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Do We Celebrate or Only Commemorate Eighty Years of Mexican-Canadian Diplomatic Relations?

It has been eighty years since diplomatic relations were established between Mexico and Canada, fifty years since the start of the Mexico-Canada Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP), thirty years since the North American Free Trade Agreement came into effect—now known as the USMCA—and twenty years since the Mexico-Canada Alliance began operating. We might now suppose there is a lot to celebrate in the bilateral sphere. But, actually, what would we be celebrating in 2024? The reimposition of visas to our compatriots ordered by Justin Trudeau's government a few months ago? That in nine years of his administration, he has only made one state visit to Mexico, in 2017? That Mexico's President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has not made a single state visit to Canada? Or, perhaps that part of Mexico's middle

classes feel disrespected by the series of bothersome bureaucratic red tape they will encounter when they travel to Canada to spend their money?

The list could be as long as we want. However, a series of situations dictate that beyond small and respectful fraternal reproaches by Mexico's head of state to Canada's about the upsetting visa requirement, yes, we do have reason for celebrating these eighty years.

And, precisely, we must celebrate that, despite our government leaders, their phobias and phobias, their ignorance and their fears, it is a fact that the cultural, academic, sports-based, but above all, human links between our two societies are stronger than ten, twenty, or thirty years ago. This is the case beyond NAFTA, the famous investments, and "historic" levels of trade that business councils love to boast about like Olympic medals—assuming that they are the real winners and proponents of development. The truth is that active Mexican and Canadian civil societies

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make the daily effort to maintain links with all kinds of counterparts. In this, the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) is not the exception; much less, the Center for Research on North America (CISAN), which is celebrating its thirty-fifth anniversary this year, 2024.

At the CISAN, then, we develop a series of research projects that tend to bring together the university and different sectors of society. Time and again, some of us are invited by different media to explain clearly and concisely complex issues that it has taken us years to understand and even predict with quite respectable degrees of accuracy. We endeavor to explain to different audiences (radio listeners, newspaper readers, and informative digital or televised platform users) what is happening in North America and in my case, what is happening in Canada and how it affects us in Mexico.

This means that it is no simple matter to explain that Canada's health system (Medicare) suffers from serious problems, beginning with insufficient medical and nursing staff, and in general a lack of care in all specialties, and ending with the exhausting route with long waiting lists of months or years, to have surgery. This is in addition to long hours or early mornings that the population has to wait in emergency rooms to be treated for the respiratory illnesses of winter precisely because there are not enough primary care physicians to see everyone. In Mexico, this makes us want to hug every costumed "Dr. Simi" pharmacy street-corner advertising character to constantly remind us, to the tune of cumbia or salsa music, that in our cities, there's a doctor close to home who can take a look at you and diagnose, for example, a throat infection and give you a prescription for antibiotics. This is something that today in Canada could be a reason for jealousy of our Mexican health system that has fallen into such disrepute.

But that's not how we should look at it. In the media and academic forums, we have explained that Canada has a terrible housing shortage. For decades, and above all because of the pandemic, due to bad administration or simple intentional negligence, the federal and provincial governments have made finding a small apartment rental, not to mention purchasing a home, as tortuous a process as any to be found in something penned by Charles Dickens. This is especially the case because of how complicated it can be to come up with sky-high payments of thousands of dollars for a space that in most cases are not worth the price.

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Well, if that isn't enough, Canada also has profound problems in the educational sector: huge classrooms with many only recently arrived little girls and boys most of whom speak neither English nor French; exhausted professors in all the provinces and territories, who, in addition to preparing their classes and writing monthly reports about each student, also have to act as psychologists or even social workers to support students whose age and conditions make them vulnerable and who have even been abandoned because of their parents' work responsibilities. In short, how can we explain that Canadian teachers are exploited in their work, and for that reason it's common for them to organize work-stoppages, protests, and teachers and teacher's aides' strikes in different parts of the country?

This is difficult to understand in Mexico for those who continue to cling hard to the idea that Canada is one of the best places to live, according to the human development indices constructed by the UN Development Program (UNDP). For several years now, since the 1990s, Canada has been descending on this list, and is no longer among the top nations cited.

