

I want to deal head-on with one argument frequently made against Canada becoming involved more extensively in Latin America. This is that Latin America is the United States' backyard. That Canada will, therefore, be forced to toe the American line - and thus be rendered impotent and irrelevant. Or that in expressing a view different from that of the US, Canada risks Washington's wrath on issues of greater importance to Canada.

Curiously, that argument is usually made by people who call themselves "nationalists". It is a peculiar form of nationalism which holds that we should avoid areas of the world - or organizations such as the OAS - because we might be forced to confront Washington. That is not a nationalist mentality. That is a colonial mentality.

If we are to assert our influence, secure our interests, and state our views, silence is an odd instrument. So too is isolation. The problems of the hemisphere will not be solved through benign neglect.

We can't have influence in Latin America by staying away.

And we certainly can't help solve problems - problems which affect Canada directly, like debt, like drugs, like the environment - if we stand apart from the nations and the organizations where these problems are addressed.

It is perverse to argue that, whenever Canada agrees with Washington, we are doing so for American reasons. Canadian interests do not automatically coincide with those of the United States. But neither do they automatically conflict.

When the U.S. agreed with us that fighting acid rain was a priority, they were not doing so for Canadian reasons. They agreed to fight acid rain because they became convinced that it was an American priority.

When Canada pushed hard for the Open Skies concept, we did not do so because the Americans wanted it. The proposal first surfaced in Washington. We pushed for it, expanded it, and got it on the NATO agenda because it met Canada's interests in East-West relations.

One of the problems with the OAS - and it is a real problem - is the frequent polarization between the U.S. and Latin America. Latin American governments - without exception and with real enthusiasm - welcomed Canada's initiative to join the OAS. It would be very odd if they did that because they believed we would compound the polarization. On the contrary, they think we can play a significant role in overcoming that problem. We were welcomed because of our tradition as an honest broker, a country of reason, a country whose skills and independence have helped breathe life into multilateral organizations ranging from the United Nations to the GATT, to the Commonwealth and La Francophonie. In addition to being part of the neighbourhood, we possess and exercise precisely the talents which can overcome confrontation.