso bands (or a Venezuelan youth orchestra, for that matter) as they are jazz bands or string quartets.

Of course, representing Canada in a multilateral organization requires constant liaison and communication with Ottawa and with Canadian missions in the region. In the days following the coup in Honduras, for example, coordination with our missions in Tegucigalpa and San José was crucial to ensuring an informed Canadian position. On the flip side, a Canadian intervention at the OAS on the state of affairs in a given country may have a direct impact on Canada's bilateral relationship on the ground. PRMOAS serves all of Canada's bilateral missions in the region, and vice versa.



Peter Kent, Minister of State of Foreign Affairs (Americas), attends a special session of the OAS General Assembly in July 2009 considering the post-coup situation in Honduras.