

THE PAN-AMERICAN GAME

Canada and Central America

BY BRIAN K. MURPHY

IT IS early December and I am on a late-night flight from Washington to Ottawa. I have been travelling since 6 a.m. and my nerves are jarred by the loud talk of some Americans travelling together just behind me at the back of the plane. While the group exhibits the boisterous chumminess of an overly keen sports team, in fact it is a team of senior American free-trade negotiators, led by a plaster-grinned Peter Murphy, on their way to Ottawa for the final marathon weekend negotiations that ultimately lead to the announcement of a final text on December 8.

Apparently oblivious to the rest of us on the plane, mostly Canadians with our own ideas about free trade, the Yanks discussed the negotiations with a crude confidence I would normally associate with tourists, overloud in their brash insecurity. Or perhaps it was just the kind of talk one should expect from a group who realize that they have won economic control of a continent. One chap speculated on whether the Canadians would agree to raise tariffs on Cuban sugar; recognizing that the Canadians (always referred to as "they") were a bit sensitive to the appearance that Washington was directing Canadian foreign policy, he joked that the agreement could just specify tariffs against "red" sugar, and Canadians would be none the wiser. On landing in snowbound Ottawa, another person guffawed that what they should do is pipe hot water up here to melt all the snow, and in return they could take back everything they wanted. Her companion snickered that that was essentially what was happening anyway, so why bother piping the water.

On any day this experience would be irritating. But this day it was particularly bracing as that morning, after 30 days travelling extensively throughout Central America, I was coming from El Salvador – another place experiencing the unique benefits of American interest. Already convinced of the threat to Canadian sovereignty and culture by the hemispheric hegemony of the U.S., and therefore of the critical self-interest of Canadians in supporting the struggles for national and social independence in Central America, this grating experience with my benevolent American cousins was a salutary homecoming. It was a reminder that the most significant contribution Canadians could make at this time to the ultimate independence of Central Americans, would be to wage their own articulate political struggle against what Ronald Reagan has so candidly referred to as "a new economic

