

This year's Couchiching Conference focusses on Canada and Latin America. Stepping back for a moment, this choice is remarkable and obvious. Remarkable because, until recently, the region has never been central to Canadian foreign policy nor critical to Canada's economic health. Yet obvious because much has changed over the past 10 years. This change requires both recognition and reflection.

Despite certain long-standing business connections, and what we used to call people-to-people contacts, the Canadian experience in Latin America was historically neither deep nor comprehensive.

Both of us had difficulty seeing past the United States. Canada's traditional transatlantic ties continued to beckon even as they were changing, often quite radically. The dynamism of East Asia attracted increasingly focussed attention within our business community, just as immigration flows from Asia were enriching our society. In contrast, Canada's hemispheric vocation was primarily the stuff of after-dinner toasts and, let's be frank, public posturing during episodic government-led safaris or ambassadorial speechifying.

But no longer. Much has changed internationally across a broad front. The sea change in international relations obliges each of us to re-evaluate where we best fit and to recognize what new options are available.

Each of us seeks to grasp the opportunities provided by the greater variety of possible partners and the shifting balances that determine the "why?", the "how?" and the "with whom?" of this new era in international relations.

The political and economic reforms that have swept Latin America have instigated Canada's own reform of our Americas policy. Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, Latin American refugees in Canada reinforced the fear that the region was run by dictatorships, torn apart by civil wars, and economically dependent on single crops.

During the last 20 years there has been unpredictable change. One by one the military dictatorships have given up power and economic liberalization and free market reform have been introduced. The growing movement towards participatory democracy and economic liberalization gave Canada the opening that was needed to revitalize our ties with Latin America.

In 1989, our foreign policy review included the then controversial decision to take our seat at the Organization of American States [OAS], which we did in 1990. This decision signalled to the countries of the region that Canada was prepared to engage with them in a way that we had not in the past. Our active participation in the Miami Summit of the Americas in 1994 and the Prime Minister's visit to the region in 1995 reinforced this attitude.