

A New Era in MEXICAN-CANADIAN RELATIONS

Sandra Fuentes*



Photos by Samuel García

Opening of the exhibition *Monarca: Butterfly Beyond Boundaries*, at the Canadian Museum of Nature.

The history of the relationship between Mexico and Canada may be short, but it has always been one of respect and understanding. Although Canada and Mexico did not establish diplomatic relations until 1944, the commercial relationship between the two countries goes back to the early years of this century.

At that time, Canada played a significant role in Mexico through major infrastructure projects including railways, urban transportation, hydro-electrification, water treatment and the establishment of the banking system. Furthermore, in 1905 in a historically important bilateral effort, Mexico and Canada formed a joint venture to launch a commercial shipping line to avoid paying customs duties to their common neighbor.

The potential of this special relationship was foreseen by Juan Almazán, minister of commerce in 1930, who reported to President Pascual Ortiz Rubio after his visit to Canada that “there are probably no other two countries in the world that can complement each other so admirably as Mexico and Canada to form a new economic entity.”¹

The development of the relationship was impeded first by the Mexican Revolution, followed by World War I. Later on, when Mexico nationalized its oil industry in 1938, Canada, still considered a British colony, could not advance its diplomatic relations with Mexico. Despite its recognition of our country's importance in the region, between 1938 and 1940,

* Ambassador of Mexico to Canada.

¹ David Winfield, “Relaciones bilaterales Canadá-México,” *Revista Mexicana de Política Exterior*, no. 38, Mexico City, 1993, p. 34.



The Mexican flag flying outside the Canadian Parliament as seen during the state visit of President Zedillo in June 1996.

Canada reached out to Latin America and established diplomatic relations with Argentina, Brazil and Chile while declaring that it was not yet prepared to formalize relations with Mexico.²

With the establishment of formal diplomatic relations in 1944, one would have thought that there would have been a flurry of activity between the two countries, but this was not so. In fact, over the next 30 years, while the two countries often shared similar views on major issues of the times (as demonstrated by their respective foreign policies committed to the pacific solution of controversies and complete adherence to international law) bilateral interaction was very limited.

In 1956, the first trilateral meeting Mexico-Canada-U.S. took place in White Sulphurs, Virginia, at the initiative of U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower. At that meeting, President Adolfo Ruiz Cortinez and Prime Minister Luis St. Laurent raised with their U.S. counterpart similar concerns related to their proximity to their powerful neighbor, such

as environmental issues, illegal fishing by American vessels and the temporary employment of Mexican workers, but no formal treaty or agreement was signed on that occasion.³

Meanwhile, a commercial relationship continued to evolve with little government participation. In 1959, during his term as ambassador of Mexico in Canada, Rafael de la Colina noted:

.... the links with Canada have been strengthening not so much because of the efforts of our governments, but because of the effective participation of the people dealing directly with trade....They are opening doors (in both countries) that help make the miracle of our commercial expansion and the exchange of products and economic activities a reality.⁴

³ *Cuarto Informe de Gobierno del Presidente Adolfo Ruiz Cortinez*, Mexico City, pp. 127-128.

⁴ *Rafael de la Colina: una vida de hechos*. Archivo Histórico Diplomático Mexicano, Serie Testimonios 1, Mexico City.

² J.C.M. Ogeisby, *Gringos from the Far North*, McMillan, 1976, p. 167.

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President Adolfo López Mateos wanted Canada to be the destination for his first state visit to break away from the tradition of first visiting the United States. His visit in 1959 was reciprocated a year later when the prime minister of Canada, Sir John G. Diefenbaker, led an important delegation to Mexico in an effort to tip the commercial balance between the two countries in favor of Canada, and to lend support to the Estrada Doctrine put forward by Mexico at the United Nations.⁵

During the late 1960s a modern liberal, Pierre Elliot Trudeau, became prime minister of Canada. His foreign policy was to engage in more active relations with the rest of the world, particularly with Latin America and especially with Mexico. His intent was to separate Canada from the United States and to promote a North-South dialogue. His philosophy was echoed by President Luis Echeverría Alvarez, who became president of Mexico in 1970.

During this period, both governments instituted several mechanisms to foster stronger cooperation in trade, tourism and foreign investment. The impact of most of these mechanisms was limited, with the exception of the Ministerial Commission, which meets every two years, and the very innovative Mexican Agricultural Temporary Workers Program. The latter is still in operation, sponsoring approximately 6,000 Mexican workers who come to Canada each year to work under the same conditions and with the same provisions as Canadian farm workers.

