BREAKING THE ICE:

THE NEW CANADIAN-MEXICAN RELATIONSHIP

by

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Abstract

This thesis is an account of the new Canadian-Mexican relationship, triggered by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), from a journalistic perspective. It assumes that the new bilateral relationship is a tool to counter-balance U.S. protectionism, and that it might create a more inclusive North America, by strengthening the links between non-governmental organizations. Therefore, this thesis explores the most significant moments of the relationship, such as the indigenous uprising in Mexico, Prime Minister Jean Chretien's visit to Mexico, the Quebec referendum, and Mexico's political and economic instability. It also explains the political culture and the Indian situation in both countries, as well as the culture shock both societies are experiencing when rediscovering one another. The main conclusion is that despite the uncertainty, the new Canadian-Mexican relationship is evolving into a mature partnership of mutual enrichment.

To my grandfather, the family's pioneer in

North America, and, of course,

to Pepe Viveros, a Mexican fighter at his best.

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Preface

Journalism is not only about reporting with objectivity and detachment on the world that surround us, it is also about covering the events that affect us personally and about which we have political and moral views. Although objectivity and detachment are the cornerstones of journalism, they are not absolutes. The tension between the world from within and from without the professional observer is always present, especially in foreign correspondents like me.

We have to make sense of a foreign reality with the background of another one. Along with our tape recorders, we bring with us our own culture, national feelings and bias. Particularly, since we explain "reality" to the people back home who are not part of it, and who, therefore, tend to see the world as we do.

So I decided to include my personal experience -- along with that of my family and friends -- in my thesis on the Canadian-Mexican relationship. First, I thought that by humanizing a bilateral story, which although increasingly important still remains highly unknown, the reader would have more fun. But secondly and more importantly, I believed that this was the only way to share with the reader how our new relationship, triggered by NAFTA, feels.

After all, I am myself a human byproduct of NAFTA. And as such I cannot pretend to be just a witness. The tension between my personal views and my professional tasks has been too great, as well as between my own world and the new Canadian world I have discovered. I am part of the story: mutual rediscovery, cultural shock and convergence, evils and hopes. My duality is the duality that Canada and Mexico are experiencing. So I decided to not only present the facts, but to disclose where I stand and what I hope for. When complete detachment is not possible, honesty must be.

Due North

The skies were cloudy and grey over Mexico City's Benito Juárez International Airport the morning of October 1, 1993. It was the perfect setting in which to say "adiós" to my country, my loved ones and my few belongings. I was moving to Canada to work as the Ottawa correspondent for the Mexican News Agency, Notimex, for at least two years. But nothing I could possibly have left behind seemed to matter more than whatever was waiting for me in Canada. I was about to become an independent woman in a tolerant society, an international correspondent at the age of 22 and a Mexican determined to unveil our new partner and friend to Mexican and Latin American readers. I was especially looking forward to my new job since I saw myself as the "daughter" of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) -- signed by Canada, the U.S. and Mexico in 1992. Akin to many urban middle-class young professionals, I then felt as proud as ever to be a Mexican: we were the generation of change at work, determined to transform our lives along with our country.

After four decades of sustained economic growth from 1940 to the late 1970s, Mexico started experiencing the limits of its own economic model of "stabilizing development," which indeed had been one of "economic growth without development," according to such critics as economist René Villarreal (97). Over the four decades of "substitution of imports," Mexico had guaranteed an average growth rate of 6.5 per cent a year, and the development of its national industry based on a mixed economy and strong protectionism. However, the country fell into a series of economic crises in the 1970s (Villarreal 98).

Just when everybody thought that Mexico would become rich, after the 1979 discovery of new oil reserves, the peso experienced its second devaluation in a six-year period, going to 45 pesos to the U.S. dollar from 29 in 1982 as a result of the external

dis-equilibrium. Just when most people had started to believe that the time had come for "managing the richness," to cite a phrase used by then-President José López Portillo, Mexicans braced themselves for what they thought then would be the worst economic crisis ever. The crisis almost caused the international financial community a Mexican moratorium in its debt services, akin to Brazil's fate. The president's promise to defend the peso "as a dog" had succumbed to the pressures of the drastic plunge in oil prices, instability and generalized capital flows.

So as "children of the crisis," most of us, including the previously well-off middle-class, had a childhood and adolescence surrounded by economic problems. But with President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, everything seemed to have changed. He had been elected in 1988, surrounded by serious electoral fraud allegations. However, his economic model, based on state-downsizing and opening of the economy, was bought by the rich and the frustrated middle classes in search of an exit from the hardships.

The more than 40 million poor -- 20 million of whom were categorized by the government as "extremely poor" -- remained under the government's control as the result of an efficient political machine. The machine's devices of control ranged from buying discipline and loyalties by means of discretional and massive public spending in poor areas, to local and isolated repression of dissidents. Although the voice of the political opposition grew and the dissidents spoke up against the president's authoritarianism and the price we were all paying for his "neoliberal" model, for most of us in urban areas the hope was there again, or so we thought.

Compared to our parents or even to the baby boomers, the economic status of Mexico's Generation X continued a joke. The minimum wage in 1993 was about $4 (US) a day. And although the unemployment rate was only at an average 5.8 percent, the

"under-employment" rate -- which includes people who work for the informal economy, like selling candies on the street -- was 23.5 per cent (Banco de Mexico 292). Downtown Mexico City had become, indeed, a permanent "tianguis" (market). Along the big avenues, a parade of children performed either as clowns or as windshield-washers in exchange for a few pesos.

For the young middle-class professionals, the apparent winners of the Salinas "New Deal," a part-time job or even a normal full-time job failed to guarantee complete independence from families. The average salary that I and my friends were making, after university, was $37.5 (US) a day. Still, compared to the 1980s, the 1990s were golden, despite being still very difficult for the middle class. We knew it would be hard to live on our own, but felt that we could eventually get a decent job. If we worked hard, we believed, we would also get a decent life.

After graduating with a bachelor's degree in International Relations at the public National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) -- one of the main sources of opposition to the government and its policies -- I got a job with the state-owned Mexican News Agency "Notimex" in early 1993 and left home. As privileged as I might have seemed, being one of the 9.2 per cent of Mexicans with post-secondary education and one of few females living alone, I would have been considered "poor" by Statistics Canada (Reddy 614). Nearly all of my salary was spent on basics, such as food, transportation and rent for my stylish but tiny third floor "studio" in the colonial neighborhood of Coyoacán. My younger sister Vanessa went so far as to describe it to my parents as a "servants' quarters on the roof," further increasing their outrage at having a daughter away from home.

Dreaming of having different lives from our parents, and especially from our mothers, my female friends and I were determined to maintain independence and to develop ourselves as competent professionals. Mexico would need more and more qualified people, we thought.

We started studying English. Soon, more and more Mexicans were getting Cable TV to watch CNN and trying frozen imported food.

However, not everything was consumerism "à la Nord-américaine" or cheap American pop culture. Economic and social changes were at work.

Although Mexico formally opened its economy to the world in 1986, with its adoption of the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), it was not until Salinas took power in December 1988 that the world started coming to Mexico. Working to overcome its international reputation as poor, protectionist, and uncivilized, Mexico earned its way back from disaster. In only three years, Mexico gained a reputation as the emerging market of Latin America. Foreign investment jumped to $33.3 billion (US) in 1993, from $1.6 billion in 1987, according to federal figures (Banco de Mexico 315).

Mexico's total external debt was renegotiated in 1990. As a result, it dropped from an average level of 63 percent of the GDP during the 1983-1988 period to 36.4 percent at the end of 1993, totaling $131.7 (US) billion (Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Publico 21; Banco de Mexico 318). The inflation, likewise, declined from an annual rate of 159.2 percent in 1987 to eight percent in 1993 (Banco de Mexico 286). And by deepening the "neoliberal" model started by his predecessor, President Miguel de la Madrid, Salinas continued privatizing the state corporations -- with the exception of oil extraction -- and to strengthen the export sector, opening the country to the world.

In a sharp contrast to the 1968 army massacre of students in Mexico City, at the end of the 1980s there were massive and unrepressed demonstrations of more than 100,000 students on the streets protesting a plan to increase fees at the public UNAM. But not everything was a question of being able to get out in the "plazas" to shout our slogans against the government without being shot. For many, "freedom" meant living lives of individual

empowerment without any remorse.

During the Salinas six-year period, Mexican youth began for the first time attending massive concerts by rock and pop stars from Santana to Madonna, something we had been denied before. Previously, Mexican authorities had not allowed massive rock concerts for fear they would not be able to control the crowds. And even if most women of my generation continued acting "Like a Virgin," we also started to sleep around, defying the traditional stereotypes that a conservative and ultra-Catholic society had imposed on us.

As a generation with high expectations increasingly fed by the propaganda of bright futures linked to North America, we started getting ready for the new age. Three of my four closest female friends from kindergarten ended up working in areas related in some way to trade. Two of them graduated from university with degrees related to computers, and the other as a translator of English, French and Portuguese. Mexico was changing dramatically, and we became one aspect of its human byproducts.

"It felt great to be back in Mexico. Everybody was in a mood of change. Everybody wanted to become better, to study foreign languages, to make the big step," recalls my colleague Diana Mendoza, a reporter in Toronto with the Reforma newspaper, who got back to Mexico City in 1993 after spending two years in Moscow as the correspondent for Epoca magazine.

In the big cities, new skyscrapers thrust skyward; fancy restaurants were all full; shopping malls started to multiply, as did night-clubs and gay bars. Along with the increasing number of children on the street begging for money or cleaning windshields at every stop light, there was money everywhere in the city and everybody who had it was spending it. If Mexico had any reason for optimism, suddenly it appeared that we had them all. Lupita Jones, from the northern border city of Mexicali, became Miss Universe in 1990. The

Mexican Soccer Team qualified for the World Cup. Octavio Paz won the literary Nobel prize, and boxer Julio César Chavez was in the ring, defeating whomever he fought.

If anything was certain, it was the uncertainty with respect to our future. We were hopeful, as our parents had been with "the oil boom" of the late 1970s. But maybe because Mexicans have always had a sense of tragedy that our history has time and again confirmed, we never felt safe. Our faith was linked to that of our country, and no one knew exactly where it was really going.

The poor became poorer, and the few rich fewer and richer. The middle-class surrounded itself with imports, hoping to occupy a select place in the new era, but without being sure exactly how. A line between the old and the new was drawn, as well as between the political technocratic "modernizers," such as Salinas, and the "dinosaurs" who wanted to stop his reforms. Half the "intelligentsia" defended the new model to finally embrace our long-desired First World membership, and half denounced it, saying Mexico was selling its butt to the United States without getting anything in exchange. The country was opening itself to the world, and that meant our lives were opened to the unknown. But by whatever choice, either by being dragged into the Salinas model or by merely remaining indifferent, we did it anyway. So we took a deep breath and took the step. The path towards development was in front of us. However, so was the deep abyss.

But since I did not know that yet, I packed my bags, said goodbye to everybody and went to the airport to take my plane to Ottawa. I was sad. I knew it would be a while before seeing my family and friends again. However, I also knew that I was not the first one in my family to do so and maybe not the last. After all, I was the third generation of Viveroses going to work north of the border.

My grandfather, José Viveros Cabrera, moved to Yerington, Nevada, in 1952, having

to leave behind my grandmother and five children in his hometown of Zacatecas. In this beautiful colonial city, with a magnificent baroque-style cathedral and plazas built in pink cantera-rock, my grandfather was unable to make a living after losing his job as a truck driver. So in a trend that continues today, with about 700,000 Mexicans going to work in the U.S. every year, Papá Ché left the mining city in the central part of Mexico to look for a better future north of the border. He moved illegally under another name and got a job as a farmer. Although there were days when my then 12-year-old father and his four sisters could just afford beans and tortillas, "at least we had now enough food on our table to carry on," recalls my grandmother Guadalupe.

But for my father, beans and tortillas were never enough. Frustrated by what this beautiful but depressed little town had to offer him, 18-year-old José Viveros Acevedo (better known as Pepe Viveros) decided to join my grandfather in Nevada. And although my grandmother was hurt at seeing the only remaining man of her household leaving, the decision ended up being convenient. At that point there were already another two male toddlers, and four hands would make more money than two.

Since Papá Ché had already gotten his "green-card" -- those were the old times in the U.S. -- my father was able to legally make his dollar-an-hour salary by carrying the farmers' sacks of wheat to the trucks. But after the first winter he spent there, he decided that there was no life away from the sun, and that they had to look for new horizons in the West Coast.

"My hands were bleeding that winter. We couldn't use gloves because then the sacks would slip because of the ice," he says.

Papá Ché was reluctant to leave Nevada because he feared that as a middle-aged man he would not be able to find any job. But my father was young and strong, and would be able to find one and earn enough for both of them, plus the Zacatecas family. So in 1959, one year

after Pepe Viveros had arrived, both men moved to Vacaville, California, where my father was hired as a dish washer in a restaurant, and my grandfather as a construction worker months later.

When I went to Vacaville at the age of 10, during a vacation to San Francisco with my parents, I could not believe where they had lived. It was a small and humble house close to the "Knot Tree" Restaurant where my father worked but very far away from my reality. That falling-apart old house had nothing to do with our middle-class home in Mexico City, or with my grandmother's house in Zacatecas that she owns, thanks to my now deceased grandfather's dollars.

"We lived with three other people in the house," explains my father. "We were humble but we were never poor. Both of us had our own cars, and we still had enough money to send to Zacatecas."

So when I screamed in the middle of a crisis that I was too afraid to come to Canada because my accent in both English and French was absolutely appalling, I could not help feeling like the most frivolous woman in the world. "Come on . . . give me a break!" my father said, looking at me and rolling his eyes. "The only thing I could say in English when I got to the States was 'donuts and coffee, please.'

"I have not spent all this money in your language courses so that you come up to me to tell me about your accent. Start worrying about more important things. What you are going to do with your life? You are now 22 and when you get back you will be a 25-year-old," he said, suggesting that I'd better start thinking about at least a formal boyfriend if I did not want to remain a spinster.

The fact that Canada would not bother about the spinsterhood of a 22-year-old was one of the many things that made me forget about my accent and my fears. I had spent my

whole childhood attending a Catholic girls-only school and living a teenage life in which I was not allowed to go out with my boyfriend (even in daylight) without a chaperone until I turned 17. But now, my rebel years in public university, my language training and the economic re-emergence of my country had all finally paid off.

But what exactly Canada was and how Canadians were was still a big mystery, even to this supposed expert on international affairs. During my four-year "cosmopolitan" training in university, I fully studied Latin America, of course, and the United States' every invasion and intervention not only in Mexico but throughout the world. If you want to defy your enemy you have to know it first. I even studied politics of the then-Soviet Union, China and Europe. But about Canada I only learned that it had negotiated a free-trade agreement with the U.S., which was put into effect in 1989, given "their economic and cultural integration." I also learned then that there was a "separatist faction" in Quebec that nobody could understand because the country was bilingual and had had several Quebecers as prime ministers. To Mexicans, Canada was not an issue worthy of study since its foreign policy was taken as an extension of the American or British one.

Even if Canada had started to be in the headlines during NAFTA negotiations, Canada was just irrelevant to most Mexicans' world view. Prime Minister Brian Mulroney had paid an official visit to Mexico in 1990, and Salinas had reciprocated with a 1991 visit to Ottawa. But although the press was telling us that Canadian unions, environmentalists and Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) were against the trilateral deal, it did not matter. We assumed the Canadian government would follow whatever American recipe was put before it. Canada was nothing more than an extension of the U.S. while Canadians were "the gringos from the far north," stuck in cold and snow.

Nevertheless, most Mexicans who had actually met Canadians told me that they were

nicer, better educated, more discreet, and more civilized than the Americans. Canadians were not killing each other on the streets with guns or consuming massive ammounts of drugs. "They just are not a decadent society like the U.S. They are more European and clean . . . and cold," I was often told.

So with this kind of "background" on my mind, with the advice to show Canadians that we were not "lazy and slow" chiming in my ears, I came to Ottawa on October 1, 1993. My idea of Ottawa as the "city of flowers" that my parents had described after their trip in the 1980s was short lived. I replaced it with the image of a sleepy and freezing "phantom town." Although the Chateau Laurier and the Parliament Buildings were magnificent, with the Ottawa river running alongside, it was fall and there were no flowers and no people in the street. Just bald trees, a downtown deserted after six o'clock and freezing "windchild," as I called it in my Spanglish. Dry as the desert, my face was flaking apart. I could not stand the cool air and I could not even walk a few blocks without eating a chocolate bar just to keep my energy high.

Since I did not discover the existence of furry parkas until mid-December, I spent most of the time indoors at the Parliamentary Press Gallery. Located in the Centre Block of Parliament, the same building that hosts the House of Commons with its Gothic-revival style architecture, the Press Gallery became the main symbol of my Canadian journalistic adventures and the most important focus of my new life. And as with all adventures, it turned out to be not exactly what I had planned.

"What cultural shock?" I asked a Canadian lawyer I met just days after my arrival. "You Canadians think we all are with 'sombreros' and 'burros.' I do not have any cultural shock. After all, we are also Westerners," I told him in what would become my daily exercise of pride and prejudice -- my pride as a Mexican when confronted by Canadian prejudices

about my country.

After a fellow reporter had asked me what languages I spoke "besides Mexican and English," I knew that my pride was going to be frequently battered.

Later, as my professional and personal life started to evolve in Ottawa, I recalled the lawyer's conversation. And I had to admit I was in the middle of a cultural shock that made me the saddest Mexican in North America for more than a year. I felt permanently torn, always divided between North American and Latin American cultures, and confronted by the hardships of trying to fit in both.

First, I had a difficult relationship with phones. It seemed that no creature alive would answer them in Canada. It took me a while, before leaving messages on the answering machines and finding out with excitement that, unlike in Mexico, my calls were returned almost immediately.

"Does the apartment have a phone?" was my most important question when apartment- hunting. "Oh, so it has one, but you are going to move out with it. Couldn't you just leave it for me?" I asked one tenant, who told me, with surprise, that it would not be necessary because, unlike in Mexico where at that time you had to wait for months to get a new line, here you get it installed within 48 hours -- and then you move out with your same telephone number.

"I am getting used to living in the developed world," I proudly announced to my mother when inaugurating my new line.

But technological advances notwithstanding, my idea of Canada's capital city as a bicultural paradise -- a kind of a bridge between English North America and Paris -- was soon revealed as faulty. Anglophones and francophones did not really mix. Bilingualism sounded good, but since my earliest days in Canada I figured out that it hardly existed outside Quebec.

Even in Ottawa, separated from "la belle province" only by the Ottawa River, almost all of the bilingual people I met were francophones. They, I found, did not like "get togethers" with Anglophones because they would have to end up speaking English. It was as if both anglophones and francophones were living in two separate worlds, based on historical resentment and the same kind of cultural shock I was experiencing. And I did not like that. I got caught right in the middle, since most of the first acquaintances I made were francophones while at the same time I wanted to know anglophones.

I remember how uncomfortable I felt the first days I arrived at the Press Gallery, saying "Hola" to everyone and attempting to give them a kiss on the cheek, as we do in Mexico. My gestures made anglophones go rigid; their arms resisted my move to pull them towards me. Francophones, I could kiss not once but twice . . . "Mais quel plaisir!" And since Mexicans are tactile people, I found in my francophone friends the perfect opportunity to put my sociable Mexican mechanisms -- the only ones I knew -- into practice. They were so efficient that some francophones even volunteered to pose my questions to the politicians during the first "wild" scrums I attended. I was unnerved by scrums at first because, compared with the orderly Mexican press conferences I had covered, where the politicians were generally treated with a solemn respect, Canadian reporters' approach suggested the politicians always had to be guilty of something.

Although at work I was surrounded by Francophones who celebrated me for being able to speak French -- despite my outrageous accent -- I did not have anyone outside work to talk to in either language. I was very excited about my career as a foreign correspondent, it is true, but I was also very lonely.

Ottawa seemed to me anything but exciting. The transition from hectic Mexico City to bureaucratic Ottawa was difficult. I did not know any Canadians, and I spent my first

weekends here without speaking to a soul, marooned in the one-bedroom apartment I had rented downtown.

Although I was thrilled to feel "normal" because in Canada most single people live alone, I had never felt so lonely. My lifetime dream of being liberated from the chains of a traditional society had finally come true. But at a price. Like many others here, I came face to face with isolation and indifference.

The indifference I am speaking of is the kind I encountered when I needed to talk to someone to break out of my loneliness, discovering that everybody was too busy even to have a coffee or a drink after work. Nobody looked at me in an elevator, as if the ceiling were more interesting. And no one ever started any conversations in a packed bus. I also noticed a poverty of warmth: Ottawans expected that dogs would not bark nor children shout too loudly in play because that might disturb the neighborhood. The Mexican loudness, the overt emotions in public places, the street theatre -- all were absent. I felt like a frozen flower looking for warmth.

On the other hand, although I was fascinated by the empowerment I felt in Canada both as an individual and as a woman, I felt repressed. True, I had no fear the police would assault me while driving in deserted streets at 3 a.m. But the normal things I did in my home town were all prohibited here. I could smoke freely almost nowhere. I could not park illegally for even five minutes without finding a $35 ticket afterwards. I could not party until dawn because my neighbors would go wild. Pleasure in Canada, it seemed, had to be something as clean and orderly as the tidy sidewalks and as healthy as skiing or skating on the frozen Rideau Canal.

I faced this new state of affairs both with pleasure and disappointment. In Canada for the first time in my life I felt I was a human being first and a woman second. This was a real

breakthrough. When I decided to leave home at the age of 22 to live on my own, it was at the price of a Cold War with my family and under the criticism from all my previous circle. Most people suspected that my idea of living alone was based on a desire to live with a man or sleep with different partners every night -- as if a woman could not have a life without a male presence.

However, since I had been pretty used to this "presence," when I arrived in Canada I really missed it. I found very soon that with a few exceptions like Quebec, Canada is one of the world's few safe havens (if we can call it that) where men do not ogle women. In Ottawa, an attractive young woman can walk down the street wearing a short skirt, high heels and no bra without a man taking notice. Women here seem so independent that they do not need attention from men, while men have lost their traditional role of making the first move. And since it was already cold when I got here, I could not even attempt to make use of the traditional female weapons of "showing." Forget the miniskirt! I locked myself in an armored suit of wool.

I was unaccustomed to this version of independence; I was not used to being ignored by the opposite sex. After years of assuming that most men -- whatever their social condition, civil state or age -- will want to sleep with you given the least provocation, I found being ignored was hard to take. It took me months before I could get a "date." My "flirting" rituals ended up being very different and -- I later found out -- obvious and therefore threatening. On the other hand -- to my personal astonishment -- I found I was such a shy and passive female, I could not even ask a male colleague for a drink, fearing that he would think we must then go out on a "date."

My problem was not only who to go out with but where to meet him. In Mexico, work is one of the main sites of flirtations; in Canada, I found male colleagues so feared

sexual harassment charges that they would never ask a woman to go out unless they knew her well first.

But in the great Canadian flirting institutions -- bars, nightclubs, discotheques and newspaper ads -- I feared I could end up meeting a serial killer. True, the crime rate in Ottawa was a joke compared to the one in Mexico City. But the horrendous story of Paul Bernardo -- who raped and killed two teenagers in a nearby Ontario town -- blared from the TV every night and scared me to death, making me even more suspicious of the lawyer, my first and only Canadian acquaintance for months.

And besides, decent Mexican women, even as liberated as I thought I was, do not pick up men at bars. Men are the ones who will -- supposedly -- fight for a "date" with you even in the middle of a traffic jam, asking for your telephone number from car to car, as they do in Mexico.

So without any extra-curricular activities or dates, I did what most bachelor Canadians do: concentrate on work. Fortunately, I had to cover the federal election.

Pride and Prejudice

As I was following the preliminary results from my desk at the Press Gallery on October 25, 1993, I knew cultural shock at the political level was already taking place. Here I was, watching how Canadian voters were destroying the Conservative Party, not even giving their Prime Minister Kim Campbell the last dignity of keeping her seat in British Columbia. After nine years of Conservative government, filled with hatred for Campbell's predecessor Brian Mulroney, Canadians were in a determined mood of change that thrilled me.

In an amazing shift "from deference to defiance," as author Peter Newman defined it, in a revolution in society, politics and attitudes to power, Canadians wanted to give a lesson to Brian Mulroney and his gang (Newman). The 1989 Free Trade Agreement with the U.S., a serious recession, more than 10 per cent unemployment and failures to accommodate Quebec in the federation, all had a deep impact on a country that after 1993 would never be the same.

Canadian voters reduced the ruling party to a humbling two seats in the House of Commons. To my amazement, Canada was able to change governments overnight without any major disturbance in the markets and without people yelling at each other on the streets or challenging the results. And not only that: besides giving power to the Liberals, led by Jean Chrétien, the election made the separatist Bloc Québecois the official opposition.

"How the heck am I going to explain this in my story?" I wondered, feeling both disbelief and enthusiasm. Studying democracy was one thing, but experiencing it was quite another!

The very idea of coming from the only country, besides the former Soviet Union, which has been governed by the same political party for more than 65 years made me very

uncomfortable. "How would I be able to maintain my pride as a Mexican coming from an about-to-be First World country when we continue living with archaic politics?" I asked myself. How would I be able to counteract Canadian prejudices about my country and defend myself from verbal attacks?

These questions were extremely important to me when I arrived in Canada. For some Canadian anti-NAFTA reporters, I was the target of attacks against Mexico. I was one of only two Mexican reporters in Ottawa, and I was seen by some as the representative of an oppressive class who must have gotten her job through the many obscure mechanisms that operate in Mexico, since I was otherwise too young and too inexperienced by any Canadian standard. In fact, I was the youngest reporter on Parliament Hill, younger even than La Presse correspondent Marie-Claude Lortie, who then was 28, and Toronto Star writer Allan Thompson, 30.

Was my father a diplomat? I was asked. Did he work for the government? Were we rich and famous? It seemed everyone assumed that without close links to the establishment in Mexico, nobody could get the kind of job I had.

When I replied that my father worked at a laboratory producing chicken vaccines, that my mother was a part-time English teacher in elementary school, and that my grandfather on my mother's side had been a persecuted Communist, some of my colleagues responded with a cold "you must be the exception." After all, to Canadians there was little difference between Haiti and Mexico. To average Canadians it seemed the Third World is altogether poor, quasi-savage and lacking any possibility of individual success if it is not achieved by oppression, corruption or other suspicious means.

Furthermore, I was working for the public wire service in a country where the government is seen as the main enemy of the freedom of the press -- the private-sector

"sanctity" notwithstanding -- and media independence from the state as its cornerstone. That the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation was a public body, just as Notimex, was irrelevant. After all, while no one would ever question Canada's freedom of the press, everybody here was more than willing to question it in Mexico, where media independence was still in diapers.

So I became a kind of "Department of Complaints" for any Mexican grievance that my colleagues had. Not only that, I also became a kind of lower standard to which many Canadians could compare themselves as morally, economically and politically superior, since they could not do the same with the Americans.

"This is unbelievable. I left a deposit of $1, 000 at the Royal Bank to get a credit card (since without immigrant status they did not want to give one for fear I would run away with a debt unpaid) and when I returned my card to get my money back, they told me to wait for a week," I complained aloud at the Press Gallery.

"Come on, Alejandra. Don't tell me that Mexican banks are more efficient," a francophone reporter told me, as if from now on I was required to accept anything since my country was worse in every single aspect of life, including banking.

I felt so insecure and hurt that I started to take personally all the attacks on Mexico, becoming a little bit paranoid. On the one hand, my Canadian experience was showing me a different reality that made me question my country -- from politics and economics to social and journalistic attitudes. But on the other hand, the continued attacks against Mexico made me feel uncomfortable as a Mexican, as if a particular grievance against the government or a specific problem, such as human rights' abuses, were not an attack against deplorable practices, but against Mexicans themselves. It was as if I were two people in one, playing the "good Mexican's role abroad," trying to forgive the country's evils, versus the "good

journalist," trying to report on them with "objectivity."

"You have to save face. I don't know about Canadians, but Americans always think they are the best and that we are not up to the challenge," my father had told me.

My work as a correspondent was to do journalism, not a "mariachi" promotion. But like many Mexicans, I wanted to show our partners that we were "up to the challenge," in both an attempt to change North American misconceptions about us, and to convince ourselves that, in fact, we were equal partners.

So when the hostility towards Mexican evils started to grow, because the debate about free trade was still very fresh and everything questionable about Mexico became the perfect weapon against NAFTA, I felt even worse. On the one hand, I had the duty of reporting what was happening here; on the other, the pressure of reporting it "with the angle" that most people in Mexico wanted to hear. It was the same for some of my editors back in Mexico City and some of my friends, for whom bad news on Mexico alone was seen as just "bad propaganda," while "balanced" stories were the cornerstone of their "objectivity."

"Are you completely sure of what you are saying?" my editor in Mexico City asked me on the phone.

"Yes, I am sure."

"But this is not possible. Why don't you find a business source? They are saying that NAFTA would be put into effect whatever Chrétien says," the editor told me as if he only wanted to hear that Chrétien was determined to proclaim it. In Mexico there was a sense of NAFTA's inevitability, and nobody was open to the idea that Canada could become its main obstacle.

Free trade, it is true, had not been an issue during the election. It was jobs, jobs and more jobs. However, in his "Red Book," Chrétien's Liberal political platform, he had promised

to reopen NAFTA, in order to establish a "level playing field" with the U.S.

