

From Nutka to Nunavut Why Canada Is Important to Mexico

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What immediately comes to mind when the reader sees the title of this article will probably be formal diplomatic relations between Mexico and Canada, government to government, managed from Mexico City and Ottawa. Naturally, these are important because they are the institutional and most visible side of the exchanges between both our countries.

But, in this article, I would like to deal with some less well known aspects, specifically underlining that 1) the relationship between Mexico and Canada is older and more complex than it seems and 2) making relations closer could be enormously beneficial for Mexico.

Formal diplomatic relations were established in 1944, only 55 years ago. But the first contacts between what is now Mexico and what is now Canada date back more than 400 years.

In the 1570s, explorers Juan de Fuca and Bartolomé Fonte left the port of San Blas, Nayarit, heading north in search of a passage to link the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Venturing north of California they arrived at what they thought was

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their much sought-after channel. What they christened the “Fuca Channel” was actually the body of water south of Vancouver Island on today’s western U.S.-Canadian border. It was then decided that the northwestern Pacific Ocean limit of New Spain was that enormous island.

Nevertheless, although Spain theoretically established sovereignty over this vast territory, it did not do much to truly integrate it into the rest of New Spain. Two hundred years later, in 1774, a new expedition explored Vancouver Island and christened a small island adjacent to it, San Lorenzo de Nutka. The Spanish estab-

lished a post there and began to exchange European goods for otter skins with the indigenous peoples of the region.

However, other actors would soon come on the scene. In 1778, English explorer James Cook crossed the Pacific and landed on what is now Vancouver Island, claiming it as an English possession. He was also motivated by the trade in otter pelts that the English traders sold in Asia for big money. Aware of the need to make the Spanish presence in the region more categorically felt, the Crown sent a military detachment under the command of Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra.

In 1788, the conflict sharpened. Great Britain declared war on Spain over the possession of Nutka Island. The war never broke out, thanks to a diplomatic agreement between Madrid and London finally arrived at in 1791 and according to which both powers would share not only Nutka but also the large adjacent island. London sent George Vancouver to execute the peace treaty. By common consent with the commander of the Spanish garrison, they christened the island “Vancouver and Quadra Island,” which remained its official name until Mexican independence rendered Spain incapable of exercising its sovereignty in the area.

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Today, the capital of the Canadian province of British Columbia, Victoria, is located on Vancouver Island. There, across from the provincial House of Parliament, a small historical monument has been placed: a bust of Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra. Also, the channel south of the island continues to be called Juan de Fuca Strait.

Two years after the diplomatic agreement, in 1793, Spain sent a scientific expedition to the region, mainly to make

Mexico published the complete report, including drawings and etchings done by Mociño and his assistants of maps, places and people.¹

So, relations between Mexico and Canada go much further back than the establishment of formal diplomatic relations. Actually, contact has been constant for the simple but fundamental reason that Mexicans and Canadians share the same North American continent. The actual distance between Mexico and

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an inventory of its natural resources. The 13-year-long expedition ventured even further north along the Pacific Coast, all the way to Alaska. The expedition's only survivor was Mexican José Mariano Mociño y Losada, born in Temascaltepec in what is now the State of Mexico. On his return, he wrote a detailed account of the region's natural resources—flora, fauna and minerals—as well as of its inhabitants. That is, long before Canadians interested themselves in studying Mexico, a Mexican was studying Canada.

Mociño went to Spain to write his report, which he called “News from Nutka.” Given the political turmoil unleashed by the invasion of Napoleon's armies, Mociño's manuscript was never published, and it languished for two centuries in the royal archives in Madrid. But, last year, the National Autonomous University of

Canada is smaller than that between Mexico and Europe. It is also more easily traveled because it can be done by land. If these contacts are not often noticed, it is due to something just as important for Mexico as for Canada: the presence of our common neighbor, the most important economic and military power in the world.

I would like to illustrate this idea with an example. As I have indicated, the two countries have had diplomatic relations since 1944. But the first 45 years of those relations were basically what I call “friendly indifference”: a cordial, but not very substantial, relationship. In 1971, formal mechanisms for consultation between executive branches were established and in 1975, for consultation between legislative branches (the so-called Mexico-Canada Ministerial Commissions and

Interparliamentary Meetings). These meetings, however, were sporadic and their final agreements not very important for either country's international agenda.

It was only with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that this began to change. Suddenly, both countries discovered that their priorities overlapped on common issues: access to the U.S. market and an interest in attracting more U.S. investment. It was through this common interest that Mexico and Canada “rediscovered” each other and made sure the trade agreement benefited both of them.

This idea, however, was not new. There is an interesting precedent that could be considered the “grandfather” of trade relations between Canada and Mexico.

In 1854, Canada established a treaty for mutual trade with the United States granting both parties trade preferences. The accord was beneficial for both countries because Canada provided mainly raw materials and the United States, manufactured products. However, the U.S. Civil War changed things. The U.S. economy, distorted by the war, concentrated on the production of arms and was forced to import basic supplies and consumption items. This benefited Canada more than U.S. interests thought prudent. True to the behavior that it continues to display today of being for free trade when it has the advantage and protectionist when it has deficits, the U.S. government unilaterally canceled the treaty for trade reciprocity.

As is only natural, this affected Canadian interests, which at the same time were dealing with the abolition of Great Britain's Corn Laws, which established the mother country's trade preferences

for her colonies. The Canadians then conceived an alternative trade strategy: approaching the Latin American markets, particularly that of Mexico, to establish a confederated trade council. With the support of London, in January 1866 a Canadian trade mission left for Latin America. Although it had initially included Mexico on the itinerary, it did not actually travel there because its members thought—quite rightly so—that any agreement made with Maximilian’s imperial government, at that time in outright decline, had no possibility of being applied. In the end, the initiative’s promoters realized how difficult it was to come to preferential agreements with Latin America because Canada’s small market made reciprocal trade with these countries unviable.