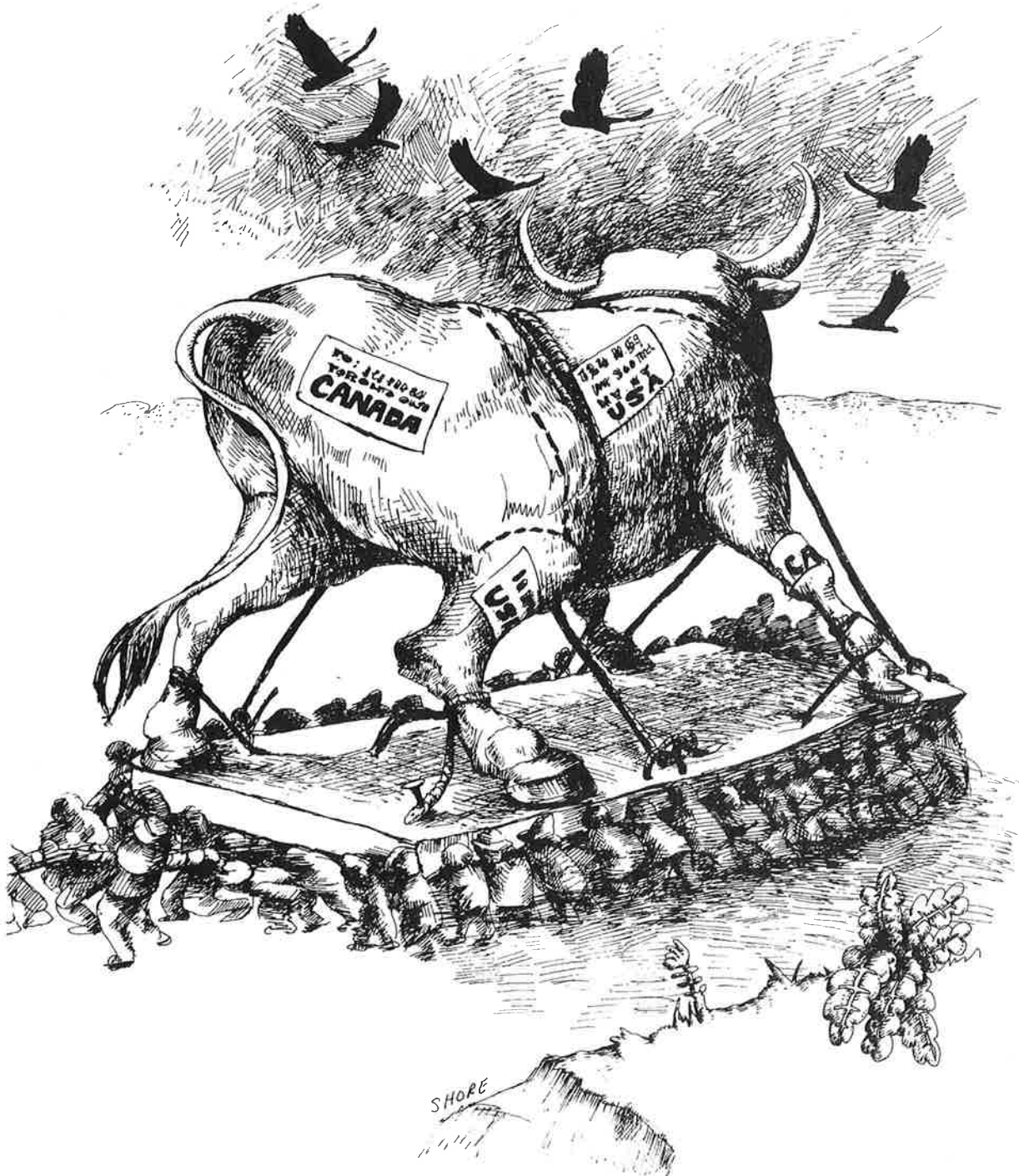
constitution for the North American continent."

Why is this so?

As I travelled in Central America in November, trying to understand the paradoxes and complexities of the region in the wake of Esquipulas II (the Guatemala, or Arias, Peace Plan), others were making their own pilgrimages – Oscar Arias, president of Costa Rica, was preparing for the Nobel Prize ceremonies in Oslo, while Joe Clark, earnest foreign minister of Canada, began an (apparently) mind-boggling eight-day trip to five Central American capitals, dispensing petite largesse and considerable confusion wherever he lit. (The tendency of the Guatemalan press to refer to him as Joe Lark, was probably just a mistake, but given that the minister's visit to this country was less than even a few hours, it may have been a sly joke.)

What is significant is that the campesino people I visited as I travelled knew little of Arias' Nobel Peace Prize, although they were aware of the dangerous tensions engendered by the daring peace plan that bore his name. They were completely oblivious of Mr. Clark's visit, which will never have the slightest effect upon their lives. And I was just another gringo moving through the drama of their lives, tolerated with generosity not because of the small assistance that I brought, but simply because I travelled with others whom they trusted. It is in the lives of these people, and of people not unlike them working on family farms, in maritime seaports and in urban factories in Canada, that we begin to see the connections that link the essentially nationalist struggles of the people of Central America with the long-term interests of Canadians in securing their own social, political, cultural, and economic autonomy and security.

There is a difficulty in discussing what is happening in Central America today because popular commentary on the region is so bound up in the vocabulary of revolution, insurrection and the vanguard on the one hand, and anticommunist freedom-fighting and democracy on the other. When terms like "revolution" are used to describe the Nicaraguan "process" and at the same time are integral to the name of the party that permanently rules Mexico, as well as various ultra-right parties throughout the region, the language has lost its currency. When a National Democratic Resistance (MNR) is in fact a band of Cuban-American and Nicaraguan mercenaries – known as Contras to some, and the "moral equivalent to the (American) founding fathers" to others – what guidelines do



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we have to the discourse? When the term democracy accurately describes all of the countries in question, we are left puzzling over the meaning of democracy, and freedom, and liberation. This is a much more significant problem than the more arcane debate about whether this or that election was actually fair and its results reflective of the "will of the people."

