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FEATURE // REPORTAGE
Multilateralism to a Latin Beat
CANADA’S 30 YEARS AT THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES

by Jamie Lambert, Secretary for Hemispheric Affairs, Organization of American States

THE BEAUX-ARTS GRANDEUR OF THE CARNEGIE-BUILT EDIFICE that houses the Organization of American States (OAS) speaks to the unifying aspirations of the Pan-American movement. Situated on the Washington Mall just four blocks from the White House, it recalls the formation in 1889 of the world’s oldest regional institution, initially in the form of the Pan-American Union and, since 1948, recast as the OAS.
A DIFFERENT AND DARKER NARRATIVE can be set out around preponderance of US power in the organization over a period that embraced the jingoism of the Spanish-American conflict of the early 20th century and the incursions, despotism and cruelty perpetrated by military regimes in the four decades following WWII.

Since the 1990s, however, the Organization has undergone a rebirth of sorts. Shedding a history intertwined with the Monroe Doctrine and the Cold War, the OAS has latterly embraced a more vigorous role in advancing democratic practice and as a champion of human rights.

While not the only factor at play, it was not accidental that this evolution coincided with Canada’s entry into the Organization in 1990. Indeed, many of the principles now enshrined as OAS core doctrine such as democracy, human rights, gender mainstreaming and the importance of engaging civil society bear Canada’s imprint.

As set out below, on top of the clout that Canada would immediately wield as the second largest contributor to the organization, three qualities have made an important difference – (1) people; (2) ideas; and (3) organizational savvy. Helpful on their own, these assets were even more effective on those occasions when cabinet-level interest in the region could be engaged as an accelerant.

People

From the outset, Canada sent to the Permanent Mission professional diplomats steeped in the region and fluent in its four main languages. At the Ambassadorial level the Mission benefitted from the leadership of end-of-career experts such as Jean-Paul Hubert, Brian Dickson, Paul Durand and Allan Culham, and up-and-comers like Peter Boehm (now Senator) and Graeme Clark (now HOM in Mexico) whose enthusiasm for the region would continue to mark their career paths.

Still another cohort, often (but not always) drawn from the ranks of former diplomats, brought their accumulated skill sets to bear within the OAS General Secretariat itself. Without belittling the contribution of others who would follow, no one has seized this role with greater effectiveness and aplomb than did John Graham.

In the early 1990s, having recently retired from his final departmental assignment as Ambassador to Venezuela, John brought to the OAS the same infectious enthusiasm that had coloured his earlier tours in Havana and as Director General responsible for the region (see John’s book, Whose Man in Havana?, University of Calgary Press, 2015). Once through the doors of the OAS, he proceeded in close collaboration with Hugo de Zela (Peruvian diplomatic savant and then-chief of staff to Secretary General Baena Soares) to mount a golpe organizacional that would shape the future purpose and relevance of the OAS – the establishment of the Unit for the Promotion of Democracy (UPD).

In later years, Graham’s leadership on democracy and governance issues within the OAS passed on to other Canadians such as Elizabeth Spehar and Chris Hernandez Roy who would continue to strengthen the UPD and its successor units. More recently, as organizational development has become a leading Canadian priority, others such as Adam Blackwell, Suzanne Laporte and I have, with the support of the Canadian government, been parachuted into the OAS with a view to help modernize administrative practices.

These Canadian multilateralists sought to modernize and change the OAS and the region. So, it is not surprising that they encountered resistance along the way.

Mention the name of any of these actors in the OAS secretariat, including Canada’s current Minister of International Development Karina Gould, who worked on migration and...
The critical accelerator – political engagement

Cabinet-level interest was certainly present when Canada signed on in 1990, as entry into the OAS came in the wake of growing concern by the Mulroney government about the peace process in war-torn Central America. Mulroney’s enthusiasm was still on display in 2010 at the celebration of Canada’s 20 years in the OAS when both he and Joe Clark spoke evocatively of Canada’s entry as an important part of their shared foreign policy legacy. However, the apogee of Canada’s impact came a decade after accession when, with the agreement of Prime Minister Chrétien and Foreign Minister Axworthy, the full kit of political engagement tools were unpacked around the OAS.

This had begun with Minister Axworthy’s participation in the OAS Commission that had been created to deal with the electoral crisis provoked by President Fujimori’s autogolpe in Peru. Contemporary concern about safeguarding democratic practice was seized upon by Canada, which stepped up politically and financially to host back-to-back the 30th OAS General Assembly in Windsor (in 2000) and the Third Summit of the Americas in Quebec City (in 2001). This created the glide path toward agreement at Quebec to negotiate and implement the Inter-American Democratic Charter, the Organization’s definitive statement on democratic practice. Ongoing attention to the region was facilitated by the designation of Christine Stewart in 1993 as Secretary of State (Latin America and Africa). This split geographic position was subsequently filled until the end of the Chrétien government by Ministers of State David Kilgour and Denis Paradis.

The Harper government’s whole-of-government America’s Strategy arguably placed greater emphasis on bilateral rather than multilateral instruments. This involved considerably ramping up ministerial visits in support of the consolidation of bilateral trade and investment accords. Building on that, preventive action to secure State position solely focused on the Americas, the Conservative government established (for a period) a new and useful dedicated political link. The innovation was well, particularly in the person of Peter Kent, who brought it to a journalist’s sense of the importance of key contacts and good working Spanish. Once his interest was piqued, those same qualities led to a very new and useful dedicated political link. The innovation was well, particularly in the person of Peter Kent, who brought it to a journalist’s sense of the importance of key contacts and good working Spanish. Once his interest was piqued, those same qualities led to a very

The bottom line is that over 30 years Canadian officials, both inside the Organization and at the mission accredited to it, have deployed Canada’s multilateral skillset deftly. Bolstered by a significant financial footprint, the organizational savvy of these Canadian practitioners has made an important difference in the orientation and effectiveness of the OAS – particularly in those moments when consistent and strategic cabinet-level engagement has been present as an accelerator.