"A Liberal government will renegotiate both the FTA and NAFTA to obtain: a subsidies code; an anti-dumping code; a more effective dispute resolution mechanism; and the same energy protection as Mexico," the Red Book said (Liberal Party of Canada 24).

This was serious enough for my country. But Chrétien's promise to abrogate the deal as "a last resort if changes cannot be negotiated" seemed to mean that now both the U.S. and Canada were determined to step back from the agreement for which Mexico had risked all.

While in opposition, Jean Chrétien and his Liberals had voted in Parliament against the FTA in 1988 and against NAFTA in May 1993. For them, the issue had never really been to trade or not to trade, but who to trade with and under which circumstances.

On the one hand, there was the nationalist group represented by Lloyd Axworthy, the critic for International Affairs, who in 1996 became the minister of this portfolio. He was loud not only in accusing the Conservatives of selling Canada to the U.S. through the FTA, but also in defending the necessity of giving priority to the defence of human rights over indiscriminate trade. On the other side, there was the group of free traders, led by Roy MacLaren, the critic for International Trade, who became the minister of the portfolio once Chrétien took power in November, 1993.

After the re-election of Mulroney in 1988, where he had the free-trade agreement as one of its defining issues, it was clear the Liberals needed a more realistic position on the issue, if they wanted power. So in June 1991, MacLaren laid out the agenda in an internal discussion paper called "Wide Open."

"The fundamental flaw of the current government's trade policy is not that it has opened our economy to the United States, but that it has done so to the exclusion of the rest of the world," the paper read (qtd. in Greenspon and Wilson-Smith 96). The alternative for

the Liberals, as the paper put it, was to become "aggressively global" in promoting free trade with Asia, Europe and Latin America, to counter-balance the 80 per cent of Canada's total trade with the U.S.

This agenda, however, did not please Axworthy and the nationalists. "All this talk about globalization is just a cover for right-wing ideology," said Axworthy. And although Chrétien said that "globalization is not right-wing or left-wing" but a "fact of life," a compromise was still needed, as journalists Edward Greenspon and Anthony Wilson-Smith reported (99, 98).

So even if the delegates to the party's policy convention later that year rejected a resolution committing a Liberal government to abrogate any free trade agreement, they agreed on the statement that "abrogating trade agreements should be only a last resort if satisfactory changes cannot be negotiated." (Greenspon and Wilson-Smith 100)

Although MacLaren continued pressing Chrétien against attempts at renegotiation, Chrétien could not change overnight his party's position of having voted against the FTA. The Liberals could not first call for improvements to NAFTA and then vote in favor of its original form. So in May, 1993, they voted against the agreement which included Mexico. Even MacLaren, who would later become the champion of extending free trade throughout the Americas during the following years, stood up to vote against the deal. The potential continental trade bloc of 360 million people suffered its first big blow. The second and really troubling one would come later, when the Conservative Mexican allies were thrown out of the political scene.

Oblivious as always to Canadian affairs, the last thing the Mexican government expected was that Canada, and not just the U.S., would become an obstacle in Mexico's bid to become a First World country. First, Mexican officials did not make any contingency plan

for an eventual resignation by Mulroney, let alone a defeat of the Conservatives in the elections. Furthermore, they were prepared even less for the Liberal promise to re-open NAFTA if elected.

Given his dramatic decline in the polls, Mulroney resigned in February 1993 and was replaced in June by Canada's first woman prime minister, Kim Campbell. According to Mexican diplomats who were posted in Ottawa when the events took place, Mexico's Trade Minister Jaime Serra Puche learned about Mulroney's resignation though a Televisa TV morning show. In the middle of an alleged panic attack, Serra Puche himself called his Canadian counterpart Michael Wilson, seeking reassurance that NAFTA would not be affected.

In a too-good-to-be-true coincidence, then-Ottawa correspondent for Televisa, Pilar Bolaños, called Wilson's office that same day to look for a reaction, only to find she could have an interview with the minister later in the afternoon. "It had never been that easy to get an interview with a Canadian minister," Bolaños recounts. Later that night, Mexicans watched a serene Michael Wilson saying that with or without Mulroney, the Conservatives would stay in power, thus guaranteeing NAFTA's approval by Parliament.

After this first alarm, the Mexican government continued its long "siesta" with respect to Canada, concentrating on the important events: U.S. President Bill Clinton and his ultimatum to negotiate two NAFTA side agreements on labor and environment as a condition to support the deal. So once again, the trio got together to complete the new requirement by the summer. Campbell signed it, the PRI-dominated Mexican Senate passed it and the Americans scheduled it, along with NAFTA, for a mid-November Congressional vote.

But as everybody in Mexico followed the American battle in Congress, where the majority of Clinton's democrats threatened to reject the deal, they continued to ignore the

possibility that Canada was about to become a stone on the road.

The night of the Liberal victory, I used the "Red Book" to write a story with the lead that NAFTA was in danger, because Chrétien wanted to "improve it." So although the newspaper headlines suggested that the American Congress might not approve the deal, all my stories warning that Chrétien could well re-negotiate it even if the Americans were to pass it had been largely ignored.

That indifference ended on Oct. 27, when Chrétien gave his first press conference as prime-minister designate, provoking an angry reaction on the part of Mexico's Trade Minister Serra Puche, who said to the press four days later that "NAFTA negotiations between the three countries are finished," and that if one party was to re-open them, then the agreement would become bilateral.

"My position is very clear. In Canada, no law is effective until it is proclaimed. So we still have this option," Chrétien said, answering a question about whether he would proclaim NAFTA, making it law, if he could not re-negotiate it with the Americans and Mexicans.

Given the importance of the topic and the pending doubts over how, what, and when he would re-negotiate it, I decided to do what we do in my country. I charged out of the National Press Theater, chasing the Prime Minister down the street, under the astonished looks of Canadian reporters and body guards.

"Are you going to reopen NAFTA and when?" I asked him, standing beside him with my tape recorder in my hand, while he was waiting for his car on the street, surrounded by his body guards. But he did not say anything. He smiled to the cameras and got into the car, leaving me and my question up in the air. Only then did I learn that in Canada you are supposed to ask your question either in press conferences or in scrums, not after running down the street chasing the politician. Given the serious violation of the Canadian media

protocol and the government's silence, I decided to pursue other politicians.

Lucien Bouchard, then the leader of the separatist Bloc Québequois, said in a press conference that it would be a mistake to re-open NAFTA because the Americans would take advantage of it to re-open the things they had agreed with Canada that they did not like. Preston Manning, the leader of the conservative and populist Reform Party, which had the second biggest minority in the House of Commons, agreed. And the business sector echoed his view.

"Maybe, the previous Conservative government could have taken a better advantage of the negotiation," Manning said in a personal interview. "But now that the U.S. is more protectionist than ever, if we try to re-open it, we could even get more disadvantages. First, we have to see what the U.S. Congress does."

Everybody here and in Mexico was waiting for the November 17 vote in Congress before committing themselves to a clear strategy to ensure NAFTA's proclamation in Canada. All the reports from Washington prior to the vote coincided with the prediction that Clinton would lose. Texas multi-billionaire Ross Perot, along with most Democrats, was firmly opposed to the deal, making a case based on Mexico's misery.

Nevertheless, the Canadian business sector started to look for alternatives to an eventual negative vote. So did the free-trade wing of the government, despite the fact that Chrétien still wanted to re-negotiate the agreement.

"If the U.S. rejects the agreement, it would be giving us the Mexican market for free, since the agreement would become then a bilateral pact between Canada and Mexico," said Thomas D'Aquino, spokesperson for the powerful Business Council on National Issues, a private lobbying organization that represents the 150 biggest Canadian corporations.

D'Aquino said on Nov. 16 that he and a Canadian business delegation had met with

President Salinas in Mexico City two weeks before to propose a bilateral free-trade agreement, in case that the American Congress rejected NAFTA. The surprising thing was that the new federal government had already given its blessing to the idea, and that it was Salinas himself who expressed less enthusiasm.

"(Salinas) told us that before thinking about a bilateral pact, he should wait first for the Congressional vote," D'Aquino said, stressing that, on the contrary, "there is a lot of sympathy here -- even in government -- towards our bilateral agreement proposal."

According to Steven Van Hoten, president of the Canadian Manufacturers Association, the Canadian government itself had offered its help in defining the "technicalities" that would make the alternative possible.

"We have discussed this possibility with the government and it has told us that it would not be difficult, since technically the arrangements could be made so that Canada and Mexico continue as trading partners, even without the States," he explained in an interview..

But thanks to the support of the Republicans and to a dramatic last-minute effort to convince his Democrats, Clinton won the vote through bipartisan support. NAFTA was finally approved on November 17. The only thing to wait for was to see if Chrétien would deliver on his promise of renegotiating the agreement -- a strong possibility since one of his main promises had been to regain government's integrity by delivering on his promises.

On November 18, taking advantage of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit in Seattle, Chrétien met separately with both President Clinton and President Salinas. They agreed to give the nod to Chrétien's requirements in order to promulgate NAFTA. They would not change the text; instead, they would be giving him a tool to gain domestic support for the agreement.

During the transition period in late October and early November, the prime minister

had called Salinas to seek some reassurance. According to Canadian and Mexican officials, Chrétien tried to convince the president that by agreeing with Canada's demands to negotiate new definitions of subsidies and dumping, Mexico would also win. Salinas accepted, but not before asking Chrétien for the assurance that all the "improvements" would be negotiated on the side without any re-opening of the agreement. "Re-opening NAFTA will be like opening a pandora box for both Canada and Mexico," Salinas apparently said to Chrétien, according to Mexican senior officials.

On the other hand, although Mexico was at ease with the energy requirements, as Salinas expressed it during his meeting with the prime minister in Seattle, this was not really an issue. Since Mexico had exempted all its energy resources from NAFTA, such as Canada had done it with its cultural sector, energy was only an issue between Canada and the U.S. But even if Chrétien attempted a final argument in favor of the energy exemption, Clinton refused it. "There is no need," the president told reporters "Everything has worked out very well up to now." Nevertheless, both Clinton and Salinas agreed to seek a way to improve the subsidy and dumping issues, something the U.S. did not see as an immediate threat and that Mexico liked, since it had also accused the U.S. of using both the wide and unclear definitions for protectionist purposes.

After a quick meeting between International Trade Minister Roy MacLaren and U.S. Trade Representative Mickey Kantor in Washington, Chrétien formally announced on December 2, 1993, that he would proclaim NAFTA, to come into effect on January 1, 1994.

"Thanks to the agreement achieved with the U.S. and Mexico, where they agreed to clarify the definition of subsidies and dumping among other things, we now have a better agreement," said Chrétien at his press conference.

What his partners had agreed on, he explained, was the creation of two trilateral

working groups to clarify the definitions of subsidies and dumping in order to create a new trade remedies code. Likewise, the partners agreed on a trilateral declaration stating that NAFTA does not in any case include water as a natural resource subject to commercialization. In addition, Canada issued a unilateral declaration that reserved its right "to interpret the energy provisions contained in the agreement" in order to maximize energy security for Canadians, in the event of energy shortages.

That all these "achievements" did not affect or change at all what had been formally agreed under NAFTA did not matter. It was Chrétien's way of telling Canadians that their new government had not betrayed its campaign promises of improving it.

Since then, the Liberal government has become the main champion of NAFTA expansion through Latin America, arguing that the more trade there is, the more jobs there will be, and that trade and human rights standards were interdependent in an inevitable process that reinforced each other.

The time for free trade had come to Canada to stay. And although I thought I now could start recovering from culture shock, I was wrong. The confrontation between the "good Mexican" and the "good reporter" was just beginning.

The Marriage of Convenience

October 7, 1992, was not just another day in the southern Texas city of San Antonio. The powerful trío on stage was determined to make history. Backed by flags showing a red maple leaf, an eagle eating a serpent under a cactus, and the stars and stripes, the leaders of Canada, Mexico and the United States witnessed their trade representatives sign the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) after 14 months of intense and difficult negotiations.

The trilateral pact would not be put into effect until January 1, 1994, along with two side agreements on labor and environment. But at that point Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and Presidents George Bush and Carlos Salinas de Gortari did not know the obstacles that would unfold over the next few months. So they kept smiling for the cameras. They were confident, determined to make history with their vision of making North America the largest free-trade zone of the world, a rapacious zone with 360 million consumers.

But what was important for them was not only the future of the three countries -- especially their personal political futures -- but the past. Along with the counter-currents against the agreement, years of confrontation and historical resentments seemed also to be over.

In fact, many "norteamericanos" may not have realized that the ceremony was held in what was Mexico 150 years ago. Just few blocks away from the former Anglo-German school where the NAFTA pens were wielded, was the Alamo, the symbol of one of the worst Mexican historical wounds.

In the middle of political turmoil after Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821, American settlers in Texas rebelled against the central government's tax demands, overrunning the Mexican garrison there in the mid-1830s. Consequently, General Adolfo López de Santa

Anna, the president himself, personally led an army of 6,000 hungry men to the site, massacring the rebels. As a result, an American force later defeated the Mexican Army in San Jacinto -- under the cry "Remember the Alamo" -- and captured Santa Anna. In exchange for his life, the general-president recognized Texas independence, which joined the U.S. in 1845.

Just when Mexico was still trying to recover from such a territorial loss, the American government wanted to purchase the states of New Mexico and California. So using a clash between border patrols of both countries as an excuse, U.S. president James Polk declared war on Mexico in 1846, invading first the North, then Mexico City the following year. In exchange for peace, President Santa Anna accepted defeat in 1848, and agreed to sell both states plus Arizona for a modest amount.

Just at the beginning of its own existence as a country, Mexico had come face to face with the superpower, inaugurating the difficult bilateral relationship both countries would continue to have. From then on, the relationship would be marked by constant U.S. intervention in Mexican affairs, whether military or politically.

U.S. President James Monroe had declared in 1823 that his country would consider any European intervention in the Americas as an aggression against itself, in a statement that would become known as the Monroe Doctrine. But although this warning had the objective of deterring any attempt on the part of the European powers to get back the new independent countries in the hemisphere, the declaration would become years later the perfect excuse for expansionism.

The Monroe Doctrine was applied against Mexico during the second half of the 19th century by military invasions and conquest of territory, at the time of American expansionism. Then, after an increasingly good relationship during Mexican dictator Porfirio Díaz's regime (1876-1880 and 1884-1910), when American investment flourished in Mexico, the 1910

Revolution would put the confrontation method back on track. Through the "Big Stick" policy, the United States would continuously intervene in its neighbor's political scene, supporting one or another revolutionary faction during the armed conflict period that officially ended in 1917. The Mexican pacification, along with Franklin D. Roosevelt as U.S. president, created the new American approach "Good Neighborhood," as the counterpart of his domestic "New Deal" (Zoraida Vázquez and Meyer).

The Monroe Doctrine guaranteed American support to Liberal President Benito Juárez against the French invasion of Mexico (1861-1867), while the "Good Neighborhood" allowed a non-military confrontation when Mexico nationalized its oil industry in 1938. But the loss of half its territory to the Americans and their constant intervention created a permanent trauma in the Mexican psyche that has co-existed with a profound admiration for the richness of the superpower.

So 145 years after and just a few blocks away from "the Alamo," the erstwhile enemies were signing NAFTA, showing how much things had changed since then. The Alamo had become one of San Antonio's main tourist attractions -- even for Mexicans -- and President Bush would go as far as to talk to Mexican reporters in Spanglish, blossoming into such phrases as "Bienveirous, bienvenirous" and "de nara, de nara."

But just how profoundly the impact of the Alamo and the U.S. invasion of Mexico City had penetrated Mexican culture also became evident that day through the spontaneous reporters' expression of "Allí vienen los gringuitos," (Here they come, the little gringos), as the American delegation was approaching.

It is popular knowledge among Mexicans that the "gringo" word that currently means an American from the U.S. was created one of the 19th century invasions, as a derivation of "green, go," since the U.S. soldiers' uniforms were green.

And although the "gringo" word has somewhat lost its demeaning connotation --since most Mexicans ignore the word's roots-- it is still pronounced with a big smile of satisfaction as if through its sound Mexicans could gain the power over the Americans that they have never had. Even the friendliest Mexican would pronounce it, with the same echo of resignation present in the popular remark of "Poor Mexico! So far from God and so close to the United States," attributed to dictator Porfirio Díaz.

However, Mexicans have not been alone in this perception of powerlessness as a neighbor of the most powerful and richest country in the world. Canada is "the other one," although, of course, with a big difference. Most Canadians do not see the U.S. as "evil," but as an elephant. "Living next to the U.S. is in some way like sleeping with an elephant: No matter how friendly and even tempered the beast, one is affected by every twitch and grunt," former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau once said (qtd. in Cumming). A more important fact is that the Canadians -- or rather their ancestors -- had never lost a war with the U.S.

The two nations had their skirmishes: in the summer of 1812, even before Canada became a country, British and French settlers living in the British colonies of Upper and Lower Canada (now the provinces of Ontario and Quebec) became involved in a war with the U.S. that would last until 1814.

Most historians have described it as a futile and useless conflict for which the real motives lay in the conflict between France and Britain and its negative effect on the U.S. commerce with France. But the animosities between British and Americans grew when the latter accused the former of promoting Indian resistance against their conquest of the Western territories, along with the U.S. hunger for territory (Lacour-Gauet 306).

In the summer of 1812, American troops advanced through Upper Canada and at the beginning of the following year they invaded and burned part of the city of York (now

Toronto). But taking advantage of their victory over Napoleón, Britain was able to regroup its best troops to expel the Americans from its North American territories. In an impressive counter-offensive, the British Army -- mostly British and French about-to-be Canadians -- advanced to the South, occupying Washington D.C., where they burned some official buildings, including the White House's predecessor.

Just as the Americans would massacre the Mexican troops in Texas to the cry "Remember the Alamo," the future Canadians had also had their slogan in "Remember York."

As had happened during the 1776 American War of Independence when the American loyalists fled to what would become Canada almost a century later, the 1812 War strengthened both settlers' links to Britain and their antipathy to Americanism.

"The war that was supposed to attach British North American colonies to the United States accomplished exactly the opposite," explains historian Pierre Berton (29). From then on, Britain and the British North American colonies' dependence on the Crown represented more the public good, law and order and social virtues, versus the "American way" based on revolutionary values and an extreme individualism, as it has been seen since then by many Canadians.

Nevertheless, although the British link continued to be the dominant one up to the Second World War, the Cold War and the emergence of the U.S. as the Western superpower started a process of Americanization of Canada.

In Mexico, the loss of more than half Mexican territory to the U.S. plus the 1910 Mexican Revolution created a strong Mexican nationalism based in great part on anti-Americanism.Unlike Canada, which counted on the "Brits" to deter the Americans, Mexico has not had in this century any European power to use as a counterbalance. So Mexicans had to stand up alone to protect their country -- first, from the American

intervention in favor of one or another Mexican military faction during the revolution, and then to implement the social and economic reforms accomplished through the war. The agrarian reform and the full Mexican control over natural resources were not completely implemented by the State until the 1930s. The 1938 oil-industry nationalization coincided with Franklin Roosevelt's "Good Neighbors" policy towards Mexico and with an already-too-busy U.S. seeing the world war coming and trying, therefore, not to upset the Latin American countries in order to guarantee their stand within the Allies' ranks.

And although Mexico would become, like Canada, part of the American sphere of influence during the Cold War, anti-Americanism continued to be present in the Mexican administrations -- at least in their rhetoric -- until the early 1980s. During the rule of president Lázaro Cárdenas, the author of both the oil nationalization and the current party-state system that Mexico has "enjoyed" until nowadays, national pride depended on the country's capacity to "take back" what was ours and that had been taken away by Americans and other foreigners. Even most conservatives and the Catholic Church, who were on bad terms with the government for its anti-Church and revolutionary stand, supported the president. In one of their major displays of national pride, hundreds of Mexicans went to the Presidential Palace to donate goods ranging from chickens and piggy-bank savings to jewelry to contribute to the government's compensation to foreign oil companies for nationalization.

During the late 1960s and 1970s, Canada tried to prevent its increasingly obvious dependence on American trade through the so-called "Third Option," by diversifying its trade and investment. It also tried to take more control over its natural resources, and to emphasize a more independent foreign policy from the U.S., by such moves as maintaining a good relationship with communist Cuba.

At the same time, Mexico also attempted to prevent its Americanization -- political

and economic rather than cultural -- through similar initiatives and by becoming a leader within the "Third World" movement that emerged during the seventies. The latter tactic greatly upset the U.S.

However, with the end of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's era (1968-79 and 1980-84) and the election of the Conservatives in 1984, things started to change radically with respect to Canada's relationship with the "elephant." Along with his British counterpart Margaret Thatcher, who embraced the U.S. President Ronald Reagan, new Prime Minister Brian Mulroney decided to make a radical change to Trudeau's "nationalist" policies. Mulroney's Tories favored the private sector over state intervention and encouraged trade and investment liberalization.

As a result, in 1987 Canada and the U.S. started formal negotiations toward a bilateral trade agreement that would reduce and eliminate trade barriers between them. But if the news was not kindly received by many Canadians, nor was it by the elite south of the Río Grande (Río Bravo for Mexicans).

Mexico feared that the bilateral agreement would isolate it from the American market and from foreign investment, which would prefer to go north. After all, Mulroney and Reagan had not been the only ones to make changes to fit their countries into the new world economy moving towards the integration of trading blocs. Under President Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988), Mexico started to leave behind years of "official" anti-Americanism, revolutionary nationalism, state intervention and strong protectionism.

When President Carlos Salinas de Gortari took office (1988-1994), he was determined not only to start enjoying the fruits of almost a decade of sacrifice but also to make Mexico a member of the First World. And he saw the opportunity in what his northern neighbors were doing. So in 1990, with the FTA already in force since January 1, 1989, Salinas decided to

take part in the process.

In 1990, Bush and Salinas announced that they would negotiate their own bilateral agreement. But Canada jumped in immediately, fearing for its life and seeing in the eventual U.S.-Mexico agreement a big danger to its own bilateral deal with the United States. Given Bush's ultimatum to take part in the negotiations with Mexico or remain with the FTA, Mulroney finally decided in September 1990 to join.

"Canada would have run the risk of losing access to that huge U.S. market if Mexico was given similar exclusive access," explained Murray Smith, former director of the Ottawa Center for Trade Policy and Law (qtd. in Morton 1). If the U.S. continued negotiating such agreements with other Latin American countries in the future, Canada would become isolated; within NAFTA, Canada would be able to get its share of the cake within the trade liberalization of the hemisphere.

But at home, the citizens were torn over their leader's decision. While most Americans were eager for the FTA, Canadians were not at ease. Always torn between their love-hate feelings toward their neighbors, they feared that Canada would become even more Americanized, that their economy would become even more dependent on the U.S., and that their labor, environmental, and social standards would become lower.

"Each of the regions of Canada is increasingly going to be relating on a north-south basis (more than on a west-east basis within Canada)," contended left-wing nationalist economist Mel Watkins from the University of Toronto. "That's always been an important phenomenon, but now, it may become dominant."

Although most of these fears were overshadowed by other more important national issues over the years following the FTA, they re-emerged during the NAFTA negotiations. Most Canadians were busy with the attempts to reform the Constitution to reaccommodate

the always secessionist threat of Quebec. But human-rights organizations, environmentalists and the labor movement set off the alarms again in both Canada and the U.S.

Mexico was a Third World country. The average Mexican then had 6.5 years of schooling and a per-capita annual income more than six times lower than his American counterpart, and almost five times lower than a Canadian's (U.S. Bureau of the Census 835). Mexico did not even have a social safety net. Mexico was a country of corrupt politicians, keeping half its 90 million people in poverty. Mexico was an unlimited source of illegal immigrants and drug trafficking going, primarily, to the United States. No business would think twice before moving to Mexico, leaving thousands of Canadian and American workers with no jobs.

"Workers cannot become sacrificial lambs on the altar of a North American free trade agreement," said James McCambly, president of the Canadian Federation of Labor. "The troubles we have adjusting to free trade with the U.S. may be small by comparison to the economic adjustments associated with a North American trade zone" (qtd. in Morton 4).

In brief, Mexico would be the window to North American misery, the opponents of NAFTA argued in Canada and the U.S. In the meantime, Mexican fears were just the opposite -- that the country would become the garbage can for polluting industries, that labor standards would remain low, and of course, that Mexicans would now be openly at the mercy of the Americans.

"Mexican officials are willing to make any concession the United States asks," said Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, president of the center-leftist Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), explaining that Mexico was offering cheap labor in return for badly needed investment without any "future vision" to increase wages (qtd. in Ferguson A1).

But although Mexicans like me resented our portrayal as a bunch of losers, I felt a

great satisfaction when seeing the Canadian debate as well as colorful and massive demonstrations against the deal. In Canada, it seemed, the citizens were able to stop the government. And although I was more in favor of NAFTA than against it, the government's paternalistic attitude bothered me. It was as if NAFTA or any other Salinas policy were unstoppable, as if Mexicans did not matter at all. In Mexico, the debate was mostly limited to the elites, the intellectuals and the press, and the political parties, excluding the rest of the population. And despite the fact we had also had our massive demonstrations against the deal, Salinas was so powerful that we knew he would do as he pleased.

"Look, instead of wasting our time enumerating the environmental catastrophes we will get as the result of NAFTA, why don't we discuss an agenda to prevent them?" I asked my friends at a meeting of Green NGOs in 1992, when I was an active participant in Mexico's environmental movement. "NAFTA will be established any way, and we will need a plan to diminish its ecological impact," I insisted, convincing almost everyone.

"NAFTA is not inevitable," said the only Canadian who was there. "The Liberals are threatening to vote against it and if they win the next election, it's very possible we won't have free trade any more," stressed the Canadian woman, who was a member of an anti-NAFTA trilateral NGO coalition.

Caramba, was she wrong! But the fact that she had confronted me made me realize what a docile attitude most of us had with respect to the government, and how much more power the citizens of other countries believed they have.

However, the official and entrepreneurial communities counter-attacked, saying that this was a "win to win" deal that would increase jobs, thanks to the growth of the exporting sector, and improve economic, labor and environmental standards by increasing trilateral trade. They maintained that North America -- including Mexico -- would not be able to

compete successfully internationally and that the move was necessary for their own survival.

"NAFTA represents the first comprehensive agreement between developing and industrialized countries, treating the parties on essentially equal terms and acknowledging that all can prosper," said Peter Nicholson, senior vice-president of the Bank of Nova Scotia. "NAFTA symbolizes a future in which the most dynamic economies will increasingly be found in the developing world" (A19).

But in mid-1992, it was clear that the enemies of NAFTA were winning the battle. In Canada, the polls started to show that 53 percent of the population was against it. And in the U.S., Bush started losing ground over the Democratic presidential candidate, Bill Clinton, who wanted to address the labor and environmental situation within NAFTA before giving his support to the agreement.

So the Mexican government itself counter-attacked. According to the government, Mexico spent $3.1 million (US) a year between 1992 and 1993 on lobbying in Washington for the negotiation and ratification of NAFTA. And although neither the Mexican authorities nor the Canadian consultants have revealed how much was spent here, the Mexican Ministry of Trade and Industrial Development hired the services of the Ottawa based Gowling-Strathwahensterson lobby firm. But whatever the real cost, it paid off beautifully. The ones whose opinion really mattered -- governments and the business community -- were convinced that Mexico was a country of opportunities.

So when Bush, Salinas and Mulroney met in San Antonio that day of October 1992, they witnessed much more than the signing of an agreement carried out by U.S. Trade Representative Carla Hills, Canadian Minister for International Trade Michael Wilson, and Mexican Secretary for Trade and Industrial Development Jaime Serra Puche.

They witnessed the formalization of their personal political triumph, and of a

powerful historic process towards a greater closeness with the U.S.

"The North American free trade agreement provides us with a pathway to prosperity," said Mulroney. "While geography and the forces of history have made us neighbors, this agreement will make us partners" (qtd. in Eggertson A1).

The forces of history, however, were about to put two of those three good friends and partners out of office. President Bush would lose the presidential elections to Democratic contender Bill Clinton in November 1992. Prime Minister Mulroney would leave the Conservative leadership in June 1993. As the result of Clinton's victory, two side agreements would have to be also negotiated to guarantee basic labor and environmental standards in the three countries, as a condition to gain the new administration's support. And once NAFTA and the side agreements had been already signed and approved both by the Mexican Congress and the Canadian Parliament, the Democratic majority in the House of Representatives would threaten to reject the deal.

But behind the trilateral scene a new duo also had been born -- maybe not as the result of passionate desire, maybe not so much because of a natural attraction as fear of being left alone. But whether a deal of love or convenience, an "arranged marriage" between Canada and Mexico was formed, having "Uncle Sam as its match-maker in a rather strange 'ménage-à-trois,' " said left-wing and PRD economist Adolfo Aguilar Zinser (qtd. in Ogle A12).

And as happened to Princess Diana and Prince Charles' relationship, in this marriage there were also three people, making it a little bit crowded.

Canada and Mexico had met each other a long time ago, establishing formal diplomatic ties in 1944. But it was not until they were formally introduced to extended relations by the U.S. that the real dating began. The affair heated up only after they both

already had a stable and committed relationship with their common neighbor. In fact, while total trade between Canada and Mexico was an insignificant 2.6 billion (US) dollars in 1992, 80 percent of both countries' exports had the U.S. as their destination, according to Statistics Canada.