Nevertheless, the Canadians did not cease their attempts to foster trade with Mexico. A. W. Donly, the first Canadian commissioner of trade visited Mexico in 1905. Between 1920 and 1940, and then at the end of the 1960s, efforts were made to increase trade between Mexico and Canada. These efforts were formalized in agreements in 1931 and 1970. In 1931, Mexico’s Minister of Communications and Public Works, Juan A. Almazán, made an official visit to Canada. On his return, he wrote a letter to President Emilio Portes Gil saying,

There are probably no two countries in the world so susceptible to complementing each other as admirably as Canada and Mexico...[being located as they are] on the same continent with the facility of communicating by both oceans.²

This statement, that almost 70 years later sounds prophetic, is no more than

the express recognition of a potential that has yet to be completely realized. As I have written elsewhere, Canada is the “indispensable alternative” and, indeed, the most immediate one for the diversification of Mexico’s foreign relations, both on a governmental and a societal level.

The main, recurring obstacle to this deepening of the relationship occurs when it is mediated by another country, first Great Britain and later the United

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States. Even today, many Mexican products are exported to Canada via the United States and vice versa. This distorts Mexican-Canadian trade figures, particularly with regard to Mexican exports.

This situation also exists around political issues. It is time we became aware of Mexico’s and Canada’s common interests and explored the enormous potential for cooperation between the two in order to take maximum advantage of it. The following are some of the fields in which that cooperation could be particularly fruitful:

a) *Foreign policy.* The way in which Mexican and Canadian international activities coincide (literally) is amazing. The two countries have always voted quite similarly in the United Nations. For example, neither broke relations with

Cuba, for the same reasons: a desire to mark their differences with U.S. policy.

Initially it was just a coincidence: each party acted on its own, but arrived at the same result. A convergence of policies, truly concerted action, is very incipient. I will mention two very important instances: the common opposition to the Helms-Burton Act and a joint effort to establish a free trade zone including all countries in the Americas. Ottawa and our Foreign Affairs Ministry

are quite right in opposing the extraterritorial application of a U.S. law that, in addition to its political implications, would attempt to stop the profitable business dealings with Cuba that they are able to carry out because they did not break diplomatic relations. With the U.S. executive’s hands tied by the House of Representatives, where protectionist proclivities are most clearly expressed, Mexico and Canada have become the champions of free trade in the Americas.

b) *Education,* particularly higher education. Canada has a first-rate, world-class university system that is an interesting alternative for Mexican students who want to study abroad. In addition to its excellent academic level, students can study in English or in French, or, depending on the location, in both; tuition

is much lower than in the United States and is controlled by provincial governments. On the other hand, Canada is a safe and pleasant place to live. This is especially important for Mexicans because Canadian do not have the same prejudices against us as Americans do, which spark unpleasant experiences there.

c) *Academic exchanges.* These are important because they favor better mutual understanding between our two countries. I sincerely believe that Mexicans can learn many important things from Canadians, particularly with regard to the advancement of democracy and development. Canada has not only developed its formal democratic institutions, but it is also an example of civility and tolerance. In addition, Canadian capitalism is different in that it combines the economic system with solidarity, with a state commitment to its people's well being. Historically, we Mexicans have been obsessed with following the political and economic example of the United States. This obsession is very powerful today despite the signs of decomposition in U.S. society and politics and the structural inequalities of its economy. I think it is time to look closer at the Canadian example.

For this reason it is important to promote Canadian studies in Mexico. Several universities in our country have created centers for Canadian studies, included courses on Canada in their curricula or established graduate programs to train specialists in Canada. Special mention should be made here of the Masters program in U.S. and Canadian studies at the Autonomous University of Sinaloa.

A concrete, very timely, example of how Canada can be a source of inspira-

tion for solving current problems in Mexico is Nunavut. Last April 1, Canada's territory went through an important transformation. Nunavut, a new territory, was created in the extreme northwest part of the country. Nunavut means "our land" in Inuktitut, the language of the Inuit (incorrectly known as Eskimos).

Nunavut is the result of a long negotiation process that began in the 1970s between the Canadian Arctic indigenous

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peoples and the federal government. Led by an organization legitimized by consensus, the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, the Inuit were able to overcome federal resistance and fears of their self-government. They accepted in exchange not requesting exceptional status or a different kind of government to those that already existed in Canada (federal, provincial and municipal) and being a territory under federal jurisdiction, whose government would be elected according to the rules that apply in the rest of Canada. Since they represent 85 percent of the territory's 22,000 inhabitants, how-

ever, they are assured of a majority in the legislature, where the government is elected. In addition, they introduced some innovations in their own organization that reflect Inuit ancestral customs:

* Members of parliament will not belong to political parties, but will come out of the communities and govern by consensus;

* The government will be highly decentralized; in addition to the capital, Iqaluit, nine regional centers will manage the public administration, dividing ministry headquarters among them.

* The official language is Inuktitut.

In addition, it is to be expected that the first legislature will approve laws that reflect traditional Inuit forms of government even further.

Concretely, the lesson of Nunavut for Mexico is that federalism is the solution for reconciling unity and diversity. The recognition of self-government for groups who differ from the majority national culture does not mean the destruction of the state, but its enrichment as a qualitatively superior democracy.

Now that Mexico is preparing to begin a new millennium, it can find inspiration in the Canadian example to solve some of its most pressing problems. ■■■

NOTES

¹ José Mariano Mociño y Losada, *Noticias de Nutka* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1998).

² C.M.Ogelsby, *Gringos from the Far North. Essays in the History of Canadian-Latin American Relations, 1866-1968* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1976), p. 75.