Also, how can we make these Mexicans understand the impact on Canadian society of the obligations issued by the federal government in Ottawa that imposes on parents new liberal ideological models dictated from Washington, to be reproduced as irrefutable dogma in public schools? This has sparked multiple clashes among different provincial governments, often supported by broad traditionalist sectors of parents, who decide to oppose in court the federal government's dictates, generating all manner of reactions in the national press. It is increasingly frequent to observe a social trend in favor of old cultural family values considered threatened by this liberal-progressive current disseminated through the mass media and multiple digital training platforms without allowing space for discussion.

And it is at this last point that I would like to explain to the reader that it is precisely due to these issues and problems that one of Canada's most blatant right wings in recent years has considerable possibilities of coming to power in the person of Pierre Poilievre, the current leader of the Conservative Party. Using clever, astute policies, Poilievre has cynically held a worn-out, recently divorced Prime Minister Justin Trudeau—who cannot see a light at the end of the tunnel of his third administration—responsible for all the country's ills.

Poilievre's palaver, together with the conditions described above, has rewarded him with sky-high popularity levels. This makes his victory as prime minister in the next elections, slated, barring any extraordinary developments, for autumn 2025, highly probable, thanks to a parliamentary agreement between the governing Liberal Party and the New Democratic Party. The latter two have committed themselves to not joining the rest of the opposition in bringing the next elections ahead in exchange for including some of their demands in Trudeau's minority government's agenda.

According to serious April 2024 polls—the kind we need in Mexico—, this possibility of the right wing returning to office is based on the Conservatives holding a twenty-point lead over the Liberals, giving the right wing the chance to have a majority government. If they did that, lots of things would change in Canada, but Trudeau's disregard for and "six-feet distance" from López Obrador's administration could be solely the first precursor of what's to come. This, of course, will depend on what happens in the 2024 U.S. elections, in which Donald Trump seems to have a good possibility of returning to the White House. He would probably be very amenable, at least ideologically, to a new Conservative prime minister. This is given that Trump and Trudeau seem to mutually dislike each other, above all after the Quebec June 2018 G-7 summit and Trudeau's accusations that Trump was responsible for the January 2021 Capitol assault.

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So, these eighty years of diplomatic relations have caught us in a precarious position given Canada's domestic situation. We should, however, also consider our country's circumstances, since the 2024 presidential elections have been historic: a woman will occupy the presidency for the first time. This is worthy of mention in a country that in theory is very "macho." It will be very interesting to see the direction bilateral relations with Mexico will take, when a probably right-wing, traditionalist, conservative Canadian government will have to relate to a new administration, headed by a progressive, social democratic woman scientist. The latter, backed by popular support, will seek to make her own history and changes, stepping outside any shadows and without ceding to any pressures.

So, if we ask ourselves where this bilateral relationship is headed, circumstances seem to indicate that we can expect interesting and unprecedented events. Using a wildlife allegory, Canada would be like a salmon out of water that will desperately turn completely around to go backward, jumping back to its traditional course; the United States, for its part, like a big grizzly bear, will watch it from the other side of that same river with disdain; and, further south, a cacomistle cat representing Mexico will watch both of them in order to not get mixed up in their problems and avoid the disdainful gaze of the big bear that is today upset and irritated not only with the salmon and the cacomistle cat, but with everyone.

So, in this same vein, the eighty years of Mexican-Canadian relations should be celebrated side-by-side with civil society, not taking personally anything that happens with the current Trudeau government. Actually, the visa requirement imposed on Mexico was only an attempt by the Canadian government to close a front that had opened up on its flank, not part of an international plot by the most reactionary right wing to damage the Mexican government.

In short, complex times are on the horizon for bilateral relations, times to reinvent interests and strengthen the ties between both countries' civil societies, times to ignore and avoid offenses—that will surely come—, since, the ages of ideological agreements among "the three amigos" of North America and the discourses promising understanding and tolerance accompanied by vague smiles would seem to be anachronisms of a future that never happened. ■■■