It was not until the period of Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King that the two nations paved the way for the future establishment of formal diplomatic ties. As Canadian author Stephen J. Randall explains, "World War II served ironically, as both the catalyst and the impediment to an expanded Canadian role in the hemisphere" (18). On the one hand, Canada was interested in Latin America and Mexico as the "Canadian involvement in the European war prior to U.S. entry placed some strains on the relationship with the then-neutral and isolationist United States (under Franklin Roosevelt)." On the other, Mackenzie's initiative was not welcome by Washington because it perceived an expanded Canadian diplomatic role in the region "as an extension of British imperial power in the Americas, rather than as a simple Canadian initiative" (18).

But Mexico, which then had a difficult relationship with both Britain and the U.S. because of its 1938 expropriation of most of the foreign-owned oil companies, received the Canadian initiative with enthusiasm. So through its representatives in Washington, Mexico opened discussions with Canadian officials in 1940 over the possibility of establishing formal diplomatic ties. With the U.S. entry into war, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the first obstacle for the establishing of formal Canadian-Mexican ties was removed. And after all, Canada, Britain and the U.S. were all interested in ensuring that Latin American countries adhered to a pro-Alliance stance. So after Britain re-established its diplomatic ties with Mexico, Canada and Mexico proceeded with their own in 1944 by appointing their respective ambassadors. And although in 1945 the linkages between both

countries were minimal, Mexico was already the second largest Latin American importer of Canadian goods (totaling $8.2 million Can) following Brazil (Randall 20).

Despite the fact that the relationship continued primarily concentrated on trade, its political potential started to unfold in what would become one of the most important alliances these two countries have ever made against the U.S.: their friendly policy towards communist Cuba. Both Canada and Mexico continued their diplomatic relations with president Fidel Castro after the 1959 Revolution, and both distanced themselves from the 1961 economic embargo imposed by the Americans. So despite the fact that the Cold War diverted Canada's attention from the hemisphere, concentrating itself instead on its alliance with the U.S. and an already decreasing one with Europe, the relationship with Mexico continued evolving.

When Pierre Trudeau took power in 1968, the way was already paved for what would become the beginning of a consistent Canadian foreign policy towards Latin America and Mexico, in particular. Mexico was a stable political country, one of the few Latin American nations without a dictatorship. Mexico also had similar policies to Canada's, mostly as the result of their complex and difficult relationships with the U.S. Besides Cuba, they both wanted to control their economic development in an independent fashion, such as implementing independent policies for natural resources exploitation. So Mexico was the perfect place at that point to implement the Canadian "Third Option" in the early 1970s.

In 1973, left-wing President Luis Echeverría paid a state visit to Ottawa, Montreal and Toronto, which was reciprocated by Trudeau's visit to Mexico City in 1976, after going also to Cuba and Venezuela, something the Americans did not like at all. But Mexicans, whose ties with anti-American Cuba continue an important nationalistic builder, liked it very much. So much that Trudeau remains one of the few Canadian figures that most Mexicans can identify -- besides Alanis Morissette, Céline Dion and Brian Adams.

But although the bilateral relationship continued becoming stronger and stronger throughout the 1970s, hard times threatened it. While Canadian exports had gone to over $365 million in 1980 from $40.4 million in 1968, the 1982 economic crisis diminished Mexico's capacity to purchase Canadian goods (Randall 27-28). So bilateral trade declined, and the business and financial Canadian community started to see Mexico as a great threat for its interests there. After all, nobody imagined that the crisis would become the catalyst for Mexico's economic restructuring that paved the way for the NAFTA negotiation and the Canadian-Mexican rediscovery years later.

Canada and Mexico still had many things in common, like trying not to get caught in the perceived Soviet-American tensions, even though the momentum the relationship had enjoyed the previous decade was gone. Instead, Latin Americans emerged at the center of turmoil that threatened Canadian exports and investments, while Mexico in particular was seen as a poor and underdeveloped country.

But with Prime Minister Mulroney, the "siesta" between Canada and Mexico was over. Whether in a forced marriage or a "ménage-à-trois," Canada and Mexico decided to inaugurate their own affair, parallel to the more important one with the U.S., opening a new era in their bilateral relationship.

For the first time, the two countries had the real possibility to counteract whatever negative impact the superpower could have on both of them and to participate fully in the re-accommodation of an Anglo-Saxon, French and Hispanic North America.

Mexico's main interest in NAFTA was to achieve free trade with the U.S., while Canada's was to not remain excluded from the possibility of extending free trade throughout the hemisphere by means of NAFTA expansion. As the result of the U.S. interest in creating a free trade area from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego, Canada saw itself in the middle of a

dilemma: either to become part of the liberalization through its membership in the trilateral pact or to see the U.S. negotiating bilateral agreements with the Latin American countries, excluding Canada.

"One of the reasons I supported the trilateral agreement was because of the perspective for expansion," explained Prime Minister Jean Chrétien during a personal interview at the end of 1994. "The more countries we have, the better we will be able to counter-balance the U.S. superpower."

Moreover, there was the real opportunity for both Canada and Mexico to act together within the "ménage-à-trois" in order to guarantee that the U.S. complies with its agreement's obligations. "It is not that Canada and Mexico will suddenly shape the American policy, but if they act together, it will be more difficult for the U.S. to act unilaterally in the North American context," explained Edgar Dosman, Executive Director of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL), an independent think-tank created in 1989 by Canadian Parliament.

The dispute settlement mechanism under the agreement -- acting providing for an impartial international arbitration body -- would force the U.S. to respect its trilateral commitments. Instead of having two independent agreements based on the asymmetry of their economies, the reasoning went, NAFTA had the potential of putting both Canada and Mexico together to better counter-balance the Americans.

"We have to take advantage of our partnership to vigilate the elephant and to prevent an accident, so that we can survive," Chrétien explaindc later, during the first visit of then-elected President Ernesto Zedillo to Ottawa in November 1994.

The accidents, however, were just around the corner. And not necessarily because of "the elephant" but because NAFTA had not been just a bridge between the First and the

Third World, but also between the Anglo-Saxon, the French and the Latin American World. Even if the "siesta" between them was by now definitely over, Canada and Mexico continued being nothing but two strangers starting to rediscover one another.

The first chapter of their new relationship began in January 1, 1994. On the same day that NAFTA went into effect, in the Southern Mexican jungle the first warning was about to be heard.

Mexico Unmasked

> The Salinas group had tried to present to the world the image of a stable and prosperous Mexico . . . But on January first, we brought the mask down and showed the country's real face -- Subcomandante Marcos (qtd. in Oppenheimer 76).

I was in the middle of an afternoon "siesta," sleeping off my New Year's Eve hangover, when my father entered the room. "Get up. The revolution has started," he said. As we surrounded the TV, we saw the chilling images of masked Indians running though the streets waving rifles. Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost and poorest state, was at war.

"It was about time. The people cannot stand it any more," a choleric Pepe Viveros said, lighting his cigarette. "We have lived with lies while the politicians rob us of our money. They do not have anything to lose."

"Pero las niñas, Pepe, Que les espera a las niñas? (But the girls, Pepe. What is going to happen to the girls?)" my mother asked, while "las niñas," my then 18-year-old sister Vanessa and I, 23, held hands.

"Well, I don't know," my father responded. "I guess that Salinas will send the Army to kill them all and that the Americans will make sure that the thing doesn't explode. Now with NAFTA, they don't have any choice."

Under the leadership of Subcomandante Marcos, a white university professor who had lived for years in the jungle organizing the movement, thousands of Mayan Indians had rebelled against the government. They took, through bloody fights with the Army, several towns of Chiapas, including the tourist city of San Cristóbal de las Casas.

"Why do you want to leave?" Subcomandante Marcos asked the tourists who were surrounding him, along with the press corps, in a San Cristóbal de las Casas plaza. "Enjoy the city . . . The way to Palenque (where the pyramids are) is closed . . . Sorry about the

annoyance, but this is a revolution," he said, assuring the tourists that the next day, on January 2, they all would be able to leave (qtd. in Tello 16).

With such a sanguine tone, and with a magnificent international public relations campaign, it was clear that the rebellion of the so-called Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN) was the first post-modern revolution the world had seen since the end of the Cold War. But behind the romantic Indian Renaissance, we Mexicans were scared to death; it was also the first armed conflict that both my parents' and my generation had confronted so openly. No one was prepared for that -- certainly not me. I had gone to Mexico City for my Christmas holiday and did not expect the news that my country, the darling of emerging markets, had been transformed overnight into a "revolucionario." I could not help but think just how naive we all had been and how blind or busy we all were, trying to become magnates while there were people who could not even afford tortillas.

Marcos said the Indians were against NAFTA because that would not only put Mexico at the mercy of the U.S. but would further marginalize the indigenous communities from development. But the fact that he had launched the attack the eve NAFTA came into effect suggested that this was much more than an anti-free trade campaign. Rather than acting before the U.S. Congress had passed the deal in November of the previous year -- something that would have certainly stopped it -- they used January 1, 1994, to draw the world's attention to one of the worst Mexican shames.

The "bronco Mexico" had been uncovered, revealed as a country of economic inequalities, social injustice and repression of minorities. Behind the "country of opportunities" was a nation divided and threatened by social unrest. Behind Salinas's regime lurked the authoritarian and corrupt Institutional Revolutionary Party, which had ruled Mexico for more than 65 years.

In the "Jungle Declaration," the EZLN asked for Salinas's resignation, the creation of a new government and better conditions for the indigenous peoples. "Goodbye to the myth of social peace," said the cover of the sensational, well-respected Mexican magazine Proceso, displaying the legendary close-up of Subcomandante Marcos that caught the world's eye. One of the main defences of the PRI for being in power since 1929 -- that it had guaranteed peace and stability in a too frequently shaken Latin America -- was demolished. And with that, crashed the hopes in Mexico as the more or less stable country of opportunities. Instead of watching stories celebrating the new trade pact, we all saw -- at home and abroad -- images of masked Indians running through the streets waving rifles and army troops and tanks sent out to stop them.

The rebellion had succeeded "in getting the country to take off its ski mask and show itself as it is," as Marcos said one year later when the authorities identified him as a former university professor with a long history of Marxist militancy (qtd. in Oppenheimer 76). Mexicans alike had awakened from the dream into a nightmare that they had refused to acknowledge. The Spaniards were no longer the oppressors, but the "mestizos," the children of the Spaniards and Indians.

In Mexico, 60 per cent of the population is ethnically "mestizo" -- the mixture of Spaniards or descendants of the Spanish and Indians -- 9 per cent caucasian or predominantly white; 11 per cent (or approximately 10 million people) Indian, particularly concentrated in the South, and 19 per cent predominantly Indian (Reddy 614).

Mexico has struggled throughout its history to come to terms with this demography. Its identity has always been divided between the Spanish winner and the defeated Indian, ever since 1521 when the Spaniards conquered the Aztec Empire's capital of Tenochtitlan (now Mexico City).

As author Alan Riding points out, Mexicans "cannot accept their mestizaje . . . Mexico searches endlessly for an identity, hovering ambivalently between ancient and modern, traditional and fashionable, Indian and Spanish, Oriental and Western. And it is in both the clash and the fusion of these roots that the complexity of Mexico resides (3)."

This complexity means that while mestizos -- and even direct descendants of Indians or Indian themselves -- can hold and have held power in Mexico, the ruling elite is guilty of a deep racism based on a belief in the Indians' inferiority. On the other hand, Indians feel both admiration and resentment towards Spaniards and whites in general. In this sense, it does not come as a surprise that the higher one looks within the economic structure, the whiter the people are. Conversely, the lower the level in the hierarchy, the darker and more Indian people are. Despite the fact that all Mexicans are equal before the law -- without any distinction of race or religious beliefs -- Indians continue to live in miserable conditions.

Today, Mexico's more than 10 million Indians are divided into 56 recognized ethnic and linguistic groups and speak over 100 different dialects, according to Mexico's National Human Rights Commission (Madrazo). Almost nine million people live in indigenous communities, where the death rate is 12 per cent higher than in the rest of the country. And among the about two million other Indians who live in urban areas, the situation is similar. The three Mexican states where more people die because of malnutrition, stomach and respiratory infections are Guerrero (Warrior), Oaxaca and Chiapas, where more than 50 per cent are Indians, mainly Mayas and Zapotecas (Albarran 13).

In Chiapas alone, more than three million people live in 16,400 different communities, most of them in the middle of the Lacandona Jungle, which makes access to public utilities and services almost impossible. In fact, three fourths of these communities have less than 99 inhabitants. In addition, more than one third of the total 594,500 homes have only one room

inhabited by more than five people. Although Chiapas produced 55 per cent of the country's electricity in 1990, one out of three homes does not have any electricity (Albarran 13).

Furthermore, the minimum salary in Chiapas is the equivalent of $4 US a day. Of the total working population of 855,000, 59 per cent make the minimum salary or less, 21 per cent twice as much, 18.7 per cent between twice and 10 times as much, and 1.3 per cent earn more than 10 times the minimum wage. With respect to education, more than three fourths of the population above 12 years of age has not completed elementary school, and only one per cent of those who work went to university, compared to 9.2 per cent of the total population (Albarran 15; Reddy 614).

Although Indians -- and particularly their culture -- have gained recognition as an essential part of the Mexican identity, they have been oppressed and largely excluded from Mexico's development.

However, this state of injustice is completely different from what happens in Mexico's two northern neighbors, where the indigenous separation and marginalization -- especially on reserves -- are institutionalized, under the moral and political justification of protecting their traditional cultures and ways of life. Unlike its neighbors, Mexico has tried -- also unsuccessfully -- to include its indigenous people in national life, in a contradictory effort of both assimilation and respect for their traditions and languages. Unlike Canada's indigenous peoples and their communities, the Mexican Indians have no special recognition in Mexico's Constitution, since the view has been that Mexico is a mestizo nation and, as such, everybody is Mexican and equal before the law.

Although Indians have the right by law to have a lawyer and a translator in case of arrest, and extensive programs of alphabetization have been carried out in their own native languages, they have not been seen as "special" Mexicans who need to be distinguished from

the others. In fact, it was as the result of this "melting-pot" approach that Mexico successfully developed its strong national identity in order to overcome and preserve itself from both internal divisions and external threats.

While Canada sacrificed the development of a strong national identity in exchange for its British character and dependence in the beginning -- a situation that protected it during the 18th and 19th century from American expansionism -- Mexico developed a strong nationalism based on an autonomous national identity (not exclusively but parallel) to protect itself from the United States's continuous aggression and interventions.

While the white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant character in North America was imposed on people of other backgrounds by the British and other European settlers, the Spaniards were unable to do the same in what is now Latin America. By exterminating the native peoples and marginalizing their survivors on reserves, white European immigrants developed their democratic and liberal institutions in what it is now Canada and the U.S. In what would become Mexico, however, the arrival of Spanish conquerors in more highly populated territories made complete extermination almost impossible, leading to the mestizaje.

Although there is no agreement with respect to how many people existed in Mexico when the Spaniards arrived, it is presumed that there were about 4.5 million people, who by 1650 were reduced to 1.2 million by epidemics, malnutrition and military clashes with the Spaniards (Lira and Munro 366-387). But even if mestizaje was the forced alternative to complete extermination, a colonial mentality prevailed after Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821: everything Indian meant failure and defeat while everything Spanish was associated with victory and triumph.

While the British settlers in North America had the background of the already

accomplished Puritan revolution in Europe, along with the formation of the liberal-state in the 18th century, Spain continued to be trapped until the beginning of the 19th century in the economic, religious and social darkness of the Middle Ages, so tragically exemplified by the Inquisition.

In addition, while capitalism had started to develop in England and with the settlers in North America, Spain and its colonies continued to be trapped in mercantilism until the 19th century, preventing the formation of both a real "bourgeoisie" and a liberal state.

Thus, as Riding says, "on the ruins of a long line of theocratic and militaristic empires, Cortés imposed the values of a profoundly Catholic and intellectually repressed Spain. . . (reinforcing) a political tradition of political authoritarianism and divine omnipotence. . . (19)"

As an independent country, Mexico emerged divided in 1821, trying to become united as a people and as a nation-state in an effort that would take it a century and several internal and external wars. Towards this end, the fathers of Mexico adopted the Western values of liberalism, inspired by the French and American revolutions.

The Mexican war of independence started in 1810 not as an indigenous uprising against European values but as a struggle of frustrated Creoles, dreaming of controlling their own destinies. Children of Spaniards, but born in New Spain, the Creoles were marginalized from power, which continued to be held and exercised from the Iberian Peninsula.

But since everybody in New Spain was oppressed, Indians, mestizos and Creoles alike became involved in the revolt. Although Indian slavery as such had been prohibited since the beginning of the Spanish domination, Indians continued to be exploited as slaves, and both mestizos and Creoles continued to be marginalized from the high ranks of the Catholic Church and public office and bureaucracy (Lynch).

But even if independence resulted in concessions to the mestizos and indigenous

peoples -- the "caste" system was immediately suppressed and equal distribution of public works was established -- the Creoles consolidated their power as landlords, businessmen and as the main authorities in the Church, the Army and the State.

Then, although the U.S. expansionist threat played a unifying role in the still-precarious Mexican nationalism, the new country's identity was still pretty much based on the Creoles. It would not be until 1867, under the government of Liberal President Benito Juárez, that mestizos and even Indians would become part of the national life and decision-making in government, although with several obstacles still to overcome.

After expelling the French, Juárez established a secular state by separating the state and the Church, and by nationalizing most of its properties -- an historical move that would guarantee the development of capitalism in Mexico. Until then, most of the resources had been in the hands of the Church, an institution whose economic activity was more focused on richness and land-properties concentration than on making profits or developing the country. With these moves, Juárez consolidated for the first time a nation-state truly integrated by Mexicans and no longer by Creoles or under a foreign power's domination.

"Juárez and his generation founded a State, whose ideals were different from those which animated the New Spain or the pre-Cortesian societies," author Octavio Paz explains (78). "The Mexican State proclaims a universal and abstract conception of the man: the Republic is no longer made up of Creoles, Indians and mestizos....but of men, solely and only."

In this sense, the new nation ruled under the first attempt at liberalism, emerged based upon the dream of equality in which all men are equal before the law and all of them are Mexican, regardless of their color, race or religion. In practical terms, however, this only benefitted mestizos and their domination over Indians, who continued to be exploited.

Juárez was an orphan Indian from the highly Zapoteca-populated southern state of Oaxaca; he had been educated by the Franciscans. But despite being an Indian himself, Juárez showed no special concern for the indigenous population since he believed that the Indians were best served by "integration" into the national life, rather than by the isolated preservation of their traditions.

However, most indigenous peoples did not share this idea. The constant Zapoteca rebellions against the Spaniards continued after Mexican independence and survived until the 20th century. After two attempts to become independent from the state of Oaxaca in bloody revolts in 1827 and 1847, they rebelled again in 1911, in what was the largest regional insurrection until then (Campbell et al.)

Although a revolution of great dimensions had already taken place under Juárez, by erasing the caste-like system that survived independence, another would be necessary to consolidate Mexico as a truly culturally, economically and politically mestizo nation.

During Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship (1896-1910) there was no written rule that obstructed mestizo participation in power. But during this period, when the country was dramatically developed through foreign investment, wealth started to be concentrated both in the hands of foreigners and of a white elite. Some 300 families owned half the country, land ownership concentration increased through fancy haciendas, mestizos started to be decriminalized in favor of European descendants and foreigners, and the Indians were reduced by poverty to a diet of beans and tortillas. It was not until the 1910 Mexican Revolution that the mestizo realm would become a reality.

In 1908, when Díaz told the American press that Mexico was not ready for democracy, middle-class intellectuals and professionals decided to challenge him in the 1910 election. In the summer of that year, wealthy Francisco I. Madero, candidate of the

Anti-Reelectionista Party, was jailed because of his popularity and only released after Díaz's fourth re-election on June 26.

From his exile in the U.S., Madero claimed in November he was the rightful president and called for an uprising on November 10, which resulted in Díaz's resignation and subsequent departure to France in May 1911. Although Madero went back to Mexico City and was elected president in October, the real revolution was only about to begin.

Washington reacted aggressively to Madero's new measures, such as the legalization of labor unions, and to the political uncertainty since there were other factions led by "caudillos" disputing Madero's power. After 10 days of an internal rebellion amongst the military ranks led by general Victoriano Huerta, the U.S. government gave him the "go-ahead," promising its diplomatic support. Madero and at least nine of his team politicians were assassinated in 1913 after having been apprehended by Huerta (Krauze 131).

However, Huerta's government only survived until 1914. After a series of military clashes between the different caudillos, and under different governments, Mexico finally saw some temporary stability in 191, when Venustiano Carranza took power with the goal of institutionalizing the Revolution's main ideals in a new Constitution.

It started being drafted at the end of 1916 by a Constituent Assembly dominated for the first time by members of a rising mestizo class -- professionals, teachers and bureaucrats whose mobility had been blocked by the "Porfiriato." The Constitution was extremely important because it envisioned a nation ruled by "true Mexicans" -- from now on mestizos-- rather than descendants of conquerors and other white foreigners. While Indians continued being poor and marginalized, they also benefited temporarily from the future agrarian reform and were recognized as an essential part of the Mexican identity.

In an effort to compromise with the "caudillos" in charge of the peasant armies -- led

by now national heroes Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa -- the government agreed to incorporate into the Constitution significant collective rights for the peasants and workers, even before the Russian Revolution could accomplish something similar.

Along with the individual rights copied from the 1857 Constitution, the new one established agrarian reform, giving the right of property to whomever worked on it, which meant the end of "latifundios" or large concentration of land under one owner. (This process would be implemented until the 1930s although not to a large extent in Southern states like Chiapas). Likewise, elementary education was made mandatory and secular, and the Catholic Church was limited even further. The Constitution banned the Church from criticizing "the fundamental laws of the country . . . or the government in general." Church officials were prohibited from voting or being elected to public office. However, the Constitution acknowledged "freedom of religion," which meant that "Mexicanidad" was no longer the same as being Catholic, and that, although almost all Mexicans were Catholic, there was the possibility of not being Catholic and still being Mexican (Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos).

However, American voices in Congress started increasingly to ask for a military intervention, since the Constitution also established that all Mexico's natural resources, like the oil, were "national property" in the hands of the state. In these difficult circumstances, Carranza put this constitutional provision (Article 27) on hold until 1920, when Obregón orchestrated a rebellion against him. While trying to organize his counter-offensive, Carranza was assassinated on his way to Veracruz by a rebel group that never acknowledged its now-known links to Obregón.

In exchange for Washington's recognition, Obregón assured the Americans that Article 27 would not be retroactive, proceeding in 1923 to sign the infamous "Bucarelli

Treaties" in which Mexico secretly agreed not to apply future oil and agrarian legislation to Americans and to reimburse them for properties damaged during the war (Zoraida and Meyer 153).The achievements of the revolution had once again been put on hold, thanks to Washington. But Mexico's future control over its destiny was already hovering in the wings.

Despite all its horrors, the Revolution consolidated "civic nationalism," one that was inclusive and no longer based on ethnic lines. Mexico emerged poor, economically and politically fractured after the war, but also united as a truly mestizo nation.

"The revolution mixed violently the north with the south, finished with the oligarchy and promoted a new (mestizo) elite," explains historian Lorenzo Meyer. "It made emerge a nationalism that sustained that the essential Mexicans were precisely those who had been despised by the modernizing Liberals of the 19th Century and who remained at the bottom of the social pyramid: the mestizo and indigenous majority, rural and poor. This was maybe the best moment of the Revolution, although the task never concluded" (24).

Aside from the fact that the Revolution shaped a truly Mexican nationalism, it gave back to Mexicans the economic and natural resources that had been for so long in the exclusive hands of foreigners, even if this only happened several years later, when the U.S. was already busy with the Second World War.

In addition to the oil industry's nationalization, President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), a mestizo with Tarascan Indian blood, gained the sympathy of the peasants and Indians through agrarian reforms and extensive repartition of land. Indeed, his name and figure continue to be extremely popular among the poor, who still affectionately refer to him as "Tata" (Daddy) Cárdenas.

So even if the Revolution had ended in 1917, the agrarian "reforma" and the oil nationalization revived its spirit in a strong nationalist sentiment. The Revolution, its heroes

and its romantic scenes with "adelitas" and Pancho Villa's images continue to be for the Mexican of today one of the most powerful symbols of being Mexican, along with the post-revolutionary colorful paintings evoking Indian images by Diego Rivera, Frida Khalo, David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco, who are still acclaimed throughout the world.

"Quantitatively and qualitatively, the external presence had lost strength in Mexico and, what it is even more important, the image that Mexicans had of themselves facing the rest of the world was much more positive and confident," write Josefina Zoraida Vázquez and Lorenzo Meyer (173).

However, it also meant that Mexico would not evolve as a real democracy, since there had not been any change of power, and that Indians would continue to be poor and marginalized. Mexico as a mestizo nation had succeeded, but at the price of its Indians. During the "ejido" system -- which prevented land owners from renting property and then exploiting poor peasants -- they continued being poor. Besides the lack of capital in the countryside, there were places in the country -- particularly in Chiapas -- where the agrarian revolution never arrived.

Although many Indians had copies of presidential decrees granting them land titles, not all of them were recognized. Besides the fact that the wealthy ranchers have blocked their efforts by appealing such decrees in court, they also have evaded land reform by subdividing their land into legal-sized parcels and registering them under other names. When facing Indian protests, the ranchers would either call on the local government for the use of state troops to stop them or would hire "Guardias Blancas" or White Guards (private gunmen) to repress them.

This situation worsened during the 1960s, when thousands of Chamula Indians, most

of them Evangelicals, resettled in the Lacandona Jungle while splitting from the Catholic dominated communities, where they had been persecuted for their beliefs. But they were not alone, for over the next decades they were followed by the Tzeltal, Chol, Tzotzil and Tojolabal Indians, who saw the jungle as an opportunity for new land (Tello Díaz).

The bloody rule of PRI "caciques" (political and economic local authorities), the existence of "latifundios" (great extensions of land) and the dominance of the Catholic Church continued. And even if the Catholic Church in the south would later move towards the leftist "Liberation Theology," it also continued to block the communities' access to birth-control methods, preferring instead to preach among the impoverished Indian communities that they had to have all the children God wanted.

"Chiapas was the epitome of everything that was wrong with Mexico. It was the most corrupt, authoritarian, backward area of a country that was being hailed abroad for its dramatic steps toward modernization," says author Andrés Oppenheimer, a veteran Miami Herald correspondent in Mexico (59).

Just when it seemed that things could not get worse, Salinas reformed Article 27 of the Constitution, putting an end to the "ejido" system, whereby peasants living on co-operative farms had lifelong property rights over their lands without the right of selling them as a way of protecting them from a forced sale. But after Salinas' "agrarian disreform," intended to attract private and foreign investment to the countryside and to demonstrate that Mexico was liberalized enough to enter NAFTA, things ended in a rebellion. Both in the revolutionary and post-revolutionary climate as well as in the "neo-liberal" model, the Indians had been sacrificed in the country's industrialization and "modernization" efforts.

When part of the Mexican pride seemed to have shifted from an already anachronistic revolution to a brighter economic future as a result of a new closeness with the U.S., a new

revolution was already under way.

Canada Under Covered

> We have to expose Canada in terms of its real face, not that false face as a champion of human rights, or that false face of peacekeepers or that false face of Team Canada, but the real face of how they treat our people -- Ovide Mercredi, Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations (qtd. in Platiel A2).

Although a ceasefire and negotiations started almost immediately, the world responded with great sympathy to the rebels. Depiction of human-rights abuses on the part of the Army made the headlines. Activist organizations in Canada and the United States started putting pressure on their governments to push Mexico towards real democracy by using the free trade agreement.

"We denounce the silence of the Canadian government with respect to the conflict in Chiapas," said Suzanne Rumsey of the Inter-Church Committee for Human Rights in Latin America. "We demand the Canadian government to put pressure on the Mexican to respect human rights, by using the trading relationship it has with Mexico," she said in a press conference on January 18, 1994. Hers was just one of the many calls for action the government received that month from NGOs and Canada's own aboriginal leaders, such as Ovide Mercredi, Grand Chief of the National Assembly of the First Nations.

However, the Canadian government, like the American, tried to play down the relationship between the uprising and NAFTA, saying that increasing trade would lead Mexico to improve its standards on human rights, democracy and economic development.

"We are confident that there is no link between the revolt and the signing of the agreement," Chrétien told the House of Commons on January 18, after being faced by several

Opposition questions related to Chiapas. However, either to save face in the eyes of the critics or as a reflex action to illustrate that with NAFTA it was now easier to address such concerns, he said that Canada would not just cross its arms and wait.

"The concern that human rights be respected has already been expressed to the Mexican government . . . We have already been pressuring them and we will continue," he said, triggering an angry reaction on the part of the Mexican Ambassador, Sandra Fuentes Berain, who immediately asked for a meeting with then Foreign Affairs Minister André Ouellet.

But although the Canadian concerns expressed to the Mexican government in public were too soft for the human rights organizations and too "undiplomatic" for the Mexican authorities, it was clear that NAFTA had changed the dynamic. Trade, it is true, had never been used to twist Mexico's arm. But the existence of the new partnership would allow Canada and the U.S. at least to "follow closely" the Mexican events that otherwise would have been dealt with without much worry.

As Christine Stewart, Secretary of State for Africa and Latin America, said, "the democratic development in Mexico and the human rights issues are more important now for Canada than in the past due to our bigger (economic) interest in the country as the result of NAFTA."

Mexicans' opposition to violence, though massive demonstrations and the continuous calls for peace on the part of intellectuals, was huge. It was the central reason Salinas finally decided to give priority to the peaceful alternative over the military one. But it was clear that the foreign "concerns" also played an important role.

