

Canada and the OAS

by Maurice Dupras

In May 1968, one month after becoming Prime Minister of Canada, Pierre Elliott Trudeau announced that a review of Canadian foreign policy would be undertaken, and that Latin America and the Caribbean would figure prominently in the review process. He said then:

We have to take greater account of the ties which bind us to other nations in this hemisphere — in the Caribbean and in Latin America — and of their economic needs. We have to explore new avenues of increasing our political and economic relations with Latin America where more than four hundred million people will live by the turn of the century and where we have substantial interests.

Over the past fifteen years the "substantial interests" Prime Minister referred to have grown considerably. Today, Canadian businesses, churches, embassies, government agencies, human rights groups, travel bureaus, universities and individuals are involved in Latin America and the Caribbean as never before. Indeed, Canadian involvement in the lands and islands south of the United States is more diverse and more intense than in any other part of the Third World.

Involvement, whether in the form of a trip south to secure a business deal or to lessen the impact of the Canadian winter by a week's holiday in the sun, usually prompts some kind of awareness that life outside of Canada is far different from the relatively carefree existence we take for granted while home. For whatever motives one embarks on a journey, travelling can be, as writer Lawrence Durrell has observed, "one of the most rewarding forms of introspection."

Involvement makes awareness possible. Introspection breeds concern. When, between June 1981 and November 1982, the Sub-committee on Canada's Relations with Latin America and the Caribbean conducted its parliamentary mandate, it was surprised at the extent of Canadian involvement in the area and heartened by the degree of awareness and concern its inquiries revealed. During my thirteen years in the House of Commons and membership in many committees I had never seen equal breadth and intensity of interest in matters of international relations.

Economic interdependence

Given that Latin America and the Caribbean, over the past two decades, have emerged as an increasingly attractive market for Canadian exports and investments, perhaps

the Sub-committee could have anticipated better the heartening of public response to its investigations, especially from such a pragmatic group as the Canadian business community. That is not so surprising when one looks at our trade and financial involvement in the region.

Approximately three-quarters of all of Canada's direct commercial investment in developing countries, as well as more than half of Canadian trade with the Third World, is focussed on Latin America and the Caribbean. Indeed, Canadian investment in the region is greater than that in any other part of the world except the United States. This involvement is reckoned to provide employment for about 150,000 Canadians, many in manufacturing and new high-technology fields such as telecommunications, energy exploration and mechanized agriculture. The five major Canadian banks alone have \$22.3 billion in assets in Latin America and the Caribbean, a figure which is approximately twelve-times that of assets in Africa and the Middle East and almost twice that of assets in the entire Asia-Pacific region. Two countries (Mexico and Venezuela) now supply Canada with about half of its total petroleum imports, a dependency which (after the events of 1973) necessitates a close, harmonious and mutually respectful relationship. All these ties, and countless others, will only develop and be reinforced between now and the end of the century. Canada thus has, and will continue to have, a considerable vested interest in the economic and social development of Latin America and the Caribbean as well as the region's political stability.

Joining OAS — debate reopens

In view of the myriad and profound connections that now exist between Canada and Latin America and the Caribbean, debate has arisen once again over the issue of Canadian membership of the Organization of American States (OAS). More specifically, questions are being asked about whether or not Canada should advance beyond its present status of Permanent Observer (a status it shares with nations of such limited hemispheric importance as Egypt and the Republic of Korea) and apply for full membership in the oldest international regional organization in the world. The matter is currently before the Cabinet

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