

A Time for Mexico?

A contemporary cliché tells us that every problem comes with an opportunity if only we can find it. One hopes this is so in the case of Mexico, which finds itself in a difficult situation in the wake of Donald Trump's presidency.

This week's Postmedia editorial, "Putting People First Will Win the Day" (*Peterborough Examiner* 14 Nov. 2017), has pointed out the many ways in which the political climate in the US has "elbowed its way into Canadian public discourse."

Like Canada, Mexico is attempting to negotiate a new NAFTA agreement with its largest trading partner, a neighbour which is aggressively determined to make sure that the new agreement favours it. But Mexico is in a more difficult position than Canada.

From the start of his campaign, the American president has adopted an adversarial approach to Mexico. Although frustrated, the US continues to say that it will build a wall on its southern border. In NAFTA negotiations, it aims to redress what he sees as an unacceptable balance of trade between the US and Mexico.

In Canada, many have suggested that our best NAFTA strategy is to quietly let the United States engage in its tug of war with Mexico – in the hopes that it will pay less attention to its negotiations with us. Ongoing arguments about softwood lumber tariffs, automobile manufacturing and Bombardier suggest that this may not be as easy as it sounds.

In my own case, the catalyst for ruminations of this sort are a recent trip to Puebla and Mexico City. In Mexico, I spoke at a conference, visited universities to discuss collaborations, and met with the undersecretary of state for education (Mexican education is a federal responsibility). I returned thinking that this is the right time for Canada to establish closer relations with the country on the southern side of our shared neighbour.

In part, the opportunities for Canada are a reflection of an American failure to capitalize on its natural synergies with Mexico. The US is the most fitting ally for Mexico. Some 50 million Americans speak Spanish, including a remarkable 18% of New Yorkers. More deeply, Mexican immigration has been a profound factor in the development of the US, and has created deep family ties which connect it to Mexico.

Instead of seeing this as an asset, the US has (foolishly, in my opinion) viewed it as a problem. It has compounded the issue by pursuing immigration policies which are virtually unenforceable and indulging in myths that distort the realities of life in America.

In such a situation there are many opportunities for Canada. The Mexican Undersecretary of Education has told me Mexico plans to create an entire education system that is bilingual – Spanish and English – from kindergarten to university. At Trent we will be working with the Ministry to make Peterborough a destination for such students, and have already seen a spike in interest from Mexican students eager to come and study internationally (but not in the United States). On our campus they have provided us with a boost in our revenue and our morale, bringing with them their own *alegría por vivir*.

There are many similar opportunities. We need only recognize that a healthy, positive relationship with

Mexico cannot be a one-way street. It needs to be solidified with a Canadian interest in Mexico. In the case of universities, having students and faculty study and research in Mexico – as well as the other way around. Having been impressed by Puebla in particular, this is something I can recommend.

This is the right time for Canada to forge strong links to Mexico.