

where, according to the Secretary of State for External Affairs, Allan MacEachen:

Weighing the advantages and disadvantages, however carefully, does not produce an automatic result. Within the cabinet we are examining the membership question with an open mind, but a decision to join the OAS would have to be based on a firm conclusion that it would have decisive advantages for our political relations with Latin American states and for the promotion of Canadian interests in the region.

While the prudence of the Minister in that June 1983 speech, given the limited attraction of joining the OAS in the past, is in many ways well-founded, nonetheless there are reasons to believe that the potential benefits of full Canadian membership now far outweigh the drawbacks.

The OAS was founded in Washington in 1890 as the International Union of American States. Originally, much of the inspiration behind the organization came from the vision of hemispheric unity promoted by the soldier and statesman Simon Bolivar (1783-1830), leader of the revolutions which resulted in the independence from Spain of what are today the republics of Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. The present charter defining the structure, functions and operations of the OAS was adopted in 1948 and amended in 1967. There are currently twenty-eight Member States and eighteen Permanent Observer States. Canada has held the latter status since 1972.

### **OAS failures**

It is indisputable that, especially after its restructuring in 1948 at a time when the Cold War and East-West confrontation dominated world politics, the OAS faltered in its attempts to promote hemispheric stability based on the principles of non-intervention and mutual respect. Two incidents which reflected this situation were the isolation by the OAS of the reformist government of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954 and OAS participation in the American occupation of the Dominican Republic in 1965, when the United States took military action to suppress what was mistakenly believed to be another Castro-style revolution in the Caribbean.

These incidents reveal only too well (as does the impotence of the institution during the 1982 crisis in the South Atlantic) past events in which the OAS has not functioned efficiently enough in the interests of hemispheric stability. Under such circumstances, it has been argued, Canada is best advised to steer clear of full OAS membership. However, to focus only on past instances of failure is to distort the historical record of the OAS and to give the organization an overly negative image as a forum for effective hemispheric dialogue. Charges of redundancy and irrelevance fail to take account of positive OAS initiatives such as the organization's central role in halting and resolving conflict between El Salvador and Honduras (the so-called Soccer War) in 1969. More importantly, such an emphasis overlooks a significant evolution on the part of Latin American and Caribbean nations, toward the promotion within OAS of political perspectives which directly challenge prevailing American viewpoints.

### **Resisting the US**

Following the overthrow of the Batista regime in 1959, the United States exerted tremendous pressure on Latin America and Caribbean nations to sever relations with

Cuba. The administration of President Kennedy went as far as to propose a collective OAS resolution to expel Cuba from membership of the organization. It was perhaps the darkest hour in the history of the OAS. Most governments succumbed to fierce American lobbying. There was, however, one important exception: Mexico, which remained firm to its own analysis of the Cuban situation and which refused to be part of an OAS action it judged legally unfounded and politically myopic.

Since Mexico's principled decision to resist manipulation of the OAS over Cuba there has been a gradual but significant shift in the balance of power within the organization. Over the years emerging regional powers such as Brazil, Colombia and Venezuela have sought improved relations with Cuba. By the late 1970s Latin Member States conducted their OAS affairs with greater autonomy, astuteness, maturity and solidarity. In 1979, for example, Panama, as an indignant response to covert intervention in Chile between 1970 and 1973, many Latin American nations once again led by Mexico, successfully blocked attempts to form an OAS force to stop the ouster of the Nicaraguan dictator, Anastasio Somoza, by popular revolutionary forces. The move by Latin Member States within the OAS to counter such initiatives clearly illustrates that they have learned an important political lesson from their involvement in the Dominican Republic Affair of the mid-1960s.

More recently, Latin American signatories of the Rio Treaty have been lobbied with a view to supporting an OAS motion that would involve sending a security force to patrol the border between Honduras and Nicaragua. This motion has again met with a signal lack of Latin American cooperation. Attempts have also been made to isolate Nicaragua within the OAS by claiming that the Sandinistas made a "contract" with the organization in June 1979 to hold elections and develop a pluralistic society. This strategy has been firmly rejected by a majority of OAS diplomats who point out that the organization has no authority to intervene in the internal affairs of Nicaragua.

### **Latin American independence**

These events indicate a growing sense of independence among Latin American nations, in what they say and do, in what they will support and what they wish no part of. Such behavior is an important measure of Latin American demands to be taken seriously in international affairs, to be shown a respect that has often been denied them in the past. Thus, whenever a proposal comes up for discussion in the OAS which is not in the best interests of Latin America or which takes little account of the Latin American viewpoint, vigorous opposition can now be anticipated.

The great fear, of course, is that Canada, upon becoming a full member of the OAS, would be drawn into the thick of Latin-US tensions and would be forced to choose sides, thus inevitably incurring the wrath of one party or the other and irreparably damaging subsequent bilateral relations. Once again, there are fundamental flaws in this line of reasoning.

If the government of the United States wished simply to have an unfailing proxy in the OAS, it is unlikely that it would have advocated — as it has done for twenty-five years — full Canadian membership in the organization. While there have been disappointing instances in the past quarter-century of Canadian foreign policy being almost indistinguishable from that of the United States, so to