If this debate is to go beyond polemic and concentrate on a concrete vision for our own future, it is necessary to focus on what is happening in the region in more blunt terms – relying less on orthodoxy and the catechism of the left and right, and more on simple description of what is actually happening.

Central America, by which I mean the five countries south of Mexico and north of Panama, is not poor. It is rich and lush and productive. This wealth, however, is not owned by the people of Central America, nor even by the nations of Central America; it is owned by a tiny minority of families, a long-established oligarchy, and by the largely American-owned international companies they serve. They own not only the resources – the wealth, the land and the infrastructure – but also the people who produce the wealth, work the land and build the infrastructure. And they own and control the armies and death squads that protect their wealth and privilege and defend the system that rationalizes the *status quo* as natural and the will of god. These families don't often reside in the countries they own, living much of the time in more comfortable estates in the U.S. where they raise their children and maintain their immense fortunes in U.S. banks (one major source of capital offsetting the ever-growing U.S. deficit). The accumulated wealth that flows north every year greatly exceeds the total value of all development aid dispensed in Central America with such fanfare. Taxes on the income and property of the wealthy are so miniscule as to warrant the assertion that the rich pay virtually no taxes at all.

A small middle-class has emerged, that feeds the essential services, the bureaucracy, the line positions of the police and military, the informal local economy and small business, and the visible functions of politics and culture. The majority of the people are poor, and provide hard labour at starvation wages on demand, owning nothing, not even their birthright.

This description, while drawn with simple lines, is not an exaggeration. We are talking about a system that cannot be understood simply with images from Dickens extrapolated into Third World slums, nor analogies to feudalism, nor Hollywood cartoons of tin-pot generals and banana republics. And it cannot be understood simply by superimposing the dialectic patterns of classical Marxism. It is a system with its own unique characteristics, with discrete causes rooted in the colonial past (and common throughout Asia, Africa and the Americas), but actually created

in the U.S. expansion leading up to and following the First World War (and the Russian Revolution). The system consolidated in the economic and political order established in conjunction with the Marshall Plan after the Second World War.

In this system, the complete wealth of nations has been seen to be at the exclusive disposal of progress and the cause of Western (essentially American) ascendancy. It is embodied in the promotion of capitalism, liberalism and Christianity. The appointed stewards of the reserved wealth of these nations, which includes the human labour force, has been the established oligarchy – the families – nurtured, sponsored and protected by the economic interests of the U.S. metropole. As stewards they have amassed tremendous wealth that is not reinvested in their own land, culture and people, but in the safe investment houses of Miami and Wall Street which in turn use this very capital to further exploit the resources and wealth of the South.

As I say, the lines are drawn simply here, but they are essentially accurate and no complex expansion of the theme reveals a blunter truth: the existing plight of Central America is the manifestation of a planned, articulated and ongoing transfer of wealth from the South to the North, and that this wealth is the surplus of the muscle, blood, sweat, toil and poverty of millions of souls bound in forced labour throughout the region. As a key segment of the American economy, we in Canada (at least the 75 per cent above the poverty line) are direct beneficiaries of this transfer of wealth and will be even more directly implicated within the hemispheric strategy implicit in the American vision of free trade.

The millions of poor in Central America are maintained in their misery by a vicious and morbid ideology that justifies merciless repression against any attempts to transcend this absolute poverty and powerlessness. This ideology combines a number of historical elements: the psychological vestiges of the Conquest and the Spanish Inquisition (whose brutal and genocidal manifestation in Latin America cost literally millions of lives – another forgotten holocaust spewed out of the belly of Europe) which remains ingrained in the *Ladino* psyche; a flourishing remnant of 1920s European Facism (the period in which the present oligarchy reached its full-flower); the stunted self-hatred of American protestant fundamentalism (the new religion of choice for the *nouveau riche* and their political and military functionaries); and the vulgar power of the basest elements of anticommunist paranoia. This bizarre recipe for righteousness and cruelty is given momentum by greed unlimited by any humane constraints, least of all religious or democratic sensibilities.