A number of treaties and agreements were signed between the two countries in different fields of cooperation as

well, but a new chapter began to unfold at the end of the 1980s, when Mexico and Canada acknowledged the great significance of their association and established the conditions for a new, closer bilateral relationship.

At a critical juncture in both their internal economies, Mexico and Canada, together with the United States, embarked on often

difficult negotiations that eventually led to the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

The negotiations presented both nations with the opportunity to innovate, assess and complement the many similarities they shared and to adapt their economies into this new agreement. NAFTA was heralded as the advent of a new economic era in which traditional activities would be encouraged to restructure or fail. As such, it encountered strong opposition with arguments that would test the adaptive capacities of each country's government and respective societies.

However, for many people, NAFTA became an instrument and an opportunity that could be seized or lost. In Mexico and Canada, a keen interest emerged in getting to know each other beyond the fixed perceptions already established. Today, Mexicans and Canadians are becoming more aware of each other's culture and history. Spanish is becoming the second most popular language studied in certain regions of Canada, due in part to business opportunities in Mexico and Latin America.⁶

As Henry Kissinger stated in his last book on diplomacy: "Intellectuals analyze the operations of international systems; statesmen build them."⁷ Therefore, current international trends have boosted the Mexico-Canada relationship. This new priority is demonstrated in numerous ways:

- Prime Minister Jean Chrétien made Mexico his first official destination abroad. President Ernesto Zedillo reciprocated by visiting Canada first as president-elect and later as president, in June 1996.

⁶ See H. P. Klepak, "Los desconocidos se conocen: Bridging the Knowledge Gap Between Mexico and Canada" in *Natural Allies? Canadian and Mexican Perspectives on International Security*, Ottawa, Carleton University Press, 1996.

⁷ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1994, p. 27.

⁵ *Boletín de prensa no. 3, Visita del Primer Ministro del Canadá, Sr. John G. Diefenbaker*, S.R.E., exp. 314 a, fol. 1, Mexico City, 1960.

- Meetings between the leaders of both countries are more regular.
- A Canadian Chamber of Commerce has opened in Mexico and, very recently, a Mexican Chamber of Commerce in Canada.
- Several fora for corporate issues between the two countries have been established.
- Ministers of both countries meet frequently to discuss common concerns.
- Five new Mexican honorary consulates in Canada are located in Quebec City, Calgary, Halifax, Winnipeg and St. John's.
- Hundreds of joint ventures have been established in the mining, environment, automobile, textile, energy and agricultural sectors, among others.
- Representatives of top Canadian corporations travel to Mexico on fact-finding missions.
- In 1995, the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) opened a School of Extension in Canada's national capital region, attracting more than 280 students in its first year.
- Mexican commercial delegations frequently visit different provinces in Canada.
- Mexican-Canadian trade increased 40 percent overall between 1993 and 1995, and 23 percent in the first eight months of 1998.

All of this is new to the bilateral relationship. It marks a new era that presents enormous opportunities as well as challenges. We have a long way to go to further our knowledge of one another, but despite the obvious differences and particularities, Mexico and Canada have certain common characteristics that facilitate communication and understanding. One of them, and perhaps the single most important one, is having a common neighbor. Although both of our countries possess rich and diverse cultural and social institutions, the U.S. influence is clear in many aspects of our daily life.

It is obvious that having a common neighbor enriches Mexico and Canada's bilateral relationship. Certainly, our proximity to such a powerful nation presents some difficulties, but it also offers opportunities for cooperation and mutual benefit.

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Through independent processes, Mexico and Canada found themselves dealing more often and more deliberately with the same kind of issues and similar objectives at the same time. And many of our policy options converged in North America.

It was in this context that our relationship gained a richer content. Our ties diversified and deepened because we share common interests, and we coincide in many policy areas.

On the one hand, we have realized that many U.S. decisions, even if directed exclusively toward one of us, may have indirect consequences for the other. Furthermore, when the U.S. government has tried to extraterritorially extend the application of its national laws, as in the case of trading with Cuba, Mexico and Canada have expressed similar positions.

On the part of Canada, the late 1980s involved a redefinition not only of its relationship with the United States but also with the rest of the Americas, as expressed in Canada's finally joining the Organization of American States in 1990.

By 1995, Canada expressed its strong commitment to "devote close attention to Mexico, a partner of growing importance.... Canada and Mexico have much to gain and learn from each other through further cooperation in NAFTA. This relationship holds promise over time in other spheres as well, including close cooperation in a broad range of multilateral institutions such as the United Nations."⁸

Beyond North America, Mexico and Canada have found common ground for cooperation on international issues. They include the support of international law and interna-

⁸ *Canada in the World. Government Statement*, Public Works and Government Services Canada, Catalogue No. E2-147/1995, p. 17.