The army perpetrated serious human rights violations. There were continued allegations of repression of civilians, executions of unarmed Zapatistas, and indiscriminate air strikes. However, 12 days after the uprising had started, the government proclaimed a unilateral ceasefire, and peace negotiations started. Salinas, it seemed, was again in control. And again, Mexicans and the world believed him, although not for very long.

Mexico, however, was not alone with respect to poor treatment of Indians. Canada was guilty as well, even if the Chiapas uprising had allowed Canadians, indirectly, to blame in others what they had not been able to resolve themselves. Although polls show than a majority of Canadians think that the indigenous people have better economic conditions than non-Aboriginals, the truth is that in "the best country in the world to live" -- as the United Nations has qualified Canada -- the indigenous population has not been necessarily much better off than in Mexico.

The 811,000 indigenous peoples, known in Canada as the First Nations and divided into 50 different cultural and linguistic groups, face an unemployment rate of 25 per cent, compared with the national average of 10 per cent. Furthermore, 46 per cent of those living on reserves live on welfare. Natives' tuberculosis incidence is 17 times higher than in the rest of the population, and 40 per cent of the country's prison inmates are Indians, even though they make up less than three per cent of the national population (Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples).

Compared with Mexico, this situation might look wonderful, given that both the federal and the provincial governments spend about $9.6 (US) billion a year on the aboriginal peoples, while Mexico spends about $120 million (DePalma E3). However, Canada is one of

the seven most industrialized countries in the world while Mexico is still part of the Third World, where no one has either welfare or unemployment insurance. This is not to suggest that the Indian situation in Mexico is justifiable, since only in the southern state of Tabasco the PRI spent about $65 million (US) dollars in the 1995 local election, but that Mexicans alike are victims of the same unequal and corrupt system.

According to the 1996 Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, established by the federal government in 1989, the government will need to spend an additional $1.5 billion (US) a year over the next 15 years if it wants to improve the most difficult aboriginal problems -- housing, unemployment, alcohol abuse, crime and suicides

Despite this sad picture, just as Mexicans have tried throughout the history to wash away their guilt by using the "mestizo" myth, Canadians justify their national shame by arguing that, unlike Mexico, they had respected their natives' identity and their cultural autonomy instead of assimilating them by force.

While in Mexico the confrontation and the fusion resulted in the "mestizaje," the "solution" in Canada and the U.S. was not a fusion but a kind of segregation, by isolating the aboriginal communities in reserves, where about 60 per cent of the Indian population in Canada still lives today.

With the objective of stopping the confrontation with the aboriginals, and after having conquered "New France" in 1760, the British established "reserved territories" for the aboriginal peoples that they were not able to sell without the required Crown licence.

After trying several policies to assimilate them without success, such as the residential school system, the government outlined Indian rights in the 1960 Indian Act. However, this

Act, which still exists today, "set Indian people apart from other Canadians, and although protective of their Indian rights, was the source of much criticism by Indian leaders and concerned Canadians alike," the Report of the Commission pointed out (1: 258). However, the 1969 attempts to eliminate all Indian special status, the gradual phasing out of federal responsibility for Indians and protection of reserve lands, the repeal of the Act and the ending of the treaties, were all rejected, given the fierce opposition even in Indian circles. The possibility of replacing the First Nations' isolation and dependence by a role of equal status had failed.

Now, although the reserve system has been defended by the Indians themselves as a way to protect their own autonomy, to keep the government's support, and to prevent European assimilation, its failure is more than evident.

Despite the fact that the federal government spends about $300 (US) million a year on the reserves, the poverty conditions, the housing shortages and social problems such as alcoholism, criminality and suicide remain cripplingly severe.

While the national mortality rate is 14.3 out of every 1,000 people, it rises to 29.5 in the Indian reserves. And while about 13 per cent of all Canadian families are considered low-income families, 40 per cent of the Indigenous ones belong to this category. Further, although the Indian population living off reserves has better incomes than those on reserves, their average annual income is 33 per cent behind those of their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 4: 609).

Perhaps most damaging of all, recent reports show that thousands of indigenous children separated from their families to live in residential schools were victims of sexual

abuse, assault and erratic sanitary and nutrition conditions from the late 19th century to the 1970s.

"The basic premise of re-socialization, of the great transformation from 'savage' to 'civilized' was violent," the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples concluded. "'To kill the Indian in the child' the Department (of Indian Affairs) aimed at severing the artery of culture that ran between generations and was the profound connection between parent and child sustaining family and community," the Commission observes (1: 365).

In response to "latent savagery," the residential schools had "deplorable" nutrition and sanitary conditions that provoked the death of an "incalculable" number of children, while thousands were sexually abused. The Catholic Bishop Hubert O'Connor, for instance, was incarcerated in July 1995 for raping one of his female students in a residential school in eastern Canada.

However, the Commission's recommendation to establish a federal inquiry into the matter, and that both governments and churches make a public apology and pay a compensation to the victims, has been badly received.

"What we needed from the Commission and we didn't get were clear recommendations about the remedies. And in this context, its response was unfortunate," Rev. Douglas Crosby, secretary general of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, told the press after the report was released.

Ron Irwin, the Minister for Indian Affairs, said "an apology would be an instantaneous gratification that does not go to the root of the problem."

When the two countries' economies are compared, Mexicans are left wondering why

Canada wants to posit its own situation as an example for Mexico to follow. According to official figures from both countries, 68 per cent of Mexican indigenous homes are without piped water, compared with 9.4 per cent of those belonging to Aboriginal Canadians (DePalma E3). However, when we take the indigenous situation in the national context, things look different. Canada's indigenous homes lacking piped water is 9.4 times higher than the average in the total population, while in Mexico it is only three times higher, since 21 per cent of the total Mexican population live in this situation. Likewise, while Canadian Indians did not get the individual right to vote until 1960, Mexico's male Indians could vote individually since the 1860s.

"There is too much arrogance in this country when we talk about other nations," acknowledged Joe Gunn, the director of social affairs at the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, an organization that denounces the indigenous human-rights abuses on the part of the Mexican government. "Here in Canada there is this notion that our poor are not as poor as the Mexican poor. But what we all need, including the human rights' NGOs and the Church itself, is to speak up with the same voice to acknowledge and condemn the injustices not only in the world but in Canada itself," he added in an interview.

Canada has also faced armed stand-offs with Indians, mainly as the result of territorial disputes, since both the federal and the provincial governments have not always respected their "original contracts," with the Aboriginals. And although the negotiating approach has prevailed in Canada, intolerance and calls for repression have not been absent.

One of the darkest chapters in the historic relationship between whites and Aboriginals occured recently. In July 1990 the Mohawks of Quebec blocked the Pont Mercier, the bridge

connecting the reserve of Kanasatake with the city of Montreal, to prevent the municipality of Oka from expanding a golf course on land that the Mohawks claimed contained an Indian cemetery. After the establishment of police barricades, and an armed confrontation in which a policeman was killed, the Army intervened to put an end to the Oka crisis. The Indians surrendered in exchange for the federal offer to purchase the "sacred land" and give it to the indigenous communities. On September 6, the Mercier Bridge was finally reopened by the army after 62 days of Mohawk occupation.

Five years later, when Canadian attention was still concentrated on Mexico's indigenous problems, Canadians again came face to face with their own unflattering reality. In June 1995, about 30 Aboriginals belonging to the so-called Sun Dancers group seized a private ranch in Gustafsen Lake, located at about 450 kilometers East of Vancouver, demanding that the area be declared a "sacred site." And in July, about 100 Chippewa Indians took by force the Canadian Armed Forces Base of Ipperwash, in Southern Ontario. The first crisis ended relatively peacefully in September, thanks to the mediation of Indian spiritual leaders and to the commitment made by the ranch's owner to let the Sun Dancers perform their religious ceremonies. But a 39-year-old Aboriginal was shot to death by a policeman during one of the confrontations in Ontario -- a case that did not come to court until 1997.

After covering both the Gustafsen Lake and Ipperwash stand-offs, I just wondered how Canada would react to an open declaration of war, like the one that the Zapatistas delivered to the Mexican government. After the Zapatistas took by force the municipalities in Chiapas, killing several policemen and soldiers, Salinas sent the Army under the very argument that the law had to be enforced -- something that left some Canadians scandalized.

But although it was true that in order to prevent a bloody confrontation, the 23 soldiers and the military police had immediately evacuated the Canadian Armed Forces Base of Ipperwash after the Indians started taking it by force, an Indian had been killed and the voices calling for a military solution were many.

Just as the Mexican government had done it with respect to Chiapas, in the case of B.C., both the provincial government and the police referred to the rebels as "criminals," while the Reform Party argued that it was not a political but a law-enforcement problem. "My government is not prepared to negotiate our right to pursue terrorists and criminals," British Columbia's Attorney General Ujja Dosanj told reporters on August 28. And in the case of Ontario, the Reform Party and several columnists started to ask for miliary intervention to stop the stand-off. Diane Francis, the Financial Post's editor, for instance, called on the government to "send the Army. . . wherever there are problems," criticizing the Ipperwash Base evacuation for being "the last example of Ottawa's cowardy" ("Ottawa must stop" 9).

While the Chiapas uprising "moved a lot of consciences, when it comes to question the structure of racism and marginalization that have ended up in violent conflicts in Canada, there is a great indifference," said Joe Gunn or Juan Pistolas, his Spanish-translated name by which he is better known in Mexico.

Therefore, Canadians have no reservations in pointing fingers to make themselves an example to follow, even though its reserve system has been considered in Mexico as a kind of unacceptable "apartheid" that has not even been under discussion.

"I don't want to tell Mexico what it should do. It is not my business. But the problem

is that you don't recognize the existence of Aboriginals. Everybody is Mexican," Chrétien said in an interview with Reforma newspaper in March 1994. "Here in Canada, we don't have this policy. In Canada you can be Canadian and being different at the same time."

However, the Aboriginals see things differently. Although Ovide Mercredi, Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, has been an important critic of Mexico's indigenous situation, the Canadian double standard of pointing fingers at others while remaining indifferent to their national problems has bothered him greatly.

"What right do we have to lecture you on what to do in your country?" Mercredi told a group of politicians, diplomats, academics and business leaders from Guatemala, who attended a conference in Ottawa in early March 1997. "(Canada) should do its own examination before it provides advice to you . . . We're beggars in our own country. Bloody beggars," he declared at the round table organized by the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (qtd. in Bobak 4).

The Chiapas rebellion has not only made Mexicans acknowledge the deep problem of racism and social injustice, it has also challenged their traditional approach towards the indigenous peoples: either assimilation or isolation. As a result of the peace agreement between the government and the Zapatistas, signed in February 1996, a constitutional reform has been considered in order to recognize their rights, such as autonomy, self-determination and the preservation of their culture and traditions.

However, the outcome of both the debate and these attempts is so unclear that Subcomandante Marcos accused the government one year later of "betrayal" under the argument that such a reform will result in the "Mexican nation's fragmentation," as he put it

in a press release issued on St. Valentine's Day 1997.

The current issue is not just between the government and the Zapatistas, but centres on what kind of Mexico Mexicans want. And it seems that the people's sympathy towards Marcos has reached its limit. Just as Mexicans did not join the rebels in a national rebellion to liberate the country from the "Salinas dictatorship," as Marcos expected after the uprising, it seems that Mexicans will not join them either in what has been seen by many as an attempt of real social fragmentation.

"The problem of the indigenous peoples in Mexico is isolation, both geographically and culturally," said historian Héctor Aguilar Camín, expressing what most non-Aboriginal Mexicans and mestizos seem to think. "The idea of having a special legislation for them has the risk that rather than achieving real and practicable autonomies, it could consecrate instead both isolationist trends and practically a life in reserves . . .Those who have been doing less worse in this country are those who developed a greater capacity for contact (with the outside)," he added in a recent article in Nexos magazine, expressing the Mexicans' fear of giving up the assimilation approach in which they had believed throughout their history.

In fact, along with Aguilar Camín, many experts and Indians' advocates have stressed that Mexico's problem is not necessarily the law, but that the laws are not fully respected. So in the end, the question becomes whether to proceed with new legislation when the current law might not have worked, not because it is a bad one, but because it has not been respected.

In March 1995, several members of the Congress' Commission for Indian Affairs came to Canada to study the Canadian experience "not in an attempt to copy, but to enrich" Mexico's alternatives to solve the indigenous situation, said Miguel Alberto Segura Dorantes,

from the conservative opposition National Action Party (PAN).

But although the deputies seemed to like the fact that Indians living in reserves did not pay taxes, they did not like the reserves at all. "We do not want reserves. We do not want to convert our Indians into 'Mexican curiosities' . . . We do not want to create a country within another country," Segura Dorantes stressed during an interview. "We have to respect the beliefs and the customs of the Indians, but within an integration among all Mexicans."

As for the PRI deputy Roberto Pedraza Martínez, the president of the Commission, he could not agree more with his colleague, even in the perception of Canada as "he who lives in glass houses throwing stones." As far as they both were concerned, after visiting several reserves in the U.S. and Canada, although "certain" indigenous autonomy was the answer, the main Indian demand is for access to public services and to the development rather than further isolation.

Whatever the final outcome might be, and despite the profound differences between Canada and Mexico with respect to indigenous peoples, it is clear that they share a common challenge -- and a similar shame.

Bullets, Ballots and Bills

"Welcome to Mexico's Benito Juárez International Airport," I read with pride. Along with a dozen Canadian journalists, I had just landed that morning of March 22, 1994 in Mexico City, where magnificent volcanoes and other less gorgeous turmoils awaited. A dark fat man with a mustache and a big smile greeted me at the immigration desk to check my passport, noticing the yellow "media" tag on my lap-top carrying case.

"Oh, so you are coming with the Canadians," he said (in Spanish, of course).

"Yes, we are covering the visit of the prime minister."

"Then you tell them good things about here. We like Canadians and so you treat them well, O.K.?" he told me while giving back my passport.

That piece of advice -- rather a command -- this unknown man gave me was like the many I was given when I had moved to Ottawa six months earlier, in the sense that I had to show everybody how great our country was.

What better opportunity to seal our new trading partnership and friendship than with Prime Minister Jean Chrétien first official visit to Mexico City? Especially, after our northern neighbors had started wondering about the destiny of their "Third Amigo" after the Chiapas uprising. Therefore, the Chrétiens' visit and the Canadian Expo 94, which took place the same week with 450 Canadian companies represented, would put trade back on track and alleviate whatever remaining fears existed in investors' minds.That, combined with our world-famous hospitality -- "Está usted en su casa" -- would certainly make the prime minister's visit at least unforgettable. And unforgettable it was, indeed.

Outside the airport, the sun was shining brightly.

"I thought it would be more polluted, but it is actually not that bad," said Laura Lynch, a CBC Radio reporter, to one of the diplomats from the Canadian Embassy who had

come to take us in the big media bus to El Presidente Hotel.

"C'est pas si mal que ça. C'est très jolie la ville," commented Dorothée Giroux, whose eight months of pregnancy did not stop her from coming to one of the biggest, most polluted cities in the world to cover Chrétien for her Radio Canada audiences back in "la belle province." "Ça sera très intéressant. C'est chaud, quand même," she said, expressing her nation's desperation at the end of winter.

The first day went smoothly -- but then Chrétien was not coming until the next day. We unpacked our belongings, mainly consisting of technological equipment to work on and file our stories, and summery clothes. El Presidente was a five-star hotel; its modern style made us forget what country we were visiting.

But the lack of central air conditioning, the hotness of the environment and the view we had from the penthouse were a constant reminder that we were in Mexico, or at least in one version of the two Mexicos.The crudeness of the other Mexico, which knows nothing about red carpets, business showcases and ministerial visits, was kilometers away from our headquarters in Polanco, one of the fancier neighborhoods in Mexico City. The presence of children and "Marías" -- indigenous women carrying babies on their backs in a "reboso" -- asking for money in the streets just blocks away from our hotel was also a reminder of how close the two Mexicos were. So when my Canadian colleagues told me they wanted to see the "real Mexico," I wondered whether they were referring to a more folkloric scene or to the "poverty belts" that surround the megalopolis.

In the end, I did not find out because the hard-working Canadians preferred to start writing right away on their business stories about the Canadian Expo, rather than trying Mexican nightlife. I went on my own to check on the familiar places, convinced my colleagues were safe in the care of the Canadian Embassy, which provided us with warnings against

eating raw vegetables in non-reputable restaurants or using the subway during the rush hour. And besides the fact the taxpayer money was being well-spent by their embassy, the hotel staff was making sure that the Canadians were happy.

"I want all this floor shining and spotless. All the Canadian media is staying here. I don't want mistakes," overheard my friend Marie-Claude Lortie, the La Presse reporter. She told me the story with a big smile, as if the red carpet and the red maple leaf flag were waiting for the fun to come.

On the afternoon of March 23, Chrétien finally arrived with his wife Aline. At about 6 p.m., as the dignitaries dressed for the dinner President Carlos Salinas de Gortari was giving later that night, we reporters boarded the media bus to go to Los Pinos, the president's official residence, where the representatives of the two countries' business communities were starting to arrive. The "fiesta" to celebrate our new partnership was about to begin.

I was talking to Globe and Mail reporter Jeff Sallot while we were waiting outside the Manuel Avila Camacho room in Los Pinos when I sensed something was wrong. My Mexican colleagues, who were also arriving, have always been loud and restless, but this time they seemed over-excited, filled with a sense of urgency. Among the crowd I suddenly saw an old friend of mine from La Jornada newspaper, trying to listen to someone else's portable radio.

"Helena!", I yelled, "What's going on?"

"So you don't know?" she asked. "Colosio has been shot twice in the head and stomach during a rally in Tijuana. We believe he's dead," she told me, sounding like a prophet of doom.

"Oh, my God!" I said, immediately turning to Jeff. "The official presidential candidate has been shot. That has not happened since the late 1920s."

In a frantic gesture, he flipped his cellular phone open to call Toronto.

"The main opposition presidential candidate has been shot," he said.

"No, no, no. He is not from the 'oposición,' he is the one picked by Salinas. He is the official candidate," I corrected him.

"Call you later. This does not make any sense," he told the person back in the other end of "Norteamerica."

All of a sudden, all the Canadian journalists swarmed around us, trying to pick up the news. Everything was happening so fast that my Spanglish emerged again, feeding further my Canadian colleagues' confusion.

"What, what? Salinas was shot?" asked one.

"Who was killed?" asked another.

"Who is the source. . .Who told you that . . .What the fuck is going on?" a lost-in-the-crowd Canadian entrepreneur demanded.

Then, an angry and red-faced Peter Donolo, Chrétien's director of communications, cut me off.

"Stop it, Alejandra. This is not officially confirmed," he yelled at me, ignoring what I knew for a fact, that when something that bad is on the Mexican news, it is because something much worse has happened. As we would learn months later, Colosio had already died at that point.

Once inside the Adolfo Lopez Mateos room, where we were listening to the radio of one of the Mexican reporters, we learned that Luis Donaldo Colosio, the candidate of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) had been shot twice by a gunman who was already under arrest The incident had taken place just hours before, in the poor neighborhood of Lomas Taurinas in Tijuana, Baja Califonia, while Colosio was on his way to his car after attending a political rally.

Chrétien had been informed by Mexican officials at El Presidente hotel. While getting into his limousine to go to Los Pinos, he said to the press that "this is the price of democracy and of being exposed to the contact with the people."

The dinner, of course, was canceled, and Salinas read a statement to the press, saying that Colosio was in hospital "in serious condition" and that he had already dispatched his own doctor to see him. We were not allowed to ask any questions. We went back to the reception room to wait for both Chrétien and Salinas who, despite the chaos, held a 30-minute meeting behind closed doors.

In the meantime, we took our seats around a big table reserved for the media. We would wait and see. What we were waiting for was new information to give us a clue to understand how something like this could possibly happen. But what we saw were people running around, speculating about the motives and implications of the unprecedented event. I could not help thinking about the irony of having such a scene going on under the cold view of the 1910 Revolution's hero Emiliano Zapata, whose portrait was hanging from one of the walls in the room.

After their meeting, at around 10 o'clock, Salinas and his Canadian guest even took the time to appear together in public with their wives to say good bye to the 620 guests of the finally canceled dinner, pausing to shake their hands in this shaky environment.

Salinas, who already knew that Colosio was dead, was white as a ghost, but with a composure demonstrating the spirit he was known for, an iron will and heart. His wife seemed gripped in a paralysis, moving her hand in a kind of automatic reflex, with an absent look. I will never forget their icy calm because it hinted of a strong sense of resignation to tragedy behind its apparent coldness. Chrétien and his wife Aline had not lost the healthy color on their faces but were visibly touched by the tragedy, trying to comfort the Salinases.

After all, Colosio was not just the candidate the president had picked to be his successor. Both men had been close friends until the former decided one month earlier to take "political distance" from the latter to boost his campaign.

Later that night, at about 10:30, just a few minutes after the official confirmation that the presidential candidate had died, Chrétien gave a press conference in the hotel, stressing that the "tragedy" would not change the new relationship between both countries. After saying that he and his wife Aline shared the sorrow of Mexicans and that they would pray for them, the prime minister told us that "this was an accident that I am sure President Salinas will be able to resolve, since he is a man determined to continue with the reforms."

With respect to the biggest worry in business circles -- that foreign investors could see the event as political instability -- Chrétien said that it was important to take into account that these things have also happened in developed countries. "This is a country that has made great and deep reforms, but that still needs to continue the change towards this direction . . . democracy means being able to resolve tragedies such as this one, and I am sure that the president will do it," he said.

After a short night of sleep, Chrétien resumed his official duties the next morning by meeting again for one hour with Salinas in Los Pinos. Later, he went to the Congress headquarters, where he addressed the deputies and senators, whose black-clad PRI majority was mourning its leader, immersed in both deep sorrow and shock. PRI Senator Silvia Hernández gave her welcoming speech in tears.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Prime Minister, you have arrived in a moment of national sadness that otherwise would have been of celebration," she said, weeping, her voice trembling.

Afterwards, Chrétien took the podium to say that in times like these "all of us are brothers and sisters," that this tragedy "will unite us even more" and that Mexicans were not

alone because they had Canadian solidarity "in these painful and difficult moments." The difficult moments, however, were just around the corner for Chrétien himself.

Given the lack of presidential security, the Canadian prime minister was squeezed, caught in the middle of a furious crowd waiting to see Colosio's remains outside the funeral parlor Galloso. "Out, out, out," the PRI crowd yelled furiously at Chrétien, blocking his way to the entrance. For 10 minutes, the prime minister unsuccessfully tried to get inside the building to express his sympathy to the Colosio family. But according to witnesses, neither additional Mexican authorities nor extra security forces were waiting for him at the door. So with only the protection of a few Mounties and Mexican bodyguards, he finally agreed to go back to his car. However, his spokesman Peter Donolo later said that "there is no condemnation on our part since we understand the painful situation that Mexicans are experiencing."

Mexican officials explained later that the PRI crowd got angry at the fact that important senior officials were getting in, while they were not being allowed -- something normal in my country. Once they knew he was the Canadian prime minister, they stopped yelling and pushing. "¡Qué verguenza!"(What a shame), some of them were reported as saying after finding out who the "autoridad" really was.

Back in Canada, besides the news of the assassination, Canadian TV viewers saw their prime minister being squeezed and insulted in a dubious welcome for a foreign dignitary. The "fiesta" had turned into a funeral, and our house into an unprecedented political circus not seen since 1929, when then elected President Alvaro Obregón was shot dead while eating at a restaurant in Mexico City. "Canadians never run away from problems, and we are not going to run now," stated a determined Chrétien at the conclusion of his three-day visit before the Canadian-Mexican Chamber of Commerce. Despite his efforts to salvage something from the

national tragedy Mexico was experiencing, the visit turned into a fiasco that will mark forever the new relationship and the views Canadians have about Mexicans.

"Colosio's assassination was one of the most important events in our new relationship," said Brian Stevenson, director of Canadian Studies at the Instituto Tecnologico Autonomo de Mexico (ITAM), who is currently working as an advisor to International Trade Minister, Art Eggleton. "Mexico's image in Canada started to be very negative . . . but it also put both countries closer. Chrétien was very touched by the tragedy. And instead of going away, he felt politically and emotionally closer to Mexico. He felt he was the kind of good friend and neighbor that Mexico needed."

In the Mexican context, the visit almost disappeared both from Mexicans' minds and from the headlines, since everybody was focused on the national chaos and its future implications, not because of the relationship with Canada but for the very sake of our country.

The "bronco" Mexico, the country that experienced the first revolution the world witnessed this century, had started to emerge instead, having the Canadian prime minister as its honorary guest. The "Mexican miracle" that Salinas fought to build and that most Mexicans and the international community believed in was over.

Although the PRI was unable to capitalize in the short term on either tragedy -- the Chiapas uprising or Colosio's murder -- the elite was unable to prevent further collapses in the longer term. In August 1994, Ernesto Zedillo became the elected president, in what was the cleanest election Mexican had ever had, according to both domestic and foreign observers. Thanks to a campaign that was able to capitalize on Mexicans' fear of instability and to the party machinery -- whose strategies have always ranged from favors and overspending to open coercion in far isolated towns -- the PRI was there to govern once again.

"Anything but the war," most Mexicans were saying before the election.

But the return to peace and stability that Mexicans had looked for by voting for Zedillo -- who had been Colosio's friend and campaign chief -- did not arrive. José Francisco Ruíz Massieu, the second in command of the PRI, was shot dead in September that year while entering his car just minutes after attending a party meeting in downtown Mexico City.

As if all this were not trouble enough, just days after Zedillo was sworn in at the beginning of December as the new president replacing Salinas for a six-year term, things got much worse economically. As the result of further pressures on the reserves, triggered by the increasing political instability, along with the government's decision not to devalue the pso before the end of the Salinas's term and mediocre management on the part of the new government, the peso finally devalued dramatically, as a Christmas gift. In the middle of an investors' frenzy -- particularly foreigners -- it lost more than half its value to the American dollar, going from 3.5 pesos to the dollar to an average of 7.5 pesos. (In 1993, that would have equaled $3,500 and $7,500 pesos, respectively, since the three zeros on the right were suppressed later that year to facilitate monetary management and hide the inflation). As a result, the economy contracted by seven per cent of the GDP in 1995, leaving about two million people without jobs in what came to be seen as the worst economic crisis that Mexico has ever experienced in modern times. Another one!

After being recognized by the world as an "economic miracle," Mexico lost that status. Therefore, the image of Mexico as a modern country was suddenly replaced by the one that had always dominated the North American mentality: Mexico as a country of "bandidos" and "bandoleros," of human-rights abuses and corrupt politicians, a nation whose only role has been to oppress a poor and historically victimized society.

But not only that. Given the seriousness of the crisis and its effects in the rest of the

continent -- which became known as the "Tequila effect"-- Mexico passed from being a "third amigo" in big trouble to the cause of real trouble for the Canadian and American economies. After all, most Mexicans were right: with NAFTA, our northern neighbors could not just close their eyes and pretend that nothing had happened.

With the peso devaluation, the international investors frantically started transferring their "hot money" to countries with hard currency and little risk, something that Canada did not offer because of its enormous deficit and national debt. So the Canadian dollar also came under attack, falling a cent and a half in the month following the peso devaluation, putting more pressure on interest rates, which rose 157 basis points (1.57 percentage points) over the same period.

Seeing tough times coming, Canada and the U.S. decided they could not just let their "amigo" die alone. So under a special currency-support mechanism agreed upon in NAFTA, the U.S. Federal Reserve and the Bank of Canada extended Mexico a line of credit of $6 and about $1 billion (US), respectively. But the situation was worsening every minute, along with the confidence in Zedillo's government. Mexicans had started to speculate not in whether he would be able to remain in power, but rather in when his grip would fail, while editorials and public opinion squashed him.

So neither this economic support nor the statements of confidence in Zedillo's government made by both Chrétien and Clinton changed the state of frenzy in the international markets. So Clinton -- facing fierce opposition in Congress -- had to use his executive powers to extend an additional $20-billion bailout, with the help of the International Monetary Fund.

In exchange, the Mexican government gave its oil reserves as a guarantee for future payment and imposed draconian austerity measures to cope with the crisis, measures

that even Zedillo termed "bitter medicine." Mortgage rates jumped in January 1995 to 80 per cent, sending thousands of families into ruin. And later, Mexicans also saw their IVA (Mexico's version of the GST) increased to 15 per cent from 10.

However, Mexicans were not the only ones tasting the bitter medicine. Canadians felt they now had to thank Mexico for their higher interest rates, questioning further the good of the new relationship with this troubled country. Now it was not only a prime minister being squeezed, but their own pockets, even if both the Canadian and U.S. governments were trying to convince their citizens that helping Mexico was to their own benefit, as they did during Clinton's official visit to Canada at the end of February.

But after all, it was not really a Canadian problem. Although the number of refugee-status demands from Mexicans would increase to 951 in 1996 from 25 in 1993, it was the U.S. which would receive Mexican immigrants -- both legal and illegal -- looking desperately for jobs. So although Chrétien told the press that the new American bailout of Mexico, announced by Clinton on January 31, was both "beneficial and positive," he drew the line.

"We have already contributed with our share, and we have our own (financial) problems," he said, expressing the mood of the whole country, for which the image of an Indian snoozing under a cactus became one of a "bandido" (robber) socking up dollars on the Stock Exchange.

The Canadian and international mood with respect to Mexico was so bad that even otherwise arrogant senior officials, such as the External Relations Minister, José Angel Gurría, had to face Canadian entrepreneurs and investors with humility.