Trapped within the structures of this ideology, the campesino and the labourer guard the flint-like

surface of their existence. Their original sin is to be poor, and for this birthmark they will pay all their lives and the lives of their children. It is also a sin to improve one's life, and such effort will bring attention and risk to the poor man or woman, who will have to demonstrate unquestionable loyalty to escape recrimination. It is the most serious sin – a mortal sin in effect, and usually a capital offence to boot – for a poor man or woman to try to improve his or her own life and the life of the neighbours as well; that is, to organize. Such efforts bring forth the wrath of God and man in all brutality.

Therein lies the struggle in Central America. The poor struggle against the violence of their poverty; the armed resistance fights a war against the repression of the poor in their struggle. The state is at war with its own people, and the U.S. defending its interests, fights at the side of wealth and privilege. Canada, essentially sharing these interests, whispers its independent policies while acquiescing to continental pragmatism in the knowledge that minor differences with the U.S. revolve around means, not ends, and that our wider interests are the same.

In this context the specific struggle for Nicaragua (the successful insurrection) has little to do with the material stakes within its borders – the spoils, so-to-speak. Rather the struggle is symbolic, representing a struggle between models, examples, possible futures, realities in conflict; or as the Sandinistas would have it, between the logic of the poor and the logic of the rich: between authentic national autonomy and subservient status as serfs to U.S. interests; between, in fact, two different visions of the hemisphere: a continentalist vision vs. a nationalist and regional vision.

These are the elements in the unfolding history of Central America, in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala most clearly, but also in Honduras. But it is not simply a story of good guys and bad guys, of rich and poor, of Zorro and the evil Commandante. It is not romantic guerrillas, noble poor, and iron soldiers. It is not even a holy war, but a more historical and profound conflict that began several decades ago and whose resolution is not inevitable. Most importantly, it is not the situation fantasized by political agnostics in which two factions, small and polarized – the army of greed and the army of Marx – fight to the death while the vast, innocent poor are caught in the middle of a struggle they neither want nor understand. If anything is made clear in an intimate visit to Guatemala and El Salvador, it is that the armed struggle is a struggle led not only in the name of the poor, the majority, but led by the poor, in their own name, and with the support and participation of the majority. In this sense these governments are absolutely correct when they justify their massacres by arguing that the

peasants are not innocent victims but active supporters of the armed resistance. That this is no justification for slaughtering unarmed noncombatants, mainly women and children, escapes the logic of wealth and privilege. But we do not need to dishonour the death of these hundreds of thousands slaughtered in recent history by declaring them innocent of active participation in their own history. For in this they are not innocent, as the success and duration of this long struggle attests. Rather it is we Canadians, even the internationalists and political solidaridists, who are Innocents, who look at the world with unformed eyes, unaware of the full extent to which we have been alienated from participating in our own history and future; and unaware of our silent participation in the suppression of millions in Central America and elsewhere in the Third World, even as we march and cry in solidarity with the blood of their martyrs.

Which brings me back to my flight from Washington with the foot soldiers of continental free trade.

What are often seen to be the issues in the free-trade debate in Canada are prosperity, progress, industry, regional parity, employment, commercial competitiveness, sometimes even culture – which in this context has tended to mean the media, and the entertainment business. Yet increasingly we hear of such issues as the risk to government-regulated and funded social services, or to universal social benefits like medical care and pensions, or to control over energy resources, issues that begin to hint at what really is being negotiated here and the shared assumptions behind these negotiations.

