

From the editor

Fox's New Mexico: Is It More Than Smoke and Mirrors?

Too few Canadians understand the importance and significance of the Fox administration. Not since the coming to power of Castro over 40 years ago has there been such a signal change in political regime in the hemisphere. The question is whether the modern presidency of Fox is all spin thanks to the small army of communications specialists he has hired to give his presidency a modern, forward-looking image as a branded product. Canadians also want to know whether, beyond the glitter and hoopla, unannounced and unheralded, there is a quiet revolution happening in Mexico, a transition from one-party rule to modern democracy. If there is, what's the evidence for it?

This special issue of *Canada Watch*, "The New Mexico Under Fox: Is It Happening?" offers a unique behind-the-scenes examination of the first six months of the Fox administration. All of the contributors are specialists and the issue is a joint effort of the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies and Center of North American Studies (CISEAN), UNAM in Mexico City.

Fox, like Chrétien, was elected as a reformer and an alternative to the discredited neo-liberal policies of his predecessor. But the public's confidence with newly elected governments quickly turns to disillusionment if promises are not kept. The result is public apathy, low voter turnout, and cynicism. As many Mexican contributors to this issue contend, the Fox administration enjoyed one of the highest approval ratings of any modern presidency, but in many policy areas the change in political power has been one more of style than substance. Will voter apathy and disillusionment be far behind?

Many Mexicans have become Fox skeptics and have lost their innocence about Mexico's transition to democracy. Why?

PUBLIC APATHY AND ANGER

The Fox government has learned to manage the public rather than serve its needs and interests. So far his administration has not addressed Mexico's crushing debt. Public sector debts amount to 48 percent of GDP. With such indebtedness, Fox will have precious few resources for addressing Mexico's most pressing social issues—poverty, public housing, health care, a modern education system, environmental issues, and labour reform.

It is disturbing that initially Fox wanted to tax the poor more for food, medicine, and

other necessities. Mexico has one of the most leaky tax systems in Latin America and the wealthy—the rich and foreign corporations—do not pay their fair share. Some experts argue that the Fox administration does not have to raise taxes but to simply collect the taxes that are owed them by rich Mexicans. Its administrative system is so corrupt and inefficient that one of the first steps the Fox presidency needed to take was to reform the government. So far there is little evidence that this task is a priority on his legislative agenda.

Some reform is happening but it is at the edges of government and there is little sign that Fox has the political commitment to make a clean break with the past.

The paradox is that Mexico, like Canada, has highly organized, sophisticated, and experienced social movement groups, which could be a formidable opponent to Fox's rather disappointing start. The fact that increasingly it is the domestic arena that defines Mexico's foreign policy interests will surprise few. The high-profile issues for Mexico's civil society are not those of the hemisphere.

Where does this leave Canada and its relationship with Mexico? Our trade with Mexico is small, even if growing. To raise it to 5 percent of our total exports from its current mini-levels as a share of total exports would take nothing short of a revolution on Canada's and Mexico's part.

Simply put, the glue between Canada and Mexico will never be economic; rather, it will be geopolitical, to limit U.S. intrusion into Canadian and Mexican affairs. As contributors to this special issue of *Canada Watch* underline, the fit between the *dos amigos* has never been easy, even if (in theory) the timing for a much closer relationship could not be better. Politics in international relations is never a theoretical exercise. So far a closer Canada-Mexico accord has not happened naturally, spontaneously, or effortlessly.

Public policy experts need to get up to speed and figure out where the obstacles are. Canadians and Mexicans need to look at the different kinds of initiatives and frameworks that would lead to a strategic alliance. It seems a lot to expect and much is riding on it. For 50 years Mexicans and Canadians have been looking at each anxiously across the continental dance floor and it's time they learned to fox-trot together.

—Daniel Drache
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