The $1-billion Canada gave Mexico "is not a present or a donation, but a line of support," Gurría said on January 12, 1995, when he met in Toronto with more than 30

Canadian businessmen and investors. "There is a benefit in stabilizing the international markets, including Mexico," he added, explaining the cause of the crisis and his government's plans to tackle it, in an attempt to put their confidence back on track.

But after being asked by one investor "how can we have confidence if we already lost money with a devaluation that just days before your government had said would not occur," Gurría pulled back. "We did everything possible not to change the exchange, and now we are doing everything we can so that you can continue carrying on."

The day after, when I prepared to take the airplane back from Toronto to Ottawa, a Canadian Airlines attendant received me at her desk with the news that Ottawa's airport was closed because of a snowstorm and zero visibility caused by a warm wave of air coming from the south.

"Well, at least this one is not our fault," I joked.

"Oh, I'm afraid it is, it's coming right from Mexico," she said. "What's wrong with you these days?"

Being a Mexican started to be tough again.

The Best Country in the World to Leave

Being a Canadian, however, was not easy either. I left Parliament Hill with dozens of demonstrators waving Canadian flags around my car and placards with "Vote No," and "Québec, on vous aime" (Quebec, we love you). And when I came back the following morning, on October 30, 1995, I had to pass the same patriotic demonstrators in my old, winter-battered Hyundai. The people of Quebec -- 80 percent francophones, 15 percent anglophones and five percent alophones -- were voting that day to decide not only their future but the future of Canada and, in some ways, of North America.

In the last few days, the polls had started to show that the "Yes" to Quebec sovereignty in an economic and monetary union with Canada was winning over the federalist "No" side. But everybody felt real anxiety when the last poll carried out by Leger & Leger was published on Oct. 28, predicting that the outcome of the referendum was "too close to call." Fifty percent of Quebecers would vote "Yes," 50 percent "No."

Despite the uncertainty and the long hours I was putting in the story, I was thrilled as I had never been in Canada before. For the first time, I was witnessing Canadian social candor and excitement. Whether in a frantic attack of panic or out of love for their country, politicians, business people, local organizations and thousands of Canadians left their patriotic timidity behind to go out in the streets to fight for their country.

On October 27, three days before the referendum, tens of thousands of Canadians left their homes, from as far away as British Columbia, to go to Montreal by car, bus, train or jet. Although what would become one of the largest demonstrations in Canadian history had been organized by the federal government, while the transportation companies provided unimaginable discounts, this was a spontaneous emotional response to what Canadians outside of Quebec saw as a political and emotional affront. Quebec's separation would mean

the rupture of their country, along with financial and economic chaos. But that the second-largest province wanted to leave the country hurt Canadians deeply, as if it were a profound affront to Canada's image of itself as a morally superior country. The "best country in the world to live" had become indeed for many Quebecers "the best country in the world to leave."

Otherwise political enemies, Chrétien and Conservative leader Jean Charest addressed the crowds in a big plaza in Montreal, asking Quebecers -- almost begging them -- to stay in Canada.

The next 48 hours were of high intensity and mixed feelings for everybody. I could not sleep, I could not eat. And not only because of the work, but because of the excitement. I was torn between the sorrow and the thrill of what could become the destruction of a country and the birth of a new one. At that point, no one was ready to bet on the outcome.

"From now on, nothing but the referendum, Alejandra," my Washington-based director of information, Pepe López Zamorano, told me that day over the phone. "Don't even go out for dinner. Remain all the time with the TV on. Anything is possible now," he said, instructing me not only to write a chronology of Canadian events since the geographic area was populated 80,000 years ago, but to write the two possible scenarios over the weekend. "The newspapers are all asking us for a chronology and the scenario of what would happen if they go. They want to be prepared to explain such a thing. Nobody really understands."

After finishing my chronicle about the Montreal rally later that night, I went to the Press Gallery's windows to gaze at the other side of the Ottawa river. The lights of Hull's buildings were shining, and the Champlain bridge was almost deserted. I could not help imagining how it would look, with thousands of people crossing it in Ottawa's direction, fleeing a future independent Quebec. I felt sadness and sympathy for my fellow Canadians.

It would be a pity if their country were destroyed. Not because of any future war -- this was, after all, Canada -- but for the things that I was convinced were waiting for them, the things that I had to endure as a Mexican. If the peso had lost more than half its value overnight, I did not want to imagine what would happen to the Canadian dollar in the aftermath of a "Yes" vote. But on the other hand, I was excited by the nationalist feeling of Quebecers, many of whom were determined to give birth to the fourth country in North America.

From the beginning, it was hard for me to understand how Canada, a political entity with no apparent strong cohesive cultural and national identity links, could have evolved as one of the most wealthy countries in the world. Anglophones and Francophones were divided, and everybody else seemed to be divided too, or at least not very united as a people.

Canada is a multicultural society. About 87 per cent of the total population has European origin, 1.5 per cent is aboriginal, and about 12 per cent is from several other ethnic origins, particularly Chinese (Reddy, 210). In fact, of the about one per cent of the total Canadian population that the country accepts as immigrants every year, some 57 percent come from the Asia-Pacific rim, 17 per cent from Europe, 13 per cent from Africa and the Middle East, and about 9 per cent from Latin America, according to Immigration Canada. But under the premise that "we can be different and equal at the same time," as Chrétien has said, many people are willing to be first, let's say, an Italian or Chinese, and then a Canadian.

Coming from a rich and diverse country, with a collective identity as a nation, it was very hard for me to understand what seemed to be this exclusionist way in which the different ethnic and language groups seemed to interact. From the outset of my Canadian sojourn, it had been easier for me to understand and enjoy Quebec's sense of identity as a nation. So although I was never a separatist -- the economic risks were too high for both Quebecers and the rest of Canadians -- I always felt more comfortable among Quebecers, since they were

closer to my Mexican reality.

Mexican and Quebec cultures and human sensibilities were more alike than those of Anglo-Saxons. Most of us were Catholic, socially and personally warmer, and with several parallels in our history. We both had been conquered -- the Indians by the Spaniards and the French by the British. But since we Mexicans had fought and won our independence in 1821, I could also understand the desire of many Quebecers to evolve as an independent nation -- so much, that just as they had asked me in 1993 with respect to NAFTA, now my editors back in Mexico were instructing me again to be more "objective and balanced."

"I don't care if your experts are telling you that Chrétien is doing everything wrong while the 'independentistas' do everything right. There must be an analyst who still believes that living in Canada is not that bad," one of my editors told me, noticing that just as I had been "pro-Zapatista" I was now being "pro-independentista." In sharp contrast, some of my Canadian friends had told me that I could not be but pro-PRI because I worked for Notimex and pro-federalist because I reported what the Globe and Mail was saying and had an anglophone-Quebecer boyfriend who did not speak a lot of French while complaining about his own "oppression."

Although Quebecers were oppressed after the 1760 British conquest of New France, just like Mexicans by the Spaniards until the 1821 Independence, they were by no means treated as a conquered people or as an exploited minority nowadays. They had been allowed to continue evolving as a French cultural society in exchange for their loyalty to Britain when the 13 colonies in 1776 declared independence and fought the American Revolution to become the United States of America.

Then, when the North American British colonies of Upper and Lower Canada (Ontario and Quebec) united in Confederation in 1867, giving official birth to Canada as a

country, the British North Americans let guaranteed the practice of bilingualism in the federal Parliament and in Quebec courts, through the new Constitution.

However, it was not until one century later that Quebecer really started to gain control over their destiny. Just as had happened to Mexico even after independence, the province remained culturally dominated by a rigid and conservative Catholic Church. Similarly, just as Mexicans remained under foreign economic control until the aftermath of the 1910 Revolution, Quebec's economy continued to be controlled by anglophones. As any separatist will tell you, until the 1970s, Quebecers had to speak English in Montreal to have any kind of success.

But unlike Mexico, who paid the price of bloody wars to gain control over its destiny, Quebecers were able to overcome two centuries of colonialism not through war but by a peaceful revolution, driven by nationalist forces.

Under the leadership of Liberal Quebec's primer minister Jean Lesage, "The quiet revolution" was inaugurated. The social liberation from the Catholic Church's domination started during the 1960s, along with francophone empowerment. In only 20 years, Quebec left its Third World-like status within Canada to become one of the most prosperous Canadian provinces. In just a few years, Montreal became not only the economic center of the country but a city of international stature with the 1976 Olympic Games.

And as a result of such nationalist pressures, the federal government decided in 1969 to declare both English and French as "official languages," while the provinces of Ontario, Manitoba, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick -- with large Francophone minorities -- also established French as a language of choice for instruction in school.

But with nationalism, separatism also emerged. In one of the darkest chapters in Canadian history, in 1970 the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ) kidnaped and killed

Quebec's minister of Labor and Immigration Pierre Laporte, provoking the unfair arrest of 465 people under the War Measures Act, which allowed police to make arrests without a warrant.

The struggle towards independence, however, was not only confined to a bunch of terrorists. Created in 1968, the sovereigntist Parti Québequois won the provincial election in 1976 under the leadership of Rene Lévesque, marking the beginning of the real conflict between Quebec and the rest of Canada.

Despite the fact that Quebec had been able to overcome economic colonialism and to keep its cultural distinctiveness, for many Quebecers that was not enough. They had developed a victim complex with respect to "the rest of Canada" very similar to the Mexican sentiment vis a vis the U.S., since the trauma with respect to Spain was in some ways overcome through independence and the subsequent loss of Spanish economic control over its former colony.

Just as Mexicans feel constantly betrayed by the Americans, many francophone Quebecers see their evolution as a history of constant Canadian betrayal, a view that is constantly fed by anglophone Canadian attitudes of arrogance and superiority.

"Don't live in Hull. The criminality rate is bigger than in Ottawa," I was advised by my anglophone friends when I arrived. And "don't live in Vanier (a Francophone area in Ottawa) either, because it is a center of criminals," was also advice I often received. In the beginning, I did not make any big deal of it, since it happened to be true. But the fact that most of the "francophone" things were supposed to be among the worst made me aware of how some anglophones despise their partners. This became especially evident one night when I was in a car with Quebec plates.

Next to our car, there was another one with five youngsters, making signals at us as

if they wanted to ask us something. My friend, the driver, opened the window and asked them in French if he could help them with a street or something. "You, speak white. You are in Canada, man, you are in Canada," a woman in the other car yelled at him, while showing us her middle finger.

So although Quebecers were indeed a well-treated national minority by world standards, they were unappreciated, uncomprehended and despised by many Anglophone Canadians.

The country was officiallybilingual, many of the most important prime ministers had been Quebecers, as had Pierre Trudeau, Brian Mulroney and Chrétien. Quebec was able to manage -- almost as a sovereign nation -- some of its policies, such as immigration and education. Quebec had instituted a series of tough policies to protect its French culture and language from anglophone penetration. However, the fact that they were not treated like the minority in East Timor, Indonesia, or like the Kurds in Turkey or Iraq, meant little to most Quebec francophones, who expected to be treated not as a minority but as a nation.

Some Quebecers, I found, were as rude as their anglophone counterparts, making obscene signals to cars with, let's say, Manitoba plates, or being arrogant to people who do not speak French. My mother, for instance, had been a victim of such behavior during a visit. But even if rude signals of mutual antipathy were limited to radical individuals on both sides, the francophones were usually at a disadvantage. They were not only unable to be addressed in French in most parts of Canada outside Quebec -- the anglophone majority would not learn French just to keep the minority content -- but their traditional collective rights were not recognized by the rest of the country.

On one hand, Quebec was recognized as one of the "two founding" nations of Canada when joining Ontario in the 1867 Confederation. But on the other, the addition of other

British colonies -- what are now Manitoba, British Columbia, Prince Edward Island, etc. -- meant that everybody had to be treated just the same.

So while for Quebecers there are two founding nations -- integrated by them and "the rest of Canada" -- for the rest of the provinces, all of them are the same and have to be treated equally. After all, Quebec already had the huge concession of having the possibility of protecting its French identity.

But many Quebecers were not satisfied with their "equal" status in the federation. The separatist government of René Lévesque held a provincial referendum in 1980, when the option of "sovereignty-association" with the rest of Canada was defeated by the federalist "No" side by 59 to 41 per cent. In addition to the defeat, separatism also started to weaken under the federal government's new leadership with Brian Mulroney and his promises to reaccommodate the province within the federation. In 1985, Lévesque left power, and a Liberal Quebec government, under Premier Robert Bourassa, took office. But although the separatists had lost the battle, they had not lost the war. The failure of Mulroney's attempts to reaccommodate Quebec proved to be decisive.

The first failure happened in 1990, when the provinces of Manitoba and Newfoundland refused to ratify the Meech Lake Accord, intended to recognize Quebec as a distinct society in the Constitution. They feared that the constitutional reform would give Quebec a "special status" over the others. The second Mulroney attempt, the Charlottetown Accord, was defeated in a 1992 national referendum.

As a result, several Conservative members of Parliament, under the leadership of then Minister of Environment Lucien Bouchard, left the ruling party to create the separatist Bloc Québecois, the party that would become the official opposition in 1993, after the October federal election won by Chrétien's Liberals.

The way, therefore, was paved for the separatists, who, with new Prime Minister Chrétien promising not to talk about the Constitution any more in order to concentrate on job creation, started to reemerged. So tired of the nine-year-old Liberal provincial government, Quebec voted in 1994 for a separatist Parti Québecois government under the leadership of Jacques Parizeau, who decided on yet another referendum.

Although the option was weak in the beginning, the "Yes" side gained strength when Parizeau decided to appoint the Bloc's charismatic leader Lucien Bouchard as his chief negotiator with Ottawa, once they won the popular call. Overnight, what had been a boring, rational debate about economics and politics became an emotional campaign of francophone pride against a perceived past of constant Canadian betrayal.

Bouchard, who had been elevated to sainthood in the eyes of most Quebecers after bravely surviving a flesh-eating disease that caused him to lose his leg at the end of 1994, was a charismatic, charming and articulate leader, who started to be treated more as a messiah than as a politician. People wanted to touch him, young women blew him kisses, and what had started as an apparently lost battle, turned into a nationalist "fiesta" of pride of being a francophone Quebecer.

The scene was thrilling. Unlike the red and blue federalist campaign of "Vote No," the separatist propaganda disguised as "partnership" between a sovereign Quebec and Canada was colorful, hopeful and exciting -- so exiting that in the first hours after the ballot-booths were closed, the "Yes" side was winning.

Even my francophone colleagues, who had voted for the bizarre option of sovereignty in an economic and political association with Canada, were pale and silent. "What have we done? What's going to happen now?" one of them was asking me constantly, while green-faced anglophones kept silent straight faces. As time went on, the enthusiastic crowd

at the Palais de congrès in Montreal, where the separatists were gathered waving their Quebec flags, started to collapse. The "No" side won with an unbelievable 50.6 to 49.4 per cent, after the results in Montreal were counted.

So while the federalist crowd at Montreal's Metropolis club celebrated with frantic screams of emotion, the crowd at the Palais de congres collapsed. A country was being saved, while the birth of another one had been killed. Canada had survived, at least for now.

If anything was clear it was that there had been no real victory. Despite the patriotic kind of renaissance Canada was experiencing, the country had emerged more divided than ever. "We lost, yes. But we lost by what?" a furious and defeated Jacques Parizeau told the crowd. "We lost by the money and the ethnic vote," he said to the astonishment of everyone, hinting of anti-immigrant attitudes on the part of some high-ranked separatists.

But although "the ethnics" may have saved Canada, the strategy behind the federal government's policy of multiculturalism, along with its putting individual rightd over collective rights, had brought the historic anglophone-francophone conflict to itslimits.

"What Trudeau really did with both his Charter of Rights and Freedoms and with the multicultural system was an attempt to replace Quebec's collective rights by individual rights," said nationalism expert Gordon Laxer, a political science professor at the University of Alberta. "But as long as their collective rights as a nation are not recognized, the problem will persist. They are, in fact, a different nation, whether we like it or not. They are not just as different as British Columbians might be from Newfoundlanders. They are a different nation and they have to be recognized as such."

What at least many of the people who voted Yes wanted was not to become completely independent but to keep their economic and political links with Canada. What these "soft sovereignists" or nationalists wanted was to get back what they felt the rest of

Canada had taken from them. If they were never going to get their collective rights recognized, they thought they might better get them in a "partnership" with Canada, as a way to take back their status as one of the two "founding nations."

The problem was that although many Canadians had gone out into the streets with messages of love for Quebecers before the referendum, their position changed again as soon as the referendum was over.

When Chrétien proposed to recognize Quebec as a "distinct society" through a symbolic parliamentary declaration, the initiative was only approved in December 1995 by the Liberal majority and the Conservatives. The Bloc Québecois still wanted another referendum to get a "Yes" vote, so they voted "No." And the Reform Party, the representative of Western interests, rejected it, arguing that this could pave the way for a future concession of "special status" to the province, diminishing the equality of the others.

So with his credibility plummeting in the West and with most of the provinces opposed, Chrétien was unable to push further for Constitutional recognition of Quebec as a distinct society, boosting once again the sense of betrayal in Quebec.

"They said they loved us so much when we wanted to go. Now that we stayed they are playing hard ball again," said Francine Fournier, a 32 year-old francophone Montrealer and mother of one. "I did not want to vote Yes. I didn't want to leave Canada. It took me two months to decide how to vote. But it's just that we had no alternative. I voted Yes because I did not believe that things were to change. Now you can see I was right," she added with some bitterness.

The referendum's close result only complicated things more. On one hand, it led to the hardening of a radical anglophone supremacy sentiment in the country, and to things that few people would expect from civilized Canadians.

Since the separatists think that Canada is divisible, Quebec is divisible too, these hardliners said. Quebec's indigenous peoples, first, and its anglophone minority, second, started talking about the partition of Quebec, while the provincial government considered how it will defend its borders. "Another Bosnia," I thought with surprise. Although a bloody conflict is unlikely, Canada is indeed becoming a Bosnia itself. This is a matrushka doll: a country of minorities within majorities who feel oppressed: the francophones by the anglophones, and Quebec's anglophone community by the francophone majority.

Although the multicultural system and the multicultural policies implemented by Trudeau saved Canada in the end, it is still unclear for how long. This is so since the solution offered for the Quebec crisis has been decentralization -- on the part of bothe the non-separatist but nationalist Quebec wing and the rest of the provinces -- putting provincial and regional interests over the national one.

"There are two ways to interpret our current political crisis," said Minister of Inter-governmental Affairs Stephane Dion, before the Circle canadien de Toronto in January 1997. "The first is that the existence of a strong secessionist movement in Quebec proves that the Canadian federation doesn't work. The second, which I strongly believe in, is that the Canadian federation does work, even though it can and most be improved."

In an attempt to convince Quebec to stay and to satisfy the rest of the provinces that are resentful of the federal's government eternal attentions to Quebec, decentralization has been put forward as the solution. In addition to provincial jurisdiction over healthcare, education and welfare -- to which the federal government contributes through transfer payments -- other areas like job training are being decentralized also.

To me, coming from an over-centralized authoritarian country, that sounds appealing But if now the federal government, one of the few things that the provinces still have in

common, were to lose even more importance, what the heck is going to keep Canada together? For a long time I thought that Canadians' pockets would. But Quebec's emotional nationalist display during the referendum proved that deep pockets were not enough. On the other hand, the social programs, one of the main symbols of Canadian identity vis-à-vis the individualistic American society, are being drastically cut in an effort to cut the budget deficits.

So in a country with cultural, linguistic, trading and political barriers, it is uncertain how further decentralization could work in favor of a united Canada -- especially in such a huge country with 30 million people, in which there is more trade and travel to the south of its border than from east to west. But the alternative -- centralization and integration, despised by most Canadians as "assimilation" -- is unworkable in this country, founded on the principle of collective identities' protection rather than on a melting pot. The melting pot that guaranteed in Mexico and, up to certain degree in the U.S., the foundation of a nation hardly exists in Canada.

According to nationalism expert Gordon Laxer, "Canada was not formed like most of the countries from the bottom to the top.Canada was created by the elite; by the politicians wanting to maintain something apart from the United States for political and economic reasons."

Even with referendums, threats of partition and linguistic wars, Canada has not only survived but is still one of the richest, most stable and enviable countries in the world. After all, not other country has a separatist party as the official opposition in Parliament, and few decide through ballots, not bullets, whether a province leaves or stays.

"Canada is a solution looking for a problem," said a former Mexican ambassador to Canada, expressing what mamy average Mexicans think.

But the close results of the referendum proved that nowadays the situation is the other way around: an eternal emotional problem without a definitive rational solution. Both the new Canadian patriotism and traditional Quebec patriotism are being re-built again upon mutual rejection and differentiation, a differentiation that could change not only Canada's geographic looks, but also North America's.

Therefore, Quebec's flirtation with separation prompted Canada's partners to react. The "ménage-à-trois" was in danger.

Quebec's membership in NAFTA "will not be automatic," said Finance Minister Paul Martin in a speech before the Business Administration Teaching Association in Montreal in September 26, 1995. In a new federal strategy to scare Quebecers with economic arguments, Martin rejected the separatist government's promises that a sovereign Quebec would be able to negotiate an economic association with Canada keeping, therefore its membership in NAFTA. "What possible incentive would Canada have to satisfy the interests and needs of a foreign country?" the minister asked; especially, he said, since the opening of any negotiation with Quebec to re-access NAFTA "would be like opening a Pandora's box . . . having the U.S. giant as part of the equation."

On this point, and despite the separatists' claims that Quebec would keep its membership in NAFTA since it would be beneficial to Canada, the U.S. and Mexico, Washington sided with Ottawa.

On October 25, President Bill Clinton said in a press conference that "a strong and united Canada has been a wonderful partner of the U.S." and that he hoped this situation continues. The previous week, the Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, had said-- in what was seen by the Quebec government as an intromission -- that "nobody has to take for granted that a different organization will enjoy the same relationship with the U.S."

The Mexican government, less vocal and traditionally respectful of both other countries' sovereignty and "peoples' self-determination," was uneasy. On one hand, Canada was "the partner," the country with which Mexico had negotiated NAFTA. As far as the government was concerned, Quebec was only a province, such as Ontario or Alberta. On the other hand, Quebec was an important source of trade and investment that Mexico did not want to lose, especially in the middle of an economic crisis.

Total trade between the province and the Latin American country had increased 14 per cent in the first six months of 1995, totaling $150.4 million (US) dollars. And while Mexican exports to Canada as a whole had increased 19 per cent, they had jumped a dramatic 50 percent to Quebec alone, generating a Mexican surplus of $98 million (US) in its trade with the province, according to Statistics Canada.

As a result, and given the U.S. support for a united Canada, Mexico emerged as an important part of the equation, able to make a difference. "Once our decision is taken, the international recognition of a sovereign Quebec, along with the friendship of other countries like France, the United States and Mexico, will be decisive," Bernard Landry, Quebec's deputy prime minister told me in September 1995 during a telephone interview from Quebec City. Mexico, he added, "will only have good things to gain from a sovereign Quebec because our friendship will be an exemplary relationship . . . having within the same trade accord (NAFTA) the three major Western languages: English, French and Spanish."

In addition, in what I thought was a kind of direct message to the Mexican government, he said an independent Quebec would have more resources "to display" in Mexico and Latin America. "We will be even more interested in the Mexican and the Latin-American markets. That's for sure."

From the time the separatist government arrived in power in the fall of 1994, it started

to approach the Mexican government, both through Quebec's mission in Mexico City and from Quebec City itself. In July 1995, Landry himself had led a trade mission to the Mexican capital, where he met several ministers, including External Relations Minister José Angel Gurría. As the deputy prime minister put it, he had asked for "Mexican sympathy" to recognize Quebec as a sovereign nation after the vote, as well as for the Mexican support for Quebec's membership in NAFTA.

What Gurría exactly told him is still uncertain, but Landry said that Gurría enunciated the traditional principles of Mexico's foreign policy, such as "non-interference in other nations' internal affairs," as well as respect for international law, in which the "nations' self-determination" is recognized by the United Nations. Nevertheless, a high-ranking official in Quebec's government later confided that "Gurría told us that if the sovereignists win the referendum, Mexico will recognize the 'fait-accompli'. We are not looking for Mexico's public support before the referendum. That would be kind of suicidal for them . . . But what is certain is that the Mexican government has told us that when the time comes, it will recognize the new reality, without opposing neither a sovereign Quebec nor our membership in NAFTA," he said.

Senior Mexican officials, however, deny that the government had flirted with the separatists, even if in private they say that after a French and American recognition, Mexico would not refuse its own, nor the possibility of supporting Quebec's re-accession into NAFTA. Nevertheless, the public position has been that a separate Quebec would go out of the agreement, having to apply for its re-entering, and that before giving its go-ahead, Mexico would have to wait and see how Canada and the U.S. reacted.

However, the Mexican government seems divided over which course to follow. On one hand, some high-ranking senior officials maintain that Quebec is economically very

important for Mexico and that, therefore, the recognition of a "fait accompli" would not hurt. On the other hand, others believe that Mexico would be better served by keeping an "excellent" relationship with Canada, since Quebec "is nothing compared to our trading and investing relationship with the other provinces like Ontario." To support this view, these Mexicans point out in private that "there is an unwritten practice" of not receiving Quebec's representative in Mexico at a level higher than the Exterior Relations Ministry's director general for North America. Any other meeting with a higher-ranking official has to be requested through the Canadian Embassy.

It is still unclear which of those positions will prevail when a new referendum comes up. But the truth is that the day before the 1995 referendum, when the separatists were sure of victory, Landry was trying anxiously to have a word with Gurría. Mexico's foreign minister never phoned him back.

The Street-Fighter and the Shoe-Shine Boy

"He is in Montreal. He arrived in mid-June. As far as we are concerned, he can stay here, as any other Mexican, for up to six months," said Roger White, the spokesperson for Immigration Canada. "Mr. Salinas is on a private visit and we are not following him at all," he added.

The otherwise indisputable leader, strongest contender to become the director of the new World Trade Organization with the support of Canada, the U.S. and all Latin America, was now in exile looking for a refuge.

He arrived in Canada on June 18, 1995, via the Lester B. Pearson International Airport of Toronto. Then, he moved to downtown Montreal with his new wife and with a multinational team that both protected him and connected him with the rest of the world -- the same world that was looking for him. He had not been accused of anything. The Mexican police were not looking for him, and it seems that his successor knew his whereabouts. But for other Mexicans and citizens of the world, Carlos Salinas was in hiding and was guilty of causing Mexico's misery.

The events that led Salinas to his informal exile and that continue to unfold make the most outrageous Hollywood plot seem dull; the Salinas story has it all: love, conspiracies to kill and corruption, reflected in a series of unbelievable events.

Everything started the morning of February 28, 1995, when President Ernesto Zedillo's special envoy went to the former president's house to inform him that his older brother, Raul, was about to be apprehended. Then, a choleric Carlos Salinas sent his own military escort to his sister's house, where Raul was staying, in an attempt to prevent the arrest. But given the orders from their military superiors -- already loyal to Zedillo -- the soldiers decided to let the police do their job. Raul Salinas was charged with masterminding

the murder of José Francisco Ruíz Massieu and later with "illicit enrichment," after his wife, Paulina Castañón, was detained in Switzerland while trying to withdraw money from a $84-million (US) account under a false identity.

Murder, however, was not unknown to the two close brothers. According to what the Mexican newspapers reported on December 18, 1953 (in pages that mysteriously disappeared from the public libraries during Salinas's presidency) "the boys" had executed a 12-year-old cleaning maid maned Manuela with a rifle their father had left in a closet.

"When he was asked what had happened, Carlos said that 'I killed her on one shot. I am a hero,' " according to El Universal newspaper (qtd. in Oppenheimer 211).

The murder was ruled an accident and nobody was charged with any crime. But the disappearance of the newspapers, along with the 1989 apprehension of "La Quina," a corrupt leader of PEMEX's union who had allegedly printed an outlet describing the affair just before Salinas's election, fed Mexicans' suspicions that the brothers were capable of anything.

But Carlos was in no mood to let his successor, the one he had personally hand-picked, tarnish their reputation. So a few hours after Raul's apprehension, the former president called the national TV newscast of Televisa's ECO to air his indignation and to embarrass Zedillo.

First, he said that his brother was innocent. Second, he rejected the public accusations that he was in any way involved in Colosio's murder. Then attacked the president where he was most fragile, on Mexico's economic debacle.

"Because of the terrible December devaluation, thousands of people have lost their jobs . . . and Mexico's international image has been hurt too," he said live, as astonished Mexicans heard him with open mouths. As far as he was concerned, the devaluation was not his fault. He said he was not to be held responsible for deciding not to devalue under his

administration's last days when the international reserves were already low; the situation was the product of the "mistakes made in December," when he was already out of office.

Two days later, on March 2, Salinas reappeared on national TV. He was in the northern industrial city of Monterrey (King Mount), starting a hunger strike in the humble home of one of his followers. Although what exactly happened next has not been confirmed, he apparently flew from Monterrey to Mexico City to meet secretly with Zedillo. In an evening encounter, Zedillo agreed to most of his predecessor's demands in exchange for his prudence and voluntary exile (Oppenheimer 216-217)

And although the president's office has denied the encounter, the facts are that Salinas suspended his hunger strike, that the president released a statement clearing him of any involvement in Colosio's murder and softening his responsibilities in the devaluation, and that the former president silently left Mexico City for New York on March 6.

While Salinas was trying unsuccessfully to avoid the press in New York, the Mexican drama continued to unfold. Days after Raul's apprehension, José Franciso Ruíz Massieu's brother, Mario, who was the special prosecutor to resolve the case, was also charged in connection with the assassination for having covered up and altered witnesses' testimony that Raúl Salinas had been involved. He had been detained in March by U.S. authorities in Newark, on his way to Spain, for having failed to declare that he was traveling with more than $10,000 (US), and the Mexican authorities were asking for his extradition.