President Ernesto Zedillo addresses a Canadian delegation of businessmen. To his right, Ambassador Sandra Fuentes.

tional organizations, the liberalization of world trade, the protection of the environment and the fight against drug trafficking, among others, along with calling for an end to the embargo against Cuba.

Mexico and Canada have also given priority to strengthening ties with countries in the Pacific and Latin American regions. This interest has allowed us to increase consultations in regional organizations such as the OAS and APEC.

Finally, we have been successful in promoting a closer relationship between our countries because our societies and economies are clearly complementary.

Our respective climates, demographic structure, level of economic development and technological advancement provide us with countless opportunities to complement each other.

Recently announced joint ventures indicate that Canadian business people would like to take advantage of the Mexican experience in order to expand their markets into Latin America, while Mexicans acquire the latest technology from Canada. Even more encouraging to see are the joint ventures directed toward penetrating regions of the U.S. market where the presence of either Mexican or Canadian products has been limited.

All these elements undoubtedly converged into the materialization of NAFTA. Mexico, Canada and the U.S. look to NAFTA to oversee their trade relationship, to increase the integration of their economies and to solve their frequent trade disputes. The three countries, and most organizations and sectors within each one, agree that clear and permanent rules need to be established for our economic exchanges, for creating jobs and ensuring long-term, sustainable development in North America. It is vital to promote cooperation and mutual benefit rather than competition and confrontation.

NAFTA was a means of realizing this goal. Although not a panacea, it certainly is an important tool for development.

NAFTA is also the expression of a stronger, self-assured Mexico that casts aside its doubts and suspicions in order to establish a relationship with its northern neighbors based on equality, cooperation and respect.

Furthermore, NAFTA was inevitable because unless North America devises a coherent strategy to integrate its economies, there is no possibility of successfully facing the tough economic competition of the integrated regions of Europe and the Pacific region.

At the same time, for both Mexico and Canada, NAFTA represented an opportunity to inject new dynamism into their relationship with their largest trading partner.

Since its implementation, exports of Mexican goods to Canada have increased almost three times more than growth in exports to Canada by non-NAFTA countries.

In terms of investment, Canadian interest in Mexico has increased substantially. In spite of the economic crisis that has affected Mexico, commercial and investment ventures between the two countries keep multiplying.

Mexico's current administration gives high priority to our ties with Canada. President Ernesto Zedillo has referred to Canada as a strategic ally with whom we can present common positions in various regional and global fora.

Mexico sees Canada as part of North America, as a permanent partner for dialogue and initiatives; as a friend that lives in and is part of the continent.... Mexico is interested in developing closer ties with Canada, a nation built upon a rich diversity which is the foundation of its strength and which vigorously shoulders continuous transformation."⁹

If there were to be a change in Mexico's policy toward Canada, it should be to set higher goals for our relationship. In the last five years, we have made effective and frequent use of bilateral consultation mechanisms such as the Joint Ministerial Commission to analyze issues of common interest and to advance in our relationship.

During the past few years, Mexico signed approximately 30 agreements with Canada. This is a significant number in itself, but even more so if we consider that between 1982 and 1988 our two countries signed only two.

In a sense, our exchanges have gained impressive momentum which will be carried well into the next century. This is due in part to the fact that the goal of forming a new partnership with Canada is supported by the most influential members of Mexican society. They vary from university professors and students to union leaders, business people and government officials.

We need to continue exploring areas of cooperation which will become strong building blocks in our collaboration.

At the same time, we have to get to know each other better. We must continue to strengthen the ties we already share.

Our relationship has evolved over the years. We have not only accepted the realities of the silent integration which has occurred in North America over the last few decades, but we have also learned to take advantage of the complementary aspects of our economies.

Obviously, there has been a profound change in our mutual perception. We have become partners in a common project. That is, the construction of a society which assures sustained economic growth within a framework of freedom and social justice.

As political and economic progress in Mexico is the sole responsibility of Mexicans, countries such as Canada

can play an important role in this process through cooperation and the promotion of a better understanding of our reality.

This is why our relationship must continue to grow while respecting our differences and taking advantage of our similarities.

This way, we will ensure that future generations of Mexicans and Canadians benefit from the opportunities offered by cooperation and democracy. *W*



Building where the offices of the Mexican Embassy are located in Ottawa, the capital of Canada.

⁹ Address of Dr. Ernesto Zedillo, president of the United Mexican States, before the Canadian Parliament, Ottawa, June 11, 1996.