



The World Today

Canada and CARICOM: A Relationship That Endures

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The publication in 2005 by the then Liberal Administration of Paul Martin of Canada's most recent policy review entitled: Canada's International Policy Statement: A Role of Pride and Influence in the World, has caused some concern among Caribbean foreign policy analysts interested in Canada's role in the region. This is not surprising and stems from what many perceive as the omission of the Commonwealth Caribbean (CARICOM) from the document signalling in their view the marginalization of the region from Canada's foreign policy orbit.

It is true that with the exception of Haiti, CARICOM has not been specifically identified for special consideration or treatment in the areas highlighted in the Canadian review. While this constitutes some reason for concern, the region need not be unduly pessimistic about the future since the Caribbean has much going for it in Ottawa; and this, notwithstanding, the recent change in political administration from a Liberal to a Conservative government.

The Caribbean relationship with Canada is as good today as it has ever been and is reflected in the Canada – Caribbean collaborative agenda which now defines and delineates the priorities and goals of the relationship for the next decade or so. This agenda covers a wide range of issues of mutual concern.

While Canada continues to concede the importance of strengthening commercial relations as critical for Caribbean development, Ottawa has also began to apply equal weight to other areas of growing interest. These include the strengthening of civil society, promoting democratic governance and supporting economic and social development. By the beginning of the new millennium to this day, this agenda has expanded to include neoliberal economic reforms such as privatization, deregulation, trade liberalization and widened market access; sustainable development, enhanced peacekeeping, anti-drug trafficking assistance, environmental protection and international terrorism and security.

Not surprisingly this heavy agenda has necessitated closer collaboration between Canada and CARICOM – a task made easier by the shared and common value-based priorities of both parties. Their common institutional culture and democratic values and Canada's reputation as a non-colonial power with a distinguished record of multilateralism – help to make the implementation of this agenda easier.

What is of special significance in the politics of the Americas is the strong Canada-CARICOM axis which has now emerged within the Organization of American States (OAS) especially since Canada entered the organization in 1989. The emergence of this axis has brought its democratic influence, tradition and perspective to bear on the deliberations of the OAS. Nowhere is this more evident than in the deliberations relating to Haiti where both Canada and CARICOM continue to play major roles in the establishment of democracy and by extension make a much wider hemispheric commitment to conflict resolution in the Americas as a whole. Both provided peacekeeping forces in Haiti during the political crises of the last fifteen years, granted financial assistance and technical expertise to facilitate the growth of a reliable and organized constitutional infrastructure for democratic elections, and worked together to monitor political and economic developments.

In the context of hemispheric security and the illicit drug trade, Canada and CARICOM have jointly endorsed the Barbados Plan of Action and the Guatemala Dialogue on Drugs and have agreed, among other things, that 'hard power' alone (that is economic and military power) is not enough to solve this intractable and globalized problem. Rather, tackling the drug problem requires co-operative action among governments, the support and involvement of non-state actors and a close working relationship with multi-lateral drug bodies.

Similarly, constitutional governance has been a subject of contemporary interest to both partners. Both, from a peace building perspective, have been heavily committed to civilian rule, democratic values, tolerance, respect for human rights and stable political institutions. In this regard, Canada-CARICOM cooperation has generated in recent times bilateral dialogues on a host of topics, including human rights in Cuba, Haiti and Guyana; women's rights, minority rights and other issues. CARICOM has also supported Canada's call for a revamping of the Inter-American human rights system and the promotion of national human rights institutions within the Americas, such as human rights commissions and ombudsman's offices. Both have also constructively contributed to the final completion and passage of the Ottawa initiated Landmines Convention and through the Treaty of Rome, the establishment of the International Criminal Court.

Canada has also extended a sympathetic ear and an understanding disposition to CARICOM as the latter grapples with the process of international trade liberalization. Over the last fifteen years the Caribbean has been understandingly preoccupied with the gradual disappearance of trade preferences and heavily involved in the Cotonou negotiations, the negotiation of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). In all these discussions Caribbean states argue that they are more vulnerable to the challenges of trade liberalization, and that such vulnerability should be factored into the making of international trade rules. Of particular significance is the impact which the lowering of tariffs would have on their public revenues.

Canada has remained sympathetic to these concerns; yet while Ottawa has been a strong advocate of trade liberalization, it has committed itself to consider provisions in

trade agreements for special and differential treatment for these countries on the understanding that eventually preferences would be phased out. This is as much as CARICOM could expect.

There is little doubt that Canada-CARICOM bonds are strong and deep today as they were yesterday. This closeness has been nurtured by a common historical legacy, democratic ideals and a similar worldview. Canadian governments, whether Conservative or Liberal, have always extended a helping hand to the region so much so that there has been very little difference in the way respective Canadian administrations have responded to regional needs. Both Liberal and Conservative administrations have been great friends of CARICOM since the end of World War 2 and have respectively done much to nurture and sustain what has traditionally been termed the 'special relationship' between Canada and the Caribbean.

The new collaborative Canada-CARICOM agenda of today guarantees an element of continuity in this relationship. The salience of the issues in the agenda makes this inevitable. The Canadian Foreign Policy Review of 2005, for all its shortcomings, does not imply the marginalization of the region. The pillars constructed over centuries of political and economic cooperation to uphold the bilateral edifice are so strong that even by themselves provide reasonable guarantees that Canada is not likely to drift away from the Caribbean.