Mexico's heroes of just a few months ago were today's enemies. So when Salinas arrived in Canada, fleeing all the media attention in the United States, Mexicans and everybody else wanted to know his whereabouts. Mexicans demanded explanations, and after everything that had happened we also deserved them. So Canadian, Mexican and international journalists prepared to find Salinas. He had been seen both in Montreal and Ottawa in

different public places, like shopping malls, office buildings and restaurants, but no journalist was able to talk to him. His whereabouts shifted as soon as someone had discovered them.

Salinas had been transformed, overnight, into a kind of "pariah." Although the corruption of his brother and, presumably his, of himself, was monstrous enough to make people hate him, I knew I was not witnessing anything new. While Mexican presidents are heroes, they usually become pariahs as soon as they leave power.

Everybody knew that Raúl was making illegal businesses. Everyone knew that many government officials rob money. Salinas was neither the first one nor the only one. Everybody knew it, and corruption was normal. What was not normal, though, was that Zedillo had decided to go publicly and criminally after his family, something that no other president in recent Mexican history had done. Although the coronation of a new president has always been based on the discredit of the former one, their impunity had also been the cornerstone to ensure that the power of the former president ends in the new one.

In fact, due to this unwritten rule, along with the constitutional provision that prohibits re-election, Mexico has prevented the arrival of a real dictatorship. In a country where presidents are as powerful as God, where the opposition used to be irrelevant in Congress -- until 1988 -- and where both the governors and the judiciary system were continuously tainted by the executive power, the only limitation on this power has been the rupture that takes place every six years between the former and the current president.

After 30 years of Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship, one of the main flags of the Revolution was "sufragio efectivo, no reelección" (effective suffrage, no re-election). However, the alternance of power was only achieved in the 1930s, when the rupture between predecessor and successor finally happened, even if it was within the same party.

Even after the Revolution, the presidents tried by all means to perpetuate their power

through the new administrations, given the fact that they could not be re-elected. President Plutarco Elias Calles, a general, in 1929 reformed the Constitution to allow his friend and predecessor, General Alvaro Obregón, to run for the presidency again that same year, with the idea that they would both share the power. But just a few days after his election, Obregón was murdered by a newspaper cartoonist and fervent Catholic, while celebrating his victory in a restaurant. Although there was evidence that the act had been the revenge of a fervent Catholic against persecution of the Church, the suspicion has been that his murder was ordered by Calles himself in order to prevent his own marginalization from power.

Consequently, Calles, also known as "El Jefe Máximo" (the Maximum Chief), announced that the time had come to "pass from a country of one man to a nation of institutions and laws." So in 1929 he founded the National Revolutionary Party (PNR in Spanish), by incorporating liberals, socialist and intellectual factions, as well as the growing bureaucracy and even the Army.

With the power of his new party, even if Calles did not run for office again, he continued running the country as the power behind the throne. After Emilio Portes Gil was named provisional president in 1929 and then replaced by General Pascual Ortíz Rubio, another of Calles' friends, problems began for the latter in 1932, when he dismissed several ministers without el Jefe Máximo's approval. As a result, Calles ordered the president to resign, which he later did, being then replaced by General Abelardo Rodríguez, still another friend of Jefe Máximo.

While the constitutional provision of "no re-election" had been formally respected up to now, Calles had been able to continue running the country, diminishing, therefore, one of the main achievements of the Revolution. But this situation was to change radically. The PNR, with Calles' approval, chose General Lázaro Cárdenas as its candidate for the 1934

election.

Given his popularity for the implementation of agrarian reforms, Cárdenas's power grew, provoking Calles jealousy and fears. After Calles had orchestrated PNR internal opposition against the president and even threatened to make him resign, Cárdenas ordered the Jefe Máximo's arrest in 1936, exiling him to Texas. If Calles had begun the period of institutionalization of the Revolution, Cárdenas had completed it.

Taking advantage of the 1938 oil nationalization and of his own popularity, Cárdenas consolidated the current structure of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which has ruled Mexico up to now. In 1938 the PNR was renamed the Party of the Mexican Revolution (PMR), based on a structure of mass organizations that would guarantee its transformation into an effective political machine. Having created the National Peasant Confederation (CNC), Cárdenas absorbed in the new party the labor movement through the Confederation of National Workers (CTM), both of which still exist within the current PRI structure. He also created the National Confederation of Popular Organizations (CNOP), as the representative of the professional and middle classes, and even formed a military sector in order to guarantee the discipline and loyalty of the Army. From being a party designed to stop the continuous clashes of factions and "caudillos" created by the Revolution, the PNR evolved into the PMR as a State-party for the control of the masses, capable of taking advantage of the strong nationalist sentiment that re-emerged during the 1930s.

Taking advantage of the party's loyalty, Cárdenas was able to hand-pick General Manuel Avila Camacho, who apparently won the 1940 elections that were contested by the opposition. But thanks to the industrial and economic development that Mexico experienced during the Second World War as an important supplier for the U.S., the new president's popularity was strong enough to drop the military sector from the PRM. Then, as his

predecessors had done, he handpicked Miguel Alemán Velazco, the first non-general, as his successor.

With no military experience, the civilian university-trained Alemán moved to the right, diminishing the implementation of the agrarian reform and being constantly confronted by corruption scandals. He also changed the PMR's name to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), whose worldwide celebrity would come mainly from its undemocratic tactics and corruption.

Although freedom of association had been guaranteed by the Constitution, the PRI became the strongest and almost exclusive political organization. By representing different sectors of society, PRI governments got the people's support in exchange for reforms that later would evolve into discretional favors and "clientelism." A party that had been founded as a way to institutionalize the revolution and had prevented both social and military unrest by absorbing interest groups and their loyalties also became a machine to prevent the development of a liberal democracy in Mexico.

However, the PRI proved to be very far away from the Soviet Union's Communist Party, to which it has often been compared. Despite the lack of shift in power, since the opposition was unable to compete with such a political machine, an alteration of both power and elites took place within the PRI itself. Given the re-election prohibition, plus the rupture between current and former presidents, an effective exchange of elites, policies and economic ideologies started to take place. With a chameleon-like style, the PRI was the producer of such different governments as the led by left-wing Luis Echeverría and that of Carlos Salinas, guaranteeing the loyalties of both the party and many "independent" sectors, and discipline by means of favors, corruption and discretional spending.

But just as important as the party's control over mass organizations was the

presidential figure and his control over the party. Until Zedillo's administration, it was the president, not the party, who handpicked not only its leaders but his presidential successor every six years. Under the rules of the game, hardly understood in any liberal democracy, the president has been the guarantor of both the system's continuity and the radical changes from within. So that is why the "no-reelection" provision in the Constitution is so important. It is the only limitation to the president's constitutional and extra-constitutional powers, and it also guarantees the alternating of power among the several elites within the PRI and the society in general, given the marginalization of the opposition parties.

As author Alan Riding pointed out in 1984, "the presidential system has survived, not because it has subjected a passive Mexico to decades of dictatorial rule, but because it mirrors the strengths and weaknesses, virtues and defects, of the Mexicans themselves: it combines a ritualistic sense of hierarchy with an enormous capacity to negotiate (Riding 67)."

However, although the traditional presidential figure started to collapse with Zedillo, it started losing its credibility a long time before. Besides the fact that there had always been opposition to the presidential and PRI system since the times of Obregón, it was not until 1968 that it became massive. Just before the Olympic Games, the students of public UNAM rebelled against the government though huge demonstrations in Mexico City that ended in a massacre perpetrated by the Army. As the result of the repression, many of the regime's detractors organized during the 1970s in guerrillas Marxist movements -- where Subcomandate Marcos was trained -- both in urban areas and the Southern state of Guerrero (Warrior). They were brutally repressed by the government, often by devastating entire peasant communities, until an amnesty was declared in the mid-1970s. Just as the Mexican government was receiving refugees from South America, who were fleeing military dictatorships, the army was violating the human rights of every Mexican who was allegedly

involved with the guerrillas (Montemayor).

Nevertheless, the most effective opposition was not Marxist and was not armed. After the 1982 economic crisis and the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, when the authorities showed ineptitude and also robbed the international aid being sent to the victims, many citizens organized themselves, giving an unprecedented force to the formal opposition. They, too, had shifted from deference to defiance. I will never forget the inauguration day of the 1986 World (Soccer) Cup at Mexico City's Azteca Stadium. At the end of the ceremony, when the president Miguel de la Madrid's presence was announced a long and unprecedented "Boooo!" followed, along with the embarrassing chorus of "Culero! Culero!" (Asshole, asshole).

But Mexicans' outrage against their government did not stop in a stadium. In 1988, Salinas's election was contested with credible allegations of electoral fraud. Just when the system and our TV screens were showing that the left-wing PRD's presidential contender Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (Lázaro's son) was winning, the system collapsed due to "technical failures." Since then, even with the PRI continuing in power, the right-wing National Action Party have won several states' elections, governing four states out of 32, including the two largest cities of Guadalajara and Monterrey (King Mount) and more than 33 per cent of the total population.

The problem is that despite the fact that Mexican society has also evolved since the times of Cárdenas, the political culture of most Mexicans is still very much connected with powerful presidential figures. Indeed, Mexicans' uneasiness with Zedillo seems to be coming not only from his mistakes and the perception that he has no control over the country's situation, but also from his initial lack of authoritarianism.

"If there is something really new in the new president, it is that he could not

recuperate the power that extinguishes every six years and that is re-born in the new figure," says political commentator Jorge Javier Romero (8). While going after a former president's family was an unprecedented move in Mexican history, the fact that this move had not boosted the new president was also new.

It can be said that Mexicans do not like Zedillo because of the economic crisis, for his reluctance to go after the former president -- instead of only after his family -- for the mismanagement of investigations into the murders, and because it seems he does not have any control over the Mexican chaos. Nevertheless, when I met him in person during his June 1996 official visit to Ottawa, I wondered if Mexicans did not dislike him also as a result of his own character, which in a country like Canada would probably have been celebrated.

Unlike Salinas, who radiated power and coldness while being in public, Zedillo was approachable and gentle. His family, too, seemed to be normal -- maybe too normal for facing the challenges of being the first family of Mexico. According to Mexico's political gossip, the president's wife, Nilda Patricia, was more disappointed than happy with her husband's ascension to power. In her first public appearances she seemed intimidated, but she also tried to be perceived as a common housewife without further pretensions.

"She was such a normal woman. You wouldn't believe that she was Mexico's first lady, just as you would have not guessed that Emiliano was the president's son," says an employee at Ottawa's aristocratic Ashbury College, where Emiliano studied from September 1995 to June 1996, paying Grade 11 tuition fees ranging between $13,000 and $15,000 (US). Zedillo's third son, Emiliano was an energetic and outgoing 17-year-old more worried about his boredom in Ottawa than about being the target of an eventual attack.

"Where are you going?" he asked me one night when he encountered me in the streets of Ottawa on my way to an alternative rock club. We had met me days before at a

Mexican diplomat's dinner.

"I'm going to Zaphod's. Don't you want to come, guys?" I asked Emiliano who was in the company of the Mexican ambassador's son.

"I can't. I am a minor," he said, reminding me of his earlier comments that even if he would have loved to fake an I.D., as many of his friends did, he could not because he was the president's son.

But unlike him, the first of the four president's children, Ernesto, was developing into a wilder creature with difficulty managing his sudden notoriorety. A university student in his 20s, Ernesto has been reported to be a common fighter in Mexico City's nightclubs, sometimes involving his own private escort. One night in 1996 at El Quichos bar, he got involved in a violent fight with Carlos Salinas's eldest son, according to witnesses.

"Emiliano was a good student, maybe not the top but very different from his brother, with whom the family had several problems," said an Ashbury College employee, adding that the school was told by "either the Mexican Embassy or the family" that there were concerns about Emiliano's security.

In early 1995, non-uniformed policemen tried to assault Ernesto when he was driving to university, but his military escort prevented the attempt. However, if Emiliano was in danger, apparently nobody had believed it here because he never had an escort in Canada. It rather looked as if the president's office were trying to protect him from the media attention Ernesto was receiving, and to prevent any further criticism for having a child in such an expensive school in the middle of the economic crisis.

But the martyr-like and ridiculed Mexican image of Zedillo was quite different in Canada, maybe because "they don't have to suffer him every day as we do," as my sister pointed out. The Financial Post's editorialist Diane Francis said that Zedillo "is not a dictator

but a democrat," and that "unlike his predecessor, Zedillo is also the Elliot Ness of Mexico ("Ernesto Zedillo" 15)." Besides the fact that "like the crime-busting attorney of Untouchables fame," he was going after corrupt politicians and policemen, Francis was particularly impressed by Zedillo's courtesy of serving her a glass of water during their interview in 1995.

But in a country used to authoritarian figures, Mexicans seemed to hate his very humility, interpreting it as a weakness. Unlike Chrétien, who came to be liked for his apparent differences from Mulroney, Zedillo had come to be hated for his lack of strength and leadership, which distinguished him from Salinas.

"Do you know how we call Zedillo, kidding him?" goes one of the most popular Mexican jokes. "Mister president," the joke ends. "Do you know why we call him Snoopy? Because he is Charlie's (Carlitos) dog," goes another one. "Do you know why we call Zedillo the Christmas tree sphere?" "Because he is nothing but an ornament." By contrast, Mexicans' best jokes during Salinas's period used to stress his authoritarianism and also to celebrate it.

Canadians, in contrast, seem to hate the display of privileges and power that characterized Brian Mulroney. They prefer to have "the guy next door," Jean Chrétien, as their prime minister.

"I governed with a young wife, four young kids, and I wore nice shoes. A lot of people didn't like that. A lot of people like a prime minister, frankly, who can speak neither language," Mulroney has been quoted as saying (qtd. in Wilson-Smith 18).

But just as Canadians also dislike Mulroney for issues, Mexicans also dislike Zedillo for his political mistakes, lack of determination and coherence. In February 1995, for instance, Zedillo ordered Subcomandante Marcos's apprehension even if an amnesty had already been declared. He sent troops to Chiapas into rebel-controlled territory and a few days later he

pulled them back. He went after the Salinas family, and then he issued a statement clearing the former president of Colosio's murder even if the police investigation was still open. Several senior officials in charge of clarifying the crimes soon became presumed criminals themselves, and instead of bringing clarity and credibility, both the government and the judicial system seem more unbelievable than ever.

Likewise, free trade with the U.S., the serious recession, the jump in unemployment and deficit figures, and the corruption scandals during Mulroney's government, made Canadians vote in 1993 for Chrétien's Liberals. But just as Mexicans love Salinas and dislike Zedillo for their character, Canadians hate Mulroney and love Chrétien.

Born in 1934 in the small lumber mill town of Shawinigan, Quebec, and without any political ties or rich family, Jean Chrétien emerged 59 years later as the leader Canadians were looking for. He was applauded not only because of a platform promising job creation as the priority, but because of his own style and personality, especially, because they appeared exactly the opposite of Mulroney's.

Compared to Mulroney's governing style, which was perceived as too extravagant, arrogant and reeking of patronage, Chrétien appeared as "the best ordinary Canadian the country's politics had ever produced," says political commentator Michael Bliss (L16). Unlike his predecessor, whose ego led him to perform as a movie star rather than as a prime minister, according to his critics, Chrétien was able to combine his image of an experienced politician with a common touch. According to Lawrence Martin, author of a semi-official biography The Will to Win, Chrétien's basic appeal is that despite being in politics for so long, he is still able to look at things as average people do, and to express his ideas in terms that people can easily understand.

In this sense, and since Canadians seem to like having a prime minister with the same

attitudes of any ordinary citizen, his physical disadvantages -- usually a major handicap for a politician -- have become a kind of asset that makes Chrétien even more respected because of his courage to cope with them, something that Mulroney fans and many Mexicans cannot understand.

Chrétien has been diagnosed with a form of dyslexia -- called dysalia -- that causes him to have difficulty articulating certain sounds and to stumble over words. In addition, he was born deaf in one ear, and at the age of 11, after walking to his sister's wedding through icy winds in his home town, his cheek became frostbitten, giving him Bell's palsy. Since then, Chrétien has had to live with facial deformity: every time he speaks or laughs, his mouth moves abnormally to the left.

"The abnormality caused no physical pain, but it was horribly humbling for a boy entering his teen years," says Martin (1: 32). "Other youngsters started to mock him, calling him 'crooked face,'" to which Chrétien apparently responded with a "go to hell." And although Chrétien's complexes over his physical defects seem to have been overcome, the same cannot necessarily be said of a "street-fighter" attitude that he developed in his youth. To the world's astonishment, he went as far as to grab a protester by the neck when he got in his way during a 1996 Canadian flag ceremony in Hull, Quebec. The act would be an unthinkable event in Mexico, where the bodyguards are the ones who grab the protestors, not the presidents.

However, Chrétien's fighting spirit has also helped him overcome one of the most terrible tragedies of his life. After having been elected the Liberal Party's leader in 1991, his adopted Indian son made headlines in the criminal section of the papers. In 1992, Michael Chrétien was convicted for the sexual assault of a woman he met in a Montreal bar a year earlier. She said that he had taken her to his apartment, tied her up and forced her to have

sex (Cordon A9).

The Chrétiens were devastated, but their desire to avoid discussing the situation in public and to guard the family privacy was respected. The Canadian media, used to going after politicians, proved to be, oddly, respectful of private matters.

"Canadian journalists respect the privacy of public figures more than American or British reporters," explains Nick Russell, a journalism professor at the University of Regina. "So in the case of Michel Chrétien, there seems to be a sense the prime minister is not held responsible for the activities of an adult child" (qtd. in Cordon A9).

However, the matter was a tragedy for Chrétien, who faithfully attended his son's trial in Montreal, often taking few hours on Western trips to dash to Prince Albert where Michel spent much of his three-year prison sentence until he was released on parole in February 1997.

But unlike Chrétien, whose personal strength has allowed him to overcome his personal and family problems, Zedillo does not seem to have the ultimate will to win. Through impressive discipline, the 44-year old Zedillo was capable of making it to the top of academic excellency overseas. While living in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the northern border town of Mexicali, Baja California, where he moved as a three-year-old from Mexico City, little Zedillo had even to work as a "bolerito" -- a shoe shine boy -- after elementary school, according to his official biography.

So it is no wonder Chrétien and Zedillo had such a good personal rapport despite the age gap. "He is a very nice man," Chrétien told me in an interview after having met him in November 1994 during Zedillo's first visit to Ottawa as president-elect. During his first official visit in June 1996, they often appeared in public, slapping each other on the back, and smiling.

After moving back to the capital in the late 1960s, where he joined the PRI, of course,

and obtained a Bachelor's degree in economics from a public university, Zedillo won several scholarships to study overseas. He went to Bradford University in England, and then to University of Colorado and Yale University. In just four years in the United States, he received two master's degrees and a Ph.D. in economics, according to his official résumé.

However, his will to win in the academic field was not echoed in the political ground. He was able to climb to the cabinet as minister for the programming and budget secretariat at the beginning of the Salinas administration at the end of 1988. But his nomination as the PRI's presidential candidate came as a tragedy. He was hand-picked by Salinas few days after his first choice, Luis Donaldo Colosio, was murdered in March 1994.

At that point, political analysts stressed the fact that Zedillo was chosen because of his submissive personality. The running suspicion has been that Salinas or "political forces" close to him were behind Colosio's unresolved murder because at one point of his campaign the president had lost his control over the candidate. Since Salinas's main intention was then to perpetuate his power for another six years behind a new president, the choice had to be somebody docile and manageable, unlike Colosio. The fact that Zedillo himself had been his campaign manager did not appear to be a problem, but rather a way to win the support of the shocked "colosistas."

So with the personality of a "yes man," without political experience, without the support of the PRI's hard-liners better known as the "dinosaurs," and with a lot of opposition from inside and outside of the political elite, Zedillo was the new candidate at the end of March. But despite all the problems, the party machinery was put into place. After all, the privileges of the powerful would be better guaranteed by somebody coming from within the system than by the opposition. Huge amounts of money, TV ads and an intelligent campaign emphasizing economic stability -- something that Salinas had after all achieved, although not

for much longer -- were able to save what in an equal and a more democratic process might have been impossible. On August 21, 1994, Zedillo won. And he did it in the cleanest -- if not fairest -- and most observed election in Mexican history. In the middle of the political storm, Mexicans voted for peace and stability, after having suffered the indigenous uprising and Colosio's assassination.

The victory, however, was achieved at a very high price and despite Zedillo himself. On the other hand, although he has tried to use a Chrétien-like style, by presenting himself as an ordinary Mexican -- only using his overseas academic credentials with foreigners -- it seems that ordinary Mexicans do not like to have an "ordinario" man like them as president.

So even if Zedillo tries to appear relaxed at political rallies, making jokes and even shining shoes of professional street shoe-shine boys, nobody seems to like it. This behavior is not seen as something genuine, but faked, for Zedillo is anything but casual. While he often tries to speak slang during his massive encounters, his grey academic side always betrays him. And no one can forget his poor performance during the first televised political debate with the opposition candidates. The pro-business National Action Party's Diego Fernández de Cevallos, who finished in second place in the election, was comfortably attacking him by calling him "pathetic result of a tragedy," and referring to Mexicans as "mis amigos," without answer. Zedillo, no expression in his face, looked directly at the cameras repeating " 'compatriotas,' I am the best choice, I am the product of the culture of effort, I know the meaning of working hard."

On the other hand, there is the problem of inconsistency. Zedillo can say and promise many things, but he can hardly deliver. He says, and almost everybody believes him, that he wants a truly democratic country, where the elections are fair and transparent, and where the Congress has real powers. But apart from the political obstacles inside the system that come

in the way of his "revolutionary ideas," he seems incapable of putting them into practice. In the cases of political assassinations, some of the prosecutors are now being prosecuted, and the credibility of the governments and the judiciary is open to question.

"He seems like a very decent man. But we don't need decent men, what we need is determination to overcome the crisis and to put Salinas and all the thieves that forever have been robbing us in jail," says Juan Andrade, a taxi driver from Tijuana, who seems to express what most ordinary Mexicans think.

Political analysts agree, calling 1995 the year that presidentialism died. The problem, says Nexos writer Jorge Javier Romero, is that "despite its primitivism," the presidency is the only institution capable of holding all the power and, therefore, the only one that can deliver real change (8). Unfortunately, he concludes, "what Zedillo is doing is just leaving things to adjust themselves, without taking the lead and the control of the situation (12)."

However, both the traditional Mexican political culture and Zedillo's personality are changing, whether for the better or for worse. In a radical shift from deference to defiance, Mexicans are hungry for justice. What is not clear is whether they will seek fair means. That most people think that Salinas is involved in both political assassinations and corruption scandals is one thing; having the evidence to prove it is another.

Just as everybody was looking for Salinas in Montreal, his friend Brian Mulroney was also about to become an international star. In November 1995, the Financial Post broke the story that the former prime minister had been named as a suspect in a RCMP letter to the Swiss authorities. In that letter, in which the Canadian authorities were asking for the freezing of several bank accounts, the RCMP contended that Mulroney, while prime minister, encouraged Air Canada to purchase 34 Airbus A-320 aircraft in 1988 at a cost of $1.8 million. According to the letter, an informant had alleged that he was to receive $5 million

(US) in kickbacks as a result. But unlike his Mexican friend, Mulroney launched an unprecedented $30-million (US) libel suit against the RCMP and Ottawa.

"Unlike Mr. Salinas, Mr. Mulroney has decided to defend himself by legal means, a fact that shows that Canada is, in a notorious contrast to Mexico, a country of laws where the rule of law prevails," wrote Mexican columnist Fausto Fernández Ponte in El Financiero newspaper (53).

But the Mexican astonishment with respect to the Mulroney affair was not only because of the "extravaganza" of having an individual launching a suit against his government, but also because of the minute amount of corruption involved. He had allegedly taken $5 million from a foreign company, while Raúl Salinas had taken at least $80 million from impoverished Mexicans' pockets.

Although Salinas was portrayed by Mexican newspaper cartoonists as taking notes in Montreal on the developments in the Mulroney affair, he never chose to do the same. Instead, he apparently only sought Mulroney's help in regard to his Canadian immigration requirements. Even if it was never proved that the two political figures met during Salinas's stay in Montreal, he was seen in Ottawa's World Exchange Plaza, the office location of Ogilvy-Renault, the law firm in which Mulroney is a partner.

However, unlike Mulroney, Salinas was never part of an open police investigation while in Canada, even after the Canadian government publicly offered to collaborate in any Mexican police investigation.

"There is no arrangement or particular category foreseen for him," said Immigration Minister Sergio Marchi on November 1995. "We are not going to appeal any special category to protect him or any other person from a demand from a foreign country," he said, making clear to the press that Canada was only waiting for a sign from the Mexican government to

take any action with respect to Salinas.

And although Mexico's deputy attorney general, Manuel Galán, had previously said that he had dispatched some agents to Canada to look for information about possible Raúl Salinas bank accounts in Canada, neither the Department of Justice nor the Royal Canadian Mounted Police ever confirmed that a Salinas investigation had been opened in Canada.

Nevertheless, Solicitor General Herb Gray told the press that he "did not comment on ongoing investigations," further fueling speculation that an investigation could have indeed been taking place. So under the increasing pressure triggered by the press both in Canada and Mexico, Marchi said on Dec. 1 that the Immigration authorities were ready to question Carlos Salinas about his future residential plans as soon as he appeared at a board of entry, since his six-month visitor authorization ended in mid-December.

Instead, Salinas appeared days later in Havana, opening a second chapter in his "voluntary exile" around the world that since then has included the Bahamas and Ireland, where he would stay from mid-1996 onwards with his new wife and Cuban-born baby boy. However, although the people's clamor for justice continued, if there was any doubt in the Mexican government about whether to proceede with eventual criminal charges against the former president, the Mulroney case could have also left it with cold feet. In Canada, not only can a normal citizen sue his government, he can win, too. After having learned that it had been an RCMP investigator, not Mulroney's lawyers, who had leaked the letter to the media, the Canadian government had to settle the case out of court. In January 1997, it had to apologize publicly to Mulroney and agree to pay his legal bills, even if it reserved the right to continue with the Airbus investigation.

Even if there are few legal parallels between Canada and Mexico, it seems that their leaders have much more than their predecessors' problems in common. Both Chrétien and

Zedillo were born outside the political elite. The two of them struggled since childhood to overcome economic and social restrictions, and the two of them succeeded, making it to the top of their countries' political mountain at a time of deep and uncharted transformation of both societies. However, the convergence of both their peoples' identities and ideals with them was also at odds.

Ironically, while Chrétien has remained popular in the West, he lacks popularity in Quebec, because of his reluctance to address the province's re-accommodation through constitutional changes. But then, as was shown with the parliamentary recognition of Quebec as a distinct society at the end of 1995, it is the rest of Canada that has restrained Chrétien. So as he prepares himself for the June 2, 1997 federal election, where he was expected to win a second mandate, the constitutional talk has been scrapped altogether in an attempt to maintain his popularity in the West, which likes it when the federal government appears tough towards the separatists.

But behind this move for electoral purposes, complacency started to emerge as he entered his fourth year in power. Besides his problems in Quebec, even with the province's federalist Liberals, who want him to deliver more concessions in order to defeat the separatists, Chrétien also seemed out of touch with the country's expectations and realities. His "little-guy" character and street-fighter approach seemed to make him obstinate and insensitive to ideas contrary to views he is convinced are right. This attitude became more evident after three years in power.

Chrétien seemed to have ignored what Quebecers' vision really was in the pursuit of his own, which since his teen-age years has been being "Canadian first, French-Canadian second." And although he had put his agenda of job creation above the attempts to give more concessions to the "belle province," he had not succeeded at the end of the day. In early 1997,

the unemployment rate remained at just below 10 per cent and most of the new jobs created were still part-time. In addition, his promise of government integrity started also to receive important set-backs, when in 1996 his government proposed to harmonize the federal Goods and Services Tax (GST) with the provincial sales taxes instead of scrapping it, as he had promised during his 1993 electoral campaign.

Deputy Prime Minister Sheila Copps had reluctantly resigned over the issue -- as she had promised -- and been re-elected in mid-1996. But in December, Chrétien said in a CBC TV show that he had never promised such a thing when indeed he had -- not in the Red Book but in public appearances and radio shows.

"The Prime Minister is lying," said the Globe and Mail on its editorial page days after the TV show, expressing what the whole country was thinking ("The Prime Minister" D8). And just as Chrétien was trying to do damage-control over his lie, another important source of his popularity -- his "getting tough" with the Mulroney politics-- became a big embarrassment in January, when the mismanagement of the Airbus affair became evident.

But Chrétien was not alone. His "amigo" Zedillo had also started to display the signs of the messianic syndrome that every Mexican president experiences in his third year in office. The former shoe-shine boy finally felt that he was ready to govern, according to his sympathizers, or to be as authoritarian as his predecessors, according to his critics.

"Redeemer and liberator of Mexico's future, Zedillo attacks the 'pessimists of always,' while everything changes in himself, the optimist, from his way of being and his way of acting to even modifying the features of his signature, by widening it," writes journalist Elias Chavez in Proceso magazine. "His style of walking, his vocabulary, his voice's tone, everything is different in Zedillo while entering his third year in power."