This is critical. It is not the details of a free-trade pact that are of significance in the long term, but rather the assumptions and premises implicit in the negotiations themselves about the inevitability and desirability of economic, social, cultural, and ultimately political integration of the continent, and the hemisphere. The quibbling (the negotiations and the debate in Canada about acceptable terms) is merely about the cost and benefits of the merger; the real issue, about whether Canadians want a merger, and what such a merger implies now and in the future, both for Canada and for the rest of the hemisphere, is lost.

Yet it is the merger itself that the present government and its supporters wish to achieve. This government and the Americans wish to achieve a continental economic unit and a shift in Canada to the political economy and social paradigm explicit in the American ideology of individualism and radical free enterprise. They could never accomplish this shift in a free debate held within Canada itself, since the elements of social democracy already achieved since the 1930s are an integral part of the Canadian political consensus and are not negotiable

within the electoral theatre. It is a continental economic unit that assumes integration of the entire hemisphere, including, especially, Mexico, but also the rich resources, cheap labour pool, and potential markets of Central America. It is an economic unit that inevitably assumes a homogenous political milieu, if not political integration, to ensure a sociopolitical environment that is stable, and most importantly, conducive to the free flow of capital, and the free exploitation of labour and resources. This is the American goal (and apparently that of the Mulroney government) both for Canada and for Mexico and Central America, that is, for the continent – the front and backyard, so-to-speak, of America. The emphasis on stability here is key in Central America, because the real priority for Central America in this vision is stability (for example, no inconvenient popular insurrections) and continued passivity in terms of resource exploitation (for example, uninhibited and cheap access to the oil reserves in Guatemala, estimated to be among the richest in the world). Central America is not envisioned as a serious consumer market in the foreseeable future because such a vision would assume radically improved living standards for the majority who are poor, and would contradict the higher priority on a cheap and passive labour force.

While it may not be clear to all that such a grand design is not a good vision for Canada and Canadians, it should be clear that it is definitely not a good vision for Central America, and for the various peoples of Central America. And for exactly the same reason that it is not a good vision for them, it is not a good vision for Canada and ordinary Canadians, who have everything to lose, socially and politically and culturally, and very little to gain (and much to lose) economically.

It is a classic situation for the best of all reality tests: who benefits from free trade and a “new economic constitution for the continent”; and who pays?

It is essential that Canadians who have professed concern and commitment to poor and working people in Canada and Central America, look at the questions in their broadest implications, over the longest term, testing their own visions against the visions, indeed stratagems, implicit in free trade and the present course of the Mulroney government. This is an issue where we have genuine and critical common cause with our friends in Central America, for our future and theirs, and this is the root of true solidarity – common cause, common struggle. If Mulroney and Reagan succeed in even a measure of legislated economic integration, the miniscule potential for an independent and ethical role for Canada as a partner of other nations and peoples in the region will be lost, for we will have formally and inextricably sided with a vision predicated on

the surrender of national self-determination and political and economic diversity in the hemisphere, for ourselves, let alone for Central Americans.

This will be a crucial test. Most Canadians probably do not feel particularly vulnerable economically in the short term to any specific details in what is seen as a complex and esoteric negotiation. The debate can appear to be somewhat academic and obtuse to people involved in other day-to-day struggles and more concrete problems in their lives and work. And perhaps the outcome even seems inevitable.

We cannot afford to acquiesce that easily; the issue is fundamental and germane to virtually all issues on the progressive activist spectrum and agenda, from peace and militarism to ecology and the environment, and especially to the agenda of independence and self-determination in the hemisphere. An activist based in one of the mainline protestant churches suggested the other day that those in Canada serious about the cause of anti-imperialism globally should drop everything else for the next several months and put all their energy into organizing and public education within the free-trade debate. A strong case could be made that he is absolutely right, and perhaps the strongest case would be made by some of the Central American activists who have told us for years that the best solidarity we could show for their struggle would be to fight for political change in our own society. If so, this is the moment. And the Central American connection is central to understanding the more fundamental issues. ■

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