Just as Star Wars was making its comeback to the big screen, it seemed that Zedillo

started to believe that "the force" was with him. In mid-January 1997, his government announced the prepayment in full of the U.S. bail-out package after the peso crisis three years before schedule. After having decreased six per cent of the GDP in 1995, the Mexican economy grew more than four per cent in 1996. The "force" was definitely with the macro-economy, but millions of Mexicans continued experiencing the crisis' lasting sequels with little hope.

Aside from the government's economic triumphalism, Mexicans also saw with suspicion Zedillo's sudden transformation. He started criticizing dissidents and the foreign press as feeders of a bad Mexican reputation abroad, a ploy to diminish the seriousness of the social and political problems.

In an unprecedented public attack on the foreign press, the president said in early 1997 that the media only wanted to present Mexico "even falling in ridicule as the last dictatorship," while "some Mexicans have taken as their 'modus vivendi' the reproduction, generation and feeding" of a bad Mexican image abroad (qtd. in Chavez).

The implementation of peace agreements with the Zapatistas was still on hold over disagreements about indigenous constitutional reform. A new violent and less noble guerrilla in the state of Guerrero (Warrior) was on the lose. The corruption scandals continued to be rampant. And the clarification of the most prominent political assassinations diminished political and judiciary credibility. The 1996 inclusion of psychics and human skeletons under false identities in the police investigation against Raúl Salinas only contributed further to Mexicans' sense of incompetence and suspicion. And although in an unprecedented event, the drug tzar, General Jesus Gutierrez Rebollo, was apprehended at the end of February 1997 under charges of being involved in drug-trafficking, the activity he was supposed to suppress, the fact that drug-trafficking had reached such a top level made the world further question

Zedillo's efforts.

Just as Chrétien was no longer the common guy from Shawinigan, Zedillo was no longer the same boy scout who assumed the presidency. But whether these transformations would make the two leaders able to face successfully their countries' greatest challenges -- Mexican instability and Quebec's eventual separation -- remains to be seen. The future is unclear as long as their own characters continue to be at odds with the new and stronger leadership their people expect from them.

Love and Betrayal

November 12, 1995, would be remembered in Mexico as the day that the "nicer" gringos from the far north had proved to be just like their southern neighbors. Canada had spied on Mexico. Again, the "Third Amigo" had been betrayed.

"They spied on the Mexican trade representatives during the NAFTA negotiations," said Jane Shorten, a former agent with Canada's electronic espionage agency, in an interview with the CTV National News broadcast on November 12.

"I just remember seeing those summaries. I know that my colleagues were in another room, the Spanish linguistics, working really hard, working day and night in the project," said Shorten, 38, who worked as a top analyst for the Communications Security Establishment (CSE) from 1986 to 1994, when she was laid off.

The Mexican reaction to the allegations did not take long. "Canada spied on Mexico before NAFTA" was the headline in most Mexican newspapers the following day. And while the editorial pages in Mexico City condemned the incident, senior officials, former ministers, experts and politicians reacted angrily to the allegations, demanding an explanation from the Canadian government.

"The spying on us is absurd," said Fernando Solana, chairman of the Senate Committee on Exterior Relations, who was the minister of this portfolio during the NAFTA talks. "It is nonsense, because during the negotiations the three countries were intensely exchanging information and points of view" (qtd. in Ramos 5).

Then, on March 13, the ministry of Exterior Relations sent a diplomatic note to the Canadian government, expressing "surprise and great concern," and asking for official confirmation of the spying allegations.

No wonder Mexicans felt betrayed. Unlike the United States, with which Mexico has

had a long and troubled relationship, Canada had been seen as a friendly neighbor, a country Mexico could find a good ally. The contradiction between being the "Third Amigo" and the target of the CSE made Mexicans think that Canada was not the good fellow they had thought it was.

"This is a very unfriendly incident," said Senator Luís Felipe Bravo Mena of the conservative National Action Party (PAN). "During the negotiations, we Mexicans assumed that we were talking with partners in good faith, and they, Canadians, instead applied strategies that are used at war (qtd. in Ramos 5)." He stressed that if the allegations were confirmed Canada would have to pay for it. First, he said that NAFTA could be revoked because the agreement would have had "an advantage in favor of Canada." And second, he said, Mexico should ask the North American country for compensation and for the intervention of international organizations to study the spying affair.

His colleague, Humberto Mayans Canabal of the PRI, agreed. "This incident is bitter proof that it is not only the U.S., but Canada too, that considers Mexico not as a trading partner, but as their backyard and employee of their economies," he said (qtd. in Ramos M. 5).

However, even if the Canadian government felt uncomfortable with the allegations and the Mexicans' bitter reaction, it never denied the incident. In fact, both the Canadian government and Canadian citizens handled it with a certain degree of cynicism.

The CSE "is an organization that works within the law of Canada. They don't report to me on a daily basis, and I cannot make any comments on if they are spying on anybody. I don't know," said Chrétien on March 14, during a visit to New Zealand where he participated in a Commonwealth meeting.

And although he said that "if somebody has broken the law they will have to pay the

price," he defended Canada's right to spy on others, noting that Canada might also have been spied on. CSE has the mandate "to check a few things around the world. Probably somebody is listening to us at this moment," he joked.

But Chrétien was not the only one with such insouciance towards the incident. Canadians seemed to be more surprised by the Mexicans' surprise than by learning that CSE was targeting friendly countries.

In fact, Shorten said this arm of the Defence Department had been gathering intelligence information not just on Mexico, but also on Japan and South Korea, eavesdropping on friendly embassies, consulates and diplomats in Canada and around the world. She even admitted she was personally spying on the government of South Korea, and that the Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was one of the main departments interested in the top-secret reports.

According to intelligence experts, eavesdropping on friendly countries is a common practice around the world. Some of Canada's largest trading partners, including the United States, France and Japan, comb the air waves for useful information, so "Canada would be foolish not to join the game," said Wesley Wark, professor of history at the University of Toronto. However, Mexico saw things differently. As a developing country whose national security threats are seen to come from within, rather than from the outside as in the last century, Mexico has centered its intelligence activities on Mexicans, with all the discontent of the opposition leaders, experts and Mexican society in general.

Spying on someone else is not something recognized by the law, and spying on other countries, whether friendly or not, is not seen as something normal or legitimate in Mexico. Even if it were, Mexico does not have the economic or technological resources to carry out sophisticated international intelligence operations, according to some Canadian and Mexican

experts. At best, the Mexican spies I have met abroad are confined to analyzing press reports, while the "orejas" (ears) I met in university, where they were trying to infiltrate the students' movement, were nothing more than young students receiving the Interior Ministry's miserable salaries in exchange for information that usually ended up being public, anyway.

In this context, the only thing able to calm Mexicans after Chrétien's comments was the promise made by Sheila Copps, Canada's deputy prime minister, that there would be a federal investigation to find out what happened.

"Mexico and South Korea are obviously very troubled, as we are," she told reporters on November 14. "There will be a federal investigation over the allegations . . . because we want to make sure that all agencies of government respect the law."

However, the Canadian government did not open an investigation into the matter; nor did it confirm or deny the allegations. In a diplomatic note responding to the Mexican concerns, then-Foreign Affairs Minister André Ouellet said that "the government does not comment on issues of national security," according to Mexican officials who were infuriated.

"Nothing ever happened, and we just didn't pressure them," said a high-ranked Mexican official. "It was not convenient for the sake of our important economic relationship."

Although the CSE mandate is to gather information about those governments working against the Canadian government, and apparently not from friends and allies, there is nothing in the law that prohibits these activities. According to some experts, it has been rather a Canadian tradition not to spy on friends and partners, although it was clear that this tradition could not be taken for granted any more.

Indeed, the revelations were not the only indication that Canada had been spying on Mexico. According to former Canadian secret agent Michael Frost, the CSE targeting of Mexico started in the early 1980s to implement the "Pilgrim" Operation, an electronic spying

program that shared information with the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA).

As Frost explains in his book Spyworld, Canadian intelligence interests were behind this project, especially economic interests, even before NAFTA. Further, Mexico was on the NSA's "wish list" (122).

Frost, who was the co-ordinator of the operation, arrived in Mexico City in 1981 with the aim of installing a specialized communications center to intercept information from government departments and Mexican agencies.The plan was to establish the interception post in the Canadian Embassy, as well as in Caracas and Havana, to extend the American intelligence activities. Those activities would have taken place from the penthouse of Mexico City's Sheraton Hotel, where a NSA post was located, since the glass structure of the Canadian Embassy in Mexico City would have made the secret operations crystal clear to everyone.

Although it is not known whether Canada still runs an interception post on the third amigo's "sovereign" territory, recent telecommunications advances would have made it irrelevant anyway. Spying on Ottawa's Mexican Embassy, for instance, might be carried out locally through the CSE general headquarters on Heron Road.

"From the CSE building in Ottawa any transmission made in the capital region can be intercepted: satellite communications, microwave towers that manage tons of information, especially long distance calls and cellular phone calls -- which are wired on a daily basis," Frost said in 1995, after Shorten's revelations (qtd. in Mendoza 1A).

After the spying affair unfolded, the Mexican Embassy tightened its anti-spying mechanisms -- whatever these are -- and the Mexican Ambassador decided to replace her "long telephone talks over important issues" with a Canadian Airlines ticket to Mexico City.

However, more important things were to come, according to Mexican officials: if

Canada and Mexico were allies, the perfect event to test their solidarity was just around the corner. The Helms-Burton furore was about to begin.

"Mexico considers as inadmissable any law that instead of promoting legality obstructs that of others and that instead of demolishing barriers erects them, diminishing the investment and the international trade," said President Ernesto Zedillo in June 11, 1996, before a joint session of the House of Commons and the Senate, which reacted spontaneously with applause lasting more than a minute.

The Canadian Parliament had also extended President Bill Clinton a warm welcome during his February 1995 official visit. Doing so for Zedillo made clear that Mexico was seen as a friend as well as an important partner and ally. The Chiapas uprising, the human-rights abuses, the political assassinations, the corruption and the economic crisis -- all had undermined Canadian confidence in the Latin American country. Still, Zedillo's five-day official visit to Canada underlined that Mexico was important for Canada -- even indispensable because of its proximity to the U.S. and because of its Latin American connections.

Zedillo was referring to the U.S. Helms-Burton law, which strengthens the economic embargo on Cuba. It was passed by Congress and signed into law by Clinton on March 12, 1996, after two American civil aircraft had been shot down by the Cubans just outside Cuban airspace, according to a later International Civil Aviation Organization investigation.

In an extraterritorial move, the legislation penalizes foreign companies investing ("trafficking") in Cuban-American and American properties that had been confiscated under President Fidel Castro's regime, and bans their executives and relatives from entering the United States.

Much of the international community condemned the new Washington attempt, but

Canada and Mexico were especially outraged. They both were the main trading partners and investors in the island, along with Spain. Executives of the Canadian mining company Sherritt International and of Mexico's telephone firm Grupo Domos had already been blacklisted by the State Department. Furthermore, according to both countries, the provision to ban their entry into the U.S. was a violation of NAFTA, which establishes the free temporary entry of business people in the three countries.

Canada and Mexico, as major U.S. trading partners and as neighbors, were in the best position to attack the law, and they were determined to put their own marriage of convenience to work to exert national pressure, in the NAFTA context and in other international fora.

"Let's make them trilateral. Arrange the diplomatic note," was the telephone instruction José Poblano, Mexico's trade representative in Ottawa, received the morning of March 13 from his boss Herminio Blanco, Minister for Trade and Industrial Development.

The previous night, just after Clinton had signed Helms-Burton into law, Canada had sent a diplomatic note formally asking for ministerial consultations on the issue under NAFTA. In turn, Mexico was ready to join the process in support of the Canadians.

Canada had tried to lead the international opposition against the law, both in Europe and Latin America. During his participation in the Caricom meeting in Granada in early March, Chrétien succeeded in convincing his counterparts to reaffirm in their final declaration their opposition to Helms-Burton. But during the unprecedented official visit to Ottawa of the presidents of six Central American countries in May 1996, Chrétien failed to convince them to condemn directly the extraterritorial law. Central America's historic dependence on the U.S. and the armed conflicts between socialist guerrillas and right-wing factions supported by the U.S. in Nicaragua and El Salvador proved to be just too much for them. Therefore,

Ottawa was able to obtain only a soft paragraph in the final declaration, saying that they "firmly opposed any unilateral imposition of measures that affect third countries and that countervail free trade practices and investment principles that are internationally accepted."

Canada's presence in Latin America had been increasing since 1990, when it joined the Organization of American States (OAS), but its influence over the region was still in diapers. Canada, it is true, has the great advantage of not being perceived as an imperialistic power, unlike the U.S. But its Latin America muscle was far punier than the historic U.S. participation in investment, trade and politics throughout the region. However, Canada's new economic and political links to Mexico were also seen as a pathway to the Latin American world. Due to its proximity to the U.S., Mexico had long been a Latin American leader, both as the bridge between the developing Latin American and the developed North American world, and for its anti-American stand where conflict had exploded between the U.S. and the region. The latter role was one Canada had rarely shouldered.

During the Central American crisis in the 1980s, for instance, Mexico, not Canada, directly intervened in the crisis to seek a peaceful alternative to Washington's confrontational policies. Although Canada had an important presence through its NGOs, the government approach to the conflict was more concerned with denouncing human rights violations than in confronting the U.S. military intervention policy, as Mexico did. Likewise, Mexico sided with Latin America to condemn the U.S. support to Britain during the Falklands War with Argentina, since the U.S. was violating the 1948 Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, in which it committed itself to assist Latin American countries to expel external military aggression. Canada, on the contrary, had sided with both Britain and the U.S.

With respect to Cuba, when all other Latin American countries decided to side with the U.S. to expel the island from the OAS in 1962, Mexico was the only country that voted

against it, becoming a Cuban public relations officer determined to lobby the world in favor of the island and against the U.S. policy. If Canada wanted to fight a continental fight, it needed Mexico.

"The Canadian-Mexican alliance against Helms-Burton shows us how our country needs to multeralize itself with Latin America and how this is working," said Juanita Montalvo, programs director at the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL), an independent think-tank created by Parliament.

But as Canada saw Mexico as a useful partner to penetrate Latin America, Mexicans saw with excitement how Canada was able to tell publicly the U.S. what Mexico could not.

When ultra-conservative, anti-Communist U.S. senator Jessie Helms accused Canada on March 1996 of doing with Castro what Britain had done with Hitler before the Second World War, Chrétien reminded him that the U.S. had supported the Cuban dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista.

"I would like to ask him, because he has been in politics for a long time. When (president Fulgencio) Batista was there, he was supported by the U.S." Chrétien said in March 8 in an interview with CBC TV.

And then, as a response to the U.S. State Department accusation that Canada was "rewarding the dictator" with Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy's visit to Havana in January 1997, Chrétien counter-attacked in the press by saying that "the only thing they (the Americans) are doing is making it possible for Castro to stay in power."

At the same time, many Canadians were also excited by the news of Mexicans doing by less official means, what Canadians couldn't. Just before coming to Ottawa in late August 1996, the U.S. special envoy on the Cuban issue, Stewart Eizenstat, had been pelted with eggs in Mexico City by a crowd. Likewise, Mexican legislators had walked out of a breakfast

offered at the U.S. Embassy, saying: "You are wrong if you think you can buy us with a dish of beans."

My stories had never been more famous in Mexico than during the Helms-Burton affair. "Mexico and Canada will fight together the Helms-Burton Law," read a half-page headline in Ovaciones, one of the most popular newspapers in Mexico City, just before Zedillo's visit to Ottawa, while Mexico's fight against Helms-Burton brought my country's comeback to the Canadian press (1A).

So when I saw the warm welcome extended Zedillo in Canada, I could not help admitting that, despite all the criticism of Mexico, for many Canadians it was still much more than a collection of political and economic miseries. If Zedillo had been received just as warmy as Clinton had, it was because he represented not only a dark political system but the potential and hopes for Mexico. For the first time since I arrived in Canada I felt that we Mexicans were beloved and needed, even if only for international political reasons. And my country delivered.

At the end of Zedillo's visit to Ottawa, before going to Toronto and Calgary to meet with businessmen from the private sector, he and Chrétien announced in a joint press conference that they would continue to fight the Helms-Burton law together.

Although the bilateral efforts have been generally absent in the Canadian media, Canada and Mexico championed a declaration condemning the law by the 1996 OAS Assembly. In November of that year Mexico passed unprecedented legislation to counteract the Helms-Burton provisions, after having studied the Canadian 1985 Foreign Extraterritorial Measures Act that was amended by Canada's Parliament in December 1996 to include further provisions against the new American law. Both the Canadian and Mexican legislations banned their companies from respecting the U.S. embargo, and allowed them to counter-sue the

American companies that sue them under Helms-Burton.

In November 1997, they both supported as a "third party" the European Union challenge against the U.S. before the World Trade Organization, instead of proceeding with their own NAFTA challenge. They both feared that by using NAFTA at this time, the U.S. could evoke its national security clause, diminishing the NAFTA dispute settlement mechanisms that had served both Canada and Mexico so well. So even if Helms-Burton continued alive and kicking into the first half of 1997, banning Canadian and Mexicans executives from entering the U.S., the mutual pressure forced President Clinton in July 1996 to freeze for a year the ability of U.S. companies to sue the foreigners who are allegedly "trafficking" in American property, confiscated by the Cuban regime.

The bilateral alliance against the U.S., indeed, had served both Canada and Mexico as a catalyst to strengthen their relationship at a time when it was threatened by Mexican instability and by Canadian national unity problems. In addition, Helms-Burton provided a way to get involved together in the international fora with a common stand, to learn more about each other and to renew their mutual confidence.

"The alliance against Helms-Burton has been the most important and strong political alliance that both countries have ever made," said Wendy Drukier, the director of programs at FOCAL, who is also in charge of Mexican studies. "Even if they haven't taken the decisive step of confronting the States face to face within NAFTA dispute settlement mechanisms, (their common stand) is a sign that our love is growing."

That the love was growing and that Canadians were trying to understand Mexico better was also evident in other affairs. Aftcr covering Zedillo's visit and, especially the reaction from official, business and NGO's circles, I concluded that Canadians had started to feel certain admiration for their Mexican partners -- if not compassion for their ability to

endure and overcome trouble.

"My visit to Mexico in March 1994 coincided with one of the most tragic events in your history in a year that was of challenges for the country and when there were people who feared for Mexico at that time," Chrétien said before Parliament during his welcoming speech to Zedillo, stressing that he had never doubted Mexico's capacity to survive those shocks. "Two years later, your administration has moved ahead, quickly proceeding with important political and economic reforms."

Canadian politicians, however, were not the only ones expressing their hopes for Mexico. After meeting the president both in Ottawa and Toronto, the private sector was again interested in the country, despite what the economic crisis had done to Canadian businesses.

Jean-Jacques Carrière, president of Ottawa based MITEL Corporation which is a partner of the Mexican telephone company TELMEX, was only one of them. With the 1995 crisis, MITEL telecommunication equipment sales in Mexico started to decline, even if Canadian exports overall grew 8 per cent that year. However, as Carrière explained in an interview, "that did not change the potential market Mexico still has for our products since the number of telephones per capita continues to grow, along with the profits and perspectives for expansion."

Likewise, although Northern Telecom de México S.A. de C.V saw its sales of corporate telephone systems decline, its total telecommunication equipment sales grew 20 per cent in 1995, totaling about $100 (US) million, while the Canadian banks who had invested in Mexico were also still making profits (Viveros 1). Although the Bank of Nova Scotia, which had acquired a 8 per cent of the shares at Mexican Inverlat saw its profits drop to $7.3 million (US) from $106 million later that year, it did not withdraw. The Canadian bank actually bought a bond to increase its stake at Inverlat to 55 per cent in the year 2000, while

the Bank of Montreal acquired a 16 per cent stake of Bancomer at the beginning of 1996, announcing about $11 million (US) dollars in profits obtained in the first quarter of 1997 from its Mexican operations.

"It is true that the banking sector was one of the most affected by the crisis," Bruce Birmingham, the CEO of Bank of Nova Scotia said after meeting Zedillo in Toronto. "But, look, it is precisely because of their crisis that they need us. They need to decrease their costs by means of modernization and the acquisition of new services and technology that we can offer."

As I conducted the interview, I could not believe it. It was as if nothing had happened. Furthermore, it was as if the devaluation and the crisis would have been actually better for many businessmen with interests in Mexico. Zedillo's visit seemed to have suddenly changed the otherwise pessimistic Canadian mood.

"It was a very successful visit that put the attention back on Mexico, giving the country the respect that it fully deserves," said David Winfield, the president of the Canadian Council for the Americas. According to Winfield, who also was Canada's Ambassador to Mexico between 1989 and 1995, this was due to the progress in the political and economic reforms and to the importance of having a president "committed to change."

While Chrétien's visit to Mexico marked the beginning of a troubled bilateral relationship -- making of Mexico a kind of undesired partner -- Zedillo's visit marked its renewal by putting the Third Amigo back in the Canadian mind.

Even the human rights NGOs, who gave a press conference during Zedillo's visit to denounce the persistence of human rights violations under his government, were overcome by the general Canadian optimism about the country. After all, Zedillo had decided in an unprecedented move to meet with them in an open round table with the presence of

journalists -- something no other Mexican president had done while abroad.

"We are pleased with our meeting with the president. The only thing we hope is that it leads to a solution to the problem, instead of to only improve the president's image in Canada," said Suzanne Ramsey, of the Inter-Church Committee for Human Rights in Latin America, urging Chrétien to replace his "silent diplomacy" for pressures on the Mexican government.

But even if Axworthy has maintained that "punitive measures" against Mexico will only be "counter-productive," as he wrote in September 1996 in a letter to Bob White, president of the Canadian Labour Congress, he has never stopped raising the human-rights issue.

When I asked Axworthy if he did not feel he was trespassing on Mexican sovereignty by raising the issue of human rights abuses with the Mexican government, he laughed. "The tone is very friendly between us and the Mexicans. We can talk about everything. This is one of the characteristics of a mature bilateral relationship; the fact that we can talk openly and sincerely between us."

After having seen what happened during Zedillo's visit, the only thing I could conclude, with surprise, is that Mexico and Canada do have a mature bilateral relationship on almost all fronts, from governments and business people to the NGOs. Our new relationship has faced a great number of obstacles and it has successfully stayed afloat. If it is true that our mutual love is growing, then might it be possible for our marriage of convenience to evolve into something closer to love?

As a Globe and Mail editorial put it, "One is hot, the other cold . . . Mexico and Canada are as different as night and day. And yet, lately, they are finding they have more and more in common" ("Mexico and Canada" A18).

Searching for a Common Future

An overwhelmed and tired Lloyd Axworthy took a commercial flight to Mexico City on December 18, 1996. He could not wait any longer for his well-deserved holidays, a few days visiting cultural sites and relaxing under the sun in the company of his wife and two children. But before he could even think about the beautiful Mexican city of Oaxaca and the golden beaches of Huatulco, which were beckoned with a warm Christmas, his responsibilities as the Foreign Minister came first. Just few hours before, Marxist guerrillas had taken hostage the Canadian Ambassador to Peru, Anthony Vincent, along with other 300 people who were partying at the Japanese Ambassador's residence in Lima.

Axworthy may have wanted to stay in Ottawa, but on December 18 he had to participate at the annual ministerial meeting Mexico-Canada, along with his colleagues Art Eggleton, the Minister of International Trade, and David Anderson, Minister for Transport. Fortunately, the Canadian ambassador was released the morning after, allowing Axworthy to carry on with his Mexican agenda and the meetings with his Mexican counterpart, Jose Angel Gurría.

While Eggleton and Mexico's Trade and Industrial Development Minister Herminio Blanco had similar personalities and approaches -- both of them were technocrats, enchanted with numbers and technical stuff -- Axworthy and Gurría were as different as day and night. Cosmopolitan, foreign-educated and perfectly fluent in Spanish, English, French, German and Italian, Gurría was a proud man, whose 1995 statement that the conflict in Chiapas was only "a war in the Internet" had earned him a national reputation as arrogant and out of touch with Mexico's problems. Maybe more than anyone else, Gurría was the ultimate example of the technocratic and quasi-aristocratic governing elite, torn between modernity and a traditional authoritarian approach towards the people. Axworthy, on the contrary, represented Canada's

current dichotomy as its best: an increasing internationalist with a low profile. He appeared a humble man with a humble attitude, whose efforts to speak Spanish had not paid off any more than had his struggle to express himself in French. And although his new and surprising embrace of the free trade ideology had left his nationalist and pro-human rights activism in the past, his past was still an important part of his present.

"Unlike former Affairs Minister André Ouellet, human rights and the NGOs' concerns on Mexico were always an issue for him," explained one high-ranked Mexican official who had dealt with both men.

But both Axworthy and Gurría had been able to get along "very well," according to Canadian officials, who stressed that they often were behind schedule because they always ended up talking more than was planned during their meetings. And on this occasion, they did it again -- and the Canadians were not pleased with the contents of that conversation.

During their informal lunch on December 19, Axworthy raised the issue of human rights; Gurría responded to the "Canadian concerns," explaining the situation in Chiapas and enumerating all the nation-wide improvements. Then, in an unprecedented move, Gurría raised his "concerns" about the indigenous situation in Canada and asked for an update regarding the scandal about the Canadian soldiers' torturing and killing a civilian Somali and the allegations that high-ranked officials may have been involved in a coverup.

"Axworthy couldn't believe it, and the (Canadian) Ambassador (Marc Perron) was furious," a Canadian senior official confided.

However, if the Canadians' ardor had cooled, they hid it very well. That same evening, both ministers participated in a "Posada," a traditional Mexican party celebrated in the days preceding Christmas, along with Eggleton, Blanco, the Canadian diplomatic corps and their children. After all, the ministers were a little bit too old to playfully attack the colorful

"piñata" hanging in the air, with the fruits and candies inside.

"Despite the rain, everybody had a lot of fun," said a Canadian present at the celebration. "Even Eggleton sang. He also ate a lot of tamales, pozole and sweet bunuelos," perhaps because the latter taste so similar to the Canadian cinnamon beaver-tails.

But behind those sweet similarities, two different countries were finding a way to find a common ground. After inaugurating their new relationship with the U.S. as "match-maker," and the Mexican political and economic instability as a constant threat, the marriage of convenience was evolving, with a life of its own, and achieving many of its objectives.

Just like the American-Mexican relationship, this was a relationship based on the asymmetry of power. As a richer and more democratic country, Canadians felt it was perfectly fine to lecture Mexicans about different political and social issues, and even Mexicans thought it was perfectly normal to seek "Canadian advice."

Although the Mexican government has never appreciated "interference" into its own business, 80 per cent of my work as the Ottawa correspondent had concentrated on looking for "the Canadian reaction" to every single Mexican development -- from human rights to politics and from religion to economics -- while the Canadian press was almost exclusively interested in denouncing Mexico's evils. (While the Canadian media reported extensively on the devaluation and the economic crisis, the news that Mexico had repaid in full the U.S. emergency economic package three years in advance was almost ignored).

In some ways, it was as if, in a period of great uncertainty, we were looking for answers in the Canadian experience. And although at the end, the answers we followed generally turned out to be the American recipes, at least we were also looking into other alternatives.

Despite the fact that "mutual concerns" on issues like indigenous peoples are still very

far from inverting this asymmetry, the Canadian-Mexican relationship was also evolving on the basis of an increasing mutual confidence and respect. Most average Canadians ignore what the two countries are doing together in the international forum, given the lack of coverage for anything but Helms-Burton. Furthermore, as a result of the labor movement campaign against NAFTA, the Mexican impact in Canada has been almost exclusively interpreted as a threat to the country's higher standards.

But the increasing dealings with the "Third Amigo" were also changing many of the traditional misconceptions about the South, and the "paternalistic" way with which many Canadians expect to treat their less developed partners. According to several experts, including Ed Broadbent, former president of the federally funded Center for Human Rights and Democratic Development, there has to be certain reciprocity, despite the asymmetry of power and development, in order to be credible.

"Just as it's appropriate for us to raise questions about rights within Mexico, it's totally appropriate for Mexicans to raise questions about Canada, whether it's the Oka incident, which was an international incident, or any other human right matter," he said in response to the Mexican Ambassador statement made in 1994 that the foreign efforts to influence social change in Mexico were "a form of imperialism" (qtd. in Todd A1).

As for Mexicans, although many of them resent what seems to be a "Canadian superiority," most Mexicans do not perceive Canada as a threat, given the lack of a history of mutual confrontation.

In an informal survey I conducted of 50 Mexicans in a shopping mall in Mexico City at the end of 1996, 90 per cent said they would prefer to immigrate to Canada instead of to the U.S. if they had to do so. And not surprisingly, the same percentage also said that if PEMEX had to be privatized, they would prefer to see it in Canadian rather than American

hands.

"Canadians also feel superior to us," explained 26-year-old Vanessa Avila, an electronic-engineer in Mexico City. "But they are not after us. We know that they are not just going to come here and get us."

In fact, although Ottawa has less influence than Washington over the "Third Amigo," it also has more credibility. As with Latin American countries and the United Nations, Canada favors an attack on drug-trafficking both in the producer and consumer nations, unlike the U.S., which has privileged a tough policy of pressure and intervention in the producer nations, while remaining the richest "paradise of drug-addicts."

On the other hand, although Canada does not face the same degree of Mexican immigration as the U.S., it is more tolerant and respectful of human rights, echoing Latin American worries of over how illegal immigrants are treated in the U.S. On May 1996, for instance, American policemen were caught by the TV cameras savagely beating illegal Mexican immigrants, including women, in Riverside County, California.

"What happened in Riverside is lamentable, and lamentable is not strong enough," said deputy speaker of the House of Commons, Bob Kilger, who was preparing for the Inter-Parliamentary Meeting Canada-Mexico, held in Ottawa on May 15. "We cannot overlook this kind of incidents wherever they are coming from. We have to be vigilant of the respect of human rights," he said in a personal interview.

Likewise, as a medium power used to the unilateral impositions of its neighbor, Canada is one of the largest promoters of multilateralism, like Mexico, and a country that fully respects its international commitments and the international law -- with a few exceptions, such as seizing foreign vessels in international waters. That, along with its non-imperialistic tradition, has gained it the confidence of many Latin American countries and of Mexico, in

particular.

As a result, Canada and Mexico have emerged as natural allies, as was evident with their common stand against the Helms-Burton law. Although they have not asked for a NAFTA panel to challenge Helms-Burton, they have so far been able to accomplish their objective of using the agreement as a tool to force the U.S. to respect the trading rules.

Fearing for an increasing protectionism in the U.S., Canada supported in January 1997 Mexico's stand against a U.S. decision to penalize the imports of Mexican tomatoes under the argument they were threatening the whole American market.

Therefore, the very objective both countries had in mind while signing NAFTA -- to counteract the U.S. unilateral impositions -- had been accomplished, even if Helms-Burton continues.

"Although I don't think this can be seen as an alliance against the United States; it's a common way to remind them that they can't just violate NAFTA," said Tim Page, vice-president of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce. "They have to live up to their trading and legal international commitments and we (Canada and Mexico) are making sure they do."

However, other issues that were set as NAFTA goals have not been accomplished. The December 1995 deadline for the two trilateral working groups to clarify the definitions of both subsidies and dumping that Chrétien put as a condition to proclaim the agreement, had come and gone with no major improvement. Likewise, the later Canadian proposal to negotiate with Mexico a bilateral agreement to eliminate the use of countervailing duties -- imposed when a country is suspected by the other to be committing dumping -- was rejected by Mexican authorities. Further, Canada's objective of joining NAFTA as a vehicle to expand its trade with the Americas has been put on hold by the Republicans opposition to give the "fast-track" to Clinton, a provision that prevents legislators from amending what the

Executive negotiates with other countries. Therefore, Canada has had to proceed alone in its quest of the Latin American markets by signing bilateral agreements with such countries as Chile -- in November 1996 -- given the U.S. difficulties to accept the South American country's accession into NAFTA. And although the continental goal of conforming the Free Trade Area of the Americas by the year 2005 will be virtually impossible without the American commitment, the emergence of Canada as one of its main supporters has increased its profile as a free-trader ally for the region.

But aside from these accomplishments and the issues still pending, the most polemic issue by far in the Canadian-Mexican relationship has been how NAFTA has affected the peoples of both countries.

"We want to eat much more than tacos," I read on the placards in the hands of about 200 workers from the truck producer Kenworth, demonstrating in Parliament Hill on April 12, 1996, against the closure of their plant in Ste.Therese, Quebec.

"This is absolutely unfair. It is the result of lower salaries in Mexico and of the U.S. trend to repatriate their jobs under NAFTA," said in a personal interview Ivan Bourgois, the leader of the production employees at Ste. Therese.

The shutdown had been decided by the U.S. firm Paccar, Kenworth's mother company, in order to move production to the plants in Ohio and Mexicali, Baja California, leaving 900 Canadian workers without jobs. But although other factors had also played a role, like an eight- month-old strike and the fear of Quebec's separation, the destiny of Kenworth became the best example of what free trade was doing to Canadians.

And although it is still uncertain how many Canadian factories had been closed and moved to Mexico, the October 1996 one-month General Motors strike in Canada also showed that free trade is certainly putting pressure on the automakers, which are shooting

down plants in order to replace part of the production by cheaper autoparts produced by independent and cheaper suppliers. The worst fears, championed by the anti-NAFTA forces in Canada led by the labor movement, had proved in these cases to be true.

In fact, globalization and free trade are changing Canada's economic face. The country is facing a dramatic economic shift from traditional manufacturing industries to high-tech and more specialized production and services, leaving jobless thousands of workers with no specialized training. And those laid-off workers, who for almost half a century had been backed up by welfare and the generous social programs, are now facing an unprecedented state downsizing.

So at the time of big unemployment -- an average national of just below 10 per cent and a 17 per cent among young people in the last few years -- the federal and provincial fight against the deficit has dismantled, although still tenuously, Canada's impressive safety-net, creating insecurity and despair.

The promise that the three governments had sold to their constituencies -- that everything will be better -- was clearly not delivered. But just as the formula of NAFTA as the "magic wand" that would create prosperity for all had been rhetoric, so was the Canadian claim that it has been the evil behind every single thing gone wrong.

Although in Canada it is clear that globalization is putting pressure on both the federal and provincial governments to put their finances in order, there is also a great deal of popular support for these measures. The people in Alberta and Ontario have voted for conservative platforms of state downsizing and war on the deficits. The national electorate seems to approve of the federal government strategy of reducing the deficit and promoting free trade. In the meantime, anti-NAFTA and anti-downsizing forces, such as the New Democratic Party, have been loosing national support, even if it still governs in British Columbia, a

province that has benefited, ironically, from freerer trade with Asia.

On the other hand, although it is true that Canadian workers are under an increasing pressure coming from an unfair Mexican competition based on cheap labor, there is also evidence to the contrary. According to an official report tabled by Finance Minister Paul Martin in a parliamentary committee in October 1996, only nine per cent of total Canadian imports come from developing countries, such as Mexico.

"Although Canada's salaries are seven times higher than in Mexico, the Canadian workers continue being more competitive than the Mexicans, given their higher productivity," the Finance Department's report stated.

In fact, other sectors had been compensated and benefited though their exports to Mexico and as many as 66,000 jobs might be sustained by Canadian exports to Mexico only -- if one believes the government's projection that every $1 billion (Can) dollars sustain 11,000 jobs, and that one in three jobs depend on exports.

"The commonly expressed view that free trade has contributed to Canada's employment problems does not find support in the data," says Daniel Schwanen in a 1997 study on NAFTA, published by Toronto's C.D. Howe Institute. "The employment performance of sectors most sensitive to the FTA has not, in fact, deteriorated relative to total manufacturing employment" (2). In contrast, the expert argues that the sectors that have experienced employment growth are those which have been liberalized, including services, while the weakest are those facing non-free trade related problems, such as fish products or construction materials.

In fact, pro free-traders argue that more jobs would have been created or kept as the result of the massive flow of investment that had come to Canada since NAFTA came into effect by making the whole North American region more attractive. Total foreign direct

investment in the country increased by 10 per cent to $124.32 (US) billion in 1995, of which 67 per cent came from the United States, while Canada only invested $56.6 billion in the United States (Department of Foreign Affairs).

And although Canadian direct investment in Mexico more than doubled between 1993 and 1994, and increased to approximately $2 billion (US) in 1996 (both current and planned), it was less than the $3.7 billion that was invested in Chile, a country with which a bilateral trade agreement was only signed in November 1996, to be put into effect in June 1997.

But if NAFTA had created winners and losers in Canada, it seemed that in Mexico most of us had been the losers. The new economic model had accentuated the divide between Mexico's modern, export-oriented economy, which now accounts for almost 30 per cent of national output, and the depressed local economy, which fell by 15 per cent in 1995. More than ever, Mexico was two Mexicos: the modern and "rich," and the forgotten and poor. Geographically, this trend is dividing the two Mexicos into three: "Mex-America in the north, Mex-Central America in the south, and city-state Mexico City," as author Robert Kaplan points out (24). Therefore, average labor wages in the northern state of Nuevo Leon (New Lion) are three times those in Chiapas, while per capita consumption in Baja California is five times higher than in southern Oaxaca (Crawford 11).

This situation, along with the devaluation and the economic crisis, had led many Mexicans to question NAFTA and the economic model behind it. But even if both the agreement and the U.S. became the perfect targets to blame for our miseries, most Mexicans are against isolationism and protectionism. Most of them, like the people living in the South, had suffered. But most people still believed, correctly, that the links with the U.S. and internationally driven economy were the pathways to prosperity, as the example of the Northern states had shown.

Even leftist parties such as the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) had replaced its traditional stand against NAFTA by a view very similar to the one held by the Liberals when they took power: not to revoke it but to improve it. And even if many leftist groups were against an economy increasingly dependent on the U.S., Subcomandante Marcos' despair at seeing that the rest of the country did not join the revolt showed that the door to the models of the past was closed, although still attractive for many who deplored centuries-old injustices.

In fact, the Mexicans whose lives depend on globalization are still numerous enough to prevent the changes that the radical and violent movements in the south -- who apparently represent the marginalized majority -- fight for. The exporter sector has benefited from the model, and northern Mexico has boomed, thanks to the "maquiladoras," which produce goods with cheap labor and low labor standards to be sold abroad. But even if the conditions of these places tend to be bad and union rights are often violated, they employ over 600,000 Mexicans and support two million Mexicans, according to political analyst Jorge Castaneda (97). In addition, yearly remittances from workers in the United States to their families in Mexico, which are mainly concentrated in the poor southern and central states, amount to nearly $4 billion (US) and might be benefiting up to four million Mexican homes (96).

"The imminent explosion that many have predicted will not take place," explains Castaneda, one of the most important critics of the Mexican system (92). "Enough enjoy the gains inherent in these ties to the global economy, and enough, despite much evidence on the contrary, expect to join in the prosperity, for the status quo to remain indefinitely sustainable" (100).

In fact, thanks to NAFTA and the access to the Canadian and American markets, Mexico was able to finance the crisis. In 1996, Mexico obtained a trade surplus of 16.2 billion

(US) dollars with the U.S. and $3.5 billion (US) with Canada. Likewise and unlike the aftermath of the 1982 devaluation, when the trade with Canada decreased, it increased more than 17 percent in 1995, totalling $ 4.78 billion, with Canadian exports growing eight per cent, according to Statistics Canada. Despite the devaluation and the crisis, bilateral trade had increased almost 60 percent with NAFTA going from $3.3 (US) billion in 1993 to $5.3 billion in 1996, while trilateral trade had increased 45 per cent.

At the same time, foreign investment and competition had created working alternatives for many people and kick-started modernizing the infrastructure, something vital to make Mexico a competitive economy. My 26-year-old cousin, Lorena, who had been making a salary of about $300 (US) a month as an account executive for a Mexican company was recruited in 1996 by AT&T in Mexico to do the same job for four times as much, plus benefits. And given the increasing foreign competition for the TELMEX monopoly, now it was possible to get a new telephone line installed in 48 hours instead of in six months.

But unlike Lorena and thousands of competent university-educated young people, there were millions without this chance in a country with an average education of Grade 6, for whom the crisis had been the ultimate proof of the new model's failure.

Mexico had emerged more divided than ever -- both economically and politically. As a result, the Canadian view of Mexico was also being divided, illustrating the First World's difficulty of dealing with countries that are neither totally poor and dictatorial nor totally developed or democratic.

For the private sector, the only Mexico that exists is the modern and rich, relegating the fights for social justice as threats to stability. But the NGOs and labor movements' campaigns against the status quo have extended the view that Mexico is in fact the last dictatorship in Latin America, as if no improvement had been made. While the NGOs, for

instance, are in favor of a change, even a radical change that fits the leftist views of most of them, for the business and the financial community, along with the governments, stability is top priority, a stability that means the status quo and the PRI itself.

Therefore, many NGOs and the labor movement will publicly denounce the Mexican injustices, sometimes extending a local situation to the national context. Then, the press will reproduce such comments with the prevalent view that bad news is the only news. As a result, the financial markets will panic, withdrawing their money from the markets, putting pressure on the peso and sending Mexicans the message that change is not always a good idea.

"Change but don't move" is what the international community would seem to be telling Mexicans, as if we were inferior creatures, incapable of having what they have: democracy. In brief, "Be democratic, respect the human rights, stop the corruption, stop the drug-trafficking, clean up your economy, and cut the social spending, but do not create waves, do not create instability."

As a result of this situation, that also exists with other developed trading partners like the U.S., Mexico has become, in fact, a hostage to the international community; for every time Mexicans push for change, the markets penalize them.

On February 19, 1997, Mexico's top anti-narcotics official, general Jose de Jesus Gutierrez Rebollo, was arrested on charges of working for the country's most notorious drug lord just as the Clinton administration was considering whether to re-certify Mexico (making it eligible for U.S. economic assistance) based on its government co-operation in combating drug trafficking. As a result of the arrest, high-ranked American officials, including Attorney General Janet Reno, recommended to president Clinton that Mexico be decertified as Colombia, and the currency then raised to eight pesos to the U.S. dollar from 7.5. In the end, Clinton certified Mexico, fearing that an adverse decision could lead to a run in the peso and

to a new economic collapse. But even if Clinton later vetoed the subsequent Congress resolution to decertify Mexico, Mexicans were outraged from left to right.

"We don't have any faith in the government's ability to fight drug-trafficking," says Mexico City plumber Jorge Espinosa. "But that does not mean that we like the United States' coming in and dictating. You are the ones who consume all the drugs" (qtd. in Larmer 35).

With these international pressures, it is normal that Mexicans prefer to be left alone, especially when it seems that the more the country is doing to deal with its problems, the more pressure it receives in exchange. Would it not be better, then, to leave the general and the Salinases to live in peace and eternal impunity?

Although the markets panicked as a result of the Chiapas' uprising, beginning with a frantic speculation that ended with the devaluation, in the end the instability had been provoked by the very regime that had posed as the only bet for the country's stability. Rather than the economic model or the pressures of NAFTA, alone, the PRI's authoritarianism and its gangster-like divisions that had ended up in notorious murders, are clearly responsible for the current Mexican chaos. The assassinations of Colosio and Ruiz Massieu, along with a casino-like management of the economy and of the reserves also put increasing pressure over the markets, and not only the Subcomandante Marcos' "war on the Internet."

As Andres Oppenheimer, Miami Herald's veteran correspondent in Mexico, noted, the country needed a new system capable of channeling social tensions, including the escalating battles of the ruling elite. "Without it, the country will continue within the vicious cycle that led to its periodic economic crisis -- a system in which a government without accountability spent as its will, paid for its excesses with foreign investment, periodically went bankrupt, and then imposed draconian sacrifices on the poor to pay its debts" (323).

In this sense, although at the government and financial level it seems that Canada's

bet on Mexico favors stability over a deep reform, great changes are also underway.

"In the beginning, we did not have a clue of how to deal with Mexico," explains one high-ranking senior official. "On the one hand, there was this very economic approach in which everything in Mexico was right; and on the other, the pressures of the human rights' NGOs's that everything was bad. But after what we have been experiencing, we now have a more realistic approach. Mexico is advancing towards the path of democracy, but we are aware that this might mean serious problems as an eventual change of parties in government."

And although it is still unclear whether this will trigger further instability and, therefore, the weakening of the Canadian business interest in Mexico, it is clear that many Canadians, who just two years ago thought these kind of changes were impossible, are starting to prepare themselves for the change, without necessarily withdrawing.

"We don't look for any earnings per share until the next century, but we are cautiously optimistic that we've made a good buy," says Peter Godsoe, chairman of Bank of Nova Scotia, which, despite having lost money with the devaluation, has decided to stay and increase its stake at Mexico's Inverlat (qtd. in Patridge B6).

But besides the inconsistent message that both the government and the business community are sending to Mexico -- change but don't create waves -- the elites are not the only ones playing a role in Mexico or in the re-accommodation of North America.

Mexico's miseries have often been used as a tool for our partner's political gains and protectionism -- as the Republicans are doing and Canada's labor movement often does.

"We have an enormous pressure," said Mexican worker, Martha Ojeda, leader of the Pro-Justice Maquiladoras Coalition, an organization based in San Antonio, Texas. "First, we have to deal with foreign corporations, which hire maquiladoras to indirectly exploit the workers in other countries, and then, with many of our northern 'companeros' who see us as

a threat," she said in March 1, 1996, during her trip to Ottawa, where Canadian NGOs were launching a campaign to commit Levi Strauss to force its Latin American maquiladoras to adopt its same labor code of conduct.

In fact, it is precisely people like Martha who, along with her Canadian counterparts -- nited! -- were making a difference between an inclusive and an exclusive North America. Just as Canadian businessmen shared the golf course with their Mexican counterparts, and Eggleton and Blanco shared tamales, human rights activists, academics, students, tourists and even indigenous representatives were fighting for a better North America: a North America where everybody could eat "much more than tacos."

In the national context, the economic re-accommodation of North America had devastated many lives but also created opportunity and prosperity for others. On the wheels of a "Made in Mexico" Chevy Cavalier, there might be a happy Canadian consumer, but also a laid-off worker from General Motors in Canada. And behind the bright red pepper displayed in Canadian supermarkets, there was a Chiapas peasant benefitting from the booming of chilies exports, while his "amigo," a producer of coffee, had to endure an increasing foreign competition.

But for all these workers, along with both the forever oppressed and the dissidents in Mexico, there was also a new channel to be heard and taken into account. The anti-NAFTA forces and the "losers" of integration had become a vital drive of the relationship.

The interest that NAFTA had sparked in Canada and the U.S. with respect to Mexico had provided Mexican dissidents with new international fora to speak up against abuses and to find the solidarity of many groups and human rights organizations among their northern neighbors. This situation has many times created the mistaken image that no improvement has been made in Mexico. But at the same time, the continuous presence of the dissident voice

in Canada has prompted extensive collaboration between the two countries' NGOs, while NAFTA new fora that allow them to spread their voice.

Despite its common absence in the media, the trilateral commissions on Labor and Environment, created by NAFTA side-agreements, have made real progress in responding to the peoples' concerns over abuses in the three countries, despite the fact that with the exception of Quebec and Alberta, the Canadian provinces still have to join the side agreements.

Now, whether this still incipient North American community will be able to create prosperity for the majority -- to absorb the disadvantaged into the machinery of development -- is still unknown. The bridge between the First World and the Third World by means of trade is still an experiment that still faces great obstacles, not only economic but political.

While a separate Quebec will certainly shift not only the North American map but its economic dynamic -- especially if it is alienated from NAFTA -- the real difficulty here is how to integrate Mexico into a prosperous North America, since from the beginning Mexico has been unwelcome.

Parallel to the increase in trade, there is a strong anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican trend both in the U.S. and Canada, based on intolerance and on a tradition in which Mexico is not seen as part of North America. The telephone companies' rebates ads of "Call any time, any where in North America," do not include Mexico, for instance. I always have great trouble writing my stories when somebody talks of North America because I never know if we are included.

While Canada and the U.S. share the largest (almost 9,000 kilometers) undefended border, thousands of policemen are guarding the 2,000 kilometer-long Mexican border, along which a wall is being erected. This is happening despite the fact that, according to the U.S.

Service of Immigration and Naturalization, the Canadians are the fourth largest group of illegal immigrants in that country (compared to the about 1.3 million Mexicans) and that Canada is increasingly competing with Mexico as the bridge to reach the American market of marijuana, according to Pierre Champlain, analyst at the Criminal Intelligence Direction of the RCMP.

It is clear that Mexico cannot enjoy the same "North American" status that Canada and U.S. enjoy as cousins. Mexico has many more problems and is much poorer. But that does not mean that Mexicans must be continuously humiliated on the border, treated as criminals until proved innocent. And in this sense, tolerant Canada has also made a difference.

Besides the fact I am almost always asked in Toronto's airport if I am sure I am just bringing a bottle of Tequila and that I am separated in trains to be interrogated by the officer at the border while Americans, British and Swiss wait on their seats, Canadians treat us well.

Although Canada and Mexico's mutual separation by the U.S. has sometimes become an obstacle preventing them from getting to know each other better, it has also prevented important clashes. There is virtually no Mexican illegal immigration to Canada, and the 6,000 Mexican workers that come here every year to work on farms enjoy the same salaries as Canadians, as well as the same benefits, and always return to Mexico after the summer ends.

However, Canada seems to be totally oblivious to its eventual "Mexicanization." According to American scholar Samuel P. Huntington, the success of NAFTA will depend to a large extent on the convergence of Mexican, Canadian and American cultures (219). After all, "True partnership implies a two-way process, mutual influences and respect," says John Walker, a Latin American expert at Queen's University (D14). The problem is that both Canadians and Americans are only thinking in terms of "North Americanizing" Mexico,

rejecting with fear the very idea of Mexican influence, as if convergence was a one-direction process.

But as has happened in the U.S., the Mexican cultural influence is irreversible. And with this I do not mean the inevitable entry of Canada into Mexico's less prosperous reality, as the labor movement claims. Although it will be difficult to see Toronto becoming another Los Angeles at the beginning of the new millennium, the situation is changing dramatically.

In 1991, only 0.5 per cent of the total 16 per cent of foreign-born Canadian people had been born in Mexico. But the number of Canadian landed immigrant status given to Mexicans, only in Mexico City, had jumped to 1,367 in 1996 from 1,061 in 1994, according to the Canadian Embassy. Likewise, the total refugee claims increased from 23 to 951 between 1993 and 1996. Mexican and Latin American culture in general were penetrating Canada dramatically. Along with "La Macarena," danced during the 1996 Ontario Liberal Convention and the continous opening of new Latino-discos in big cities, Spanish had become the fourth-largest foreign language in Canada (with 1.1 per cent of the population having it as its mother tongue) after Italian, German and Chinese (Reddy 260).

And even if most Latin Americans saw Canadians as the northern "gringos," at the end of the millennium Canada was also emerging as a credible ally and alternative to "Gringoland," whose "Magic Kingdom" had not always benefited them. From being just another guest at the continental dinner, hosted by the U.S., NAFTA and its increasing links to Latin America are changing Canada's reputation in the continent. And although the integration of a more equitable and inclusive North American community is not inevitable, its possibility is stronger than ever. With its continental perspective, the new Canadian-Mexican relationship -- on all fronts -- has broadened the North American horizons beyond the U.S. With that comes the possibility of integrating into the most prosperous regions of the world

a vibrant Latin American community determined to make the transition from the U.S. backyard to a machine creating wealth.

After all, just as Axworthy and Gurría had been able to get along so well despite their different backgrounds, so do Canada and Mexico. Rather than breaking a "pinata," they were finally breaking the ice.

Afterword

As Axworthy took his plane to Oaxaca after the official posada, I went back to Mexico City for my holiday. For the first time in my life, I did not find any gifts beneath the Christmas tree at home. Mexican families, along with my country, had been upside-down after two years of economic crisis, and my family was no exception.

Pepe Viveros was selling his chicken vaccines as never before. The devaluation had eliminated most of his foreign competitors from the domestic market, since buying national products was cheaper than having to import them. But nobody paid him back.

"There is no money. It is as simple as that," my father explained.

Therefore, and after having worked for years "just for pleasure," my mother had to start working for necessity, along with my sister, who from then on had to contribute to her private university fees.

However, most people were not that lucky. During the Salinas' years, the banks had extended massive credit and thousands of credit cards. With the following sky-rocketing of the interest rates, people had lost not only their jobs, but their homes and their cars. With the collapse of the banking system and 50 per cent of bad loans, the banks now owned more cars than General Motors and Ford altogether in the country.

I had never seen so much despair and poverty. People were desperate and upset. The IVA, the Mexican version of the GST, had been increased in 1995 to 15 per cent from 10 per cent, and the prices of many previously controlled basic products were set free.

My father had worked hard all his life and had made it from poverty to middle-class. Now, at 56 years of age, he had to start all over again. Had he been born in Canada, he would not have had to worry. He would be preparing for retirement with his RRSPs, while my sister would be living on her own on a student loan and my single aunt Lala would not have to be

working for a miserable salary at the age of 65. But we were all Mexicans. We had to cope. But had we?

After more than three years in Canada, I knew that things can be different, that there is not such a thing as a destiny of tragedy people have to always endure and accept. History had made us the way we are. But that does not mean that we have to continue being like this forever. Once again, I was in the middle of a cultural shock. Only this time it was the other way around: my personal and journalistic experience as part of another reality made me realize how many things were wrong in my country. But even if I still felt some remorse for having become so critical, and for having lost touch with my origins, I did not feel as a "traitor" any more. Instead, I started wishing for Mexico all the good things that I had experienced in Canada. I wanted to be like some of my colleagues. I started dreaming of the day Mexican journalists would have access-to-information legislation, and public inquiries about military wrongdoing, as happened in Canada.

In Canada, I had sometimes had to face verbal attacks and prejudices. My pride as a Mexican had been pretty battered. But I was not afraid any more. Even if I had lost all my hope in the system and in the capability of the PRI to change and finally give us democracy, my Canadian experience as a Mexican observer made me also appreciate and revalue the good things that had made so many Mexicans living abroad, like my father, return home..

Although for many Canadians "Mexicanization" only means a bad thing, like the dropping of their own economic and social standards, not everything Mexican is evil. My Christmas holiday convinced me that we Mexicans also have good things that can inspire other societies like Canada, which are experiencing the pain of change.

Despite its humanity and solidarity in caring for the disadvantaged, development has also started to dehumanize many Canadians, to make them selfish and increasingly

materialistic. Their perpetual whining has allowed them to be very "combative" and to build up a fair and equal society that serves as inspiration for the world. But the fact that Canada has one of the highest suicide rates in the world and that despite its economic wealth seems to be nowadays in the middle of depression is also a sign that something is going wrong; that maybe many people are starting to lose the kind of spiritual basics that not only make humans fight hardships and endure, but also to be happy and to make the best of life.

However, in an impressive change of attitudes driven by the economic change, Canadians are also converging culturally in many ways with Mexicans. Behind the insecurity and despair that the free trade and the state downsizing is creating, more and more Canadians are starting to discover -- or rediscover -- something else beyond economic wealth. More and more young people are staying at their parents' homes after university, and another kind of personal solidarity can already be seen on the horizon. Instead of relying on the state, Canadians are taking their uncertain future into their own hands. Just like in Mexico, there has been a Canadian increase in self-employed workers, and people are having to take a second look at their family situation.

It is as if Canada had already reached the limits of its own post-War development model and had started shifting to another one. This world is completely unknown to many Canadians, who lack the cultural and personal tools to handle it, as we Mexicans do. Whether this will evolve as a return to family values -- not in the sense of conservatism but of the family replacing certain spheres of the state -- is still unknown. But that Canadians are already revaluating their relationship between the individual and the collectivity, and between their values and the traditional rules of the game, is a fact. Behind "the best country in the world to live" there is also a country that does not often realize it, parallel to another one who is still pushing ahead to make the best of it.

When I came back to Ottawa in January 1997 from my holidays in Mexico, I felt happy as never before. I felt safe; I felt protected from my Mexican destiny. Unlike when I was a newcomer, I did not have to spend any more weekends without speaking to a soul. I had friends and I had a life. And although there were still many things that I knew I would never get used to, there were so many others that I already was part of. Just as I had been able to replace baby hills for medium size mountains -- I was already an intermediate skier -- my fears and my inferiority complex as a Mexican were behind me.

I knew that Mexico would not be a First World country by the year 2000. I knew that many things still had to be changed in order to aspire at least to a modest democracy, and that maybe the definite collapse of the PRI and the election of a government for the opposition was still years away.

But the very fact of having lived in Canada showed me that a better destiny was also possible. Behind its linguistic wars and unity crisis, Canada was still alive and kicking. And although the new economic pressures had devastated the lives of so many people, the country was again on the road to prosperity.

Even if the depression of seeing so many poor and desperate people had made me question my very "Mexicanidad" (Mexicanity) I also felt very proud. Mexico was bordering on chaos, but it was not defeated.

Just as many of my Mexican attitudes had started to change due to my contact with another culture, Mexico's attitudes seemed to also had been turned upside-down as the result of the economic openness. Many of the attitudes of passivity had changed. And just as I was tired of my attitude of "Mexican loser" in Canada, Mexicans were also defiant.

Mexican nationalism and Mexico's image of itself is changing dramatically. And I am not talking about starting to replace tacos with hamburgers as the result of NAFTA. Although

this process is worrying an increasing number of Mexicans, Mexicans will still enjoy "rancheras" songs, prefer the domestic taco over the scoundrel "Taco Bell," and stick with hot chile over the sour pickle for a long time to come.

More and more newspapers and radio stations were attacking the government and getting scoops that would have been unthinkable three years before. The otherwise complacent and pro-government press -- including Televisa -- was giving in to the competition that brave and professional newspapers like Reforma were creating, and there were even police torture scenes in a popular TV evening soap-opera. Likewise, although the international criticism had made Mexicans even more insecure and self-depreciating, more and more were making use of the foreign press and fora to expose the government's problems, with fewer people interpreting that as a kind of "treason."

This was not, of course, an exclusive result of NAFTA and the globalization process that put pressure on the government. It was more a combination of the pressures from within and from without. But maybe without NAFTA, the convergence might have been impossible, given the lack of international interest in us.

Behind all the poverty and despair, Mexicans were still pushing ahead. After having lost it all, Pepe Viveros still woke up every morning to go to work and save his business. Unlike the 1982 crisis, my father started this time to export to other Latin American countries to compensate for the vaccines that his long-time clients were unable to pay him for. What previously had been an impossible task, given the bureaucratic requirements, now was a reality.

The children performing as clowns along the big avenues were still there. And how to forget the big smile of that very old indigenous woman begging on the street, as if she had forgotten that she did not have anything to eat or a place to stay. Although everything was

more difficult, life continued being business as usual and Mexicans still tried to enjoy it. My 20-year-old sister Vanessa did not even have money for the new Lancôme eye-shadow she so badly wanted, to get my Montreal "smoky-eye" dramatic look. But she still managed to be happy. Instead of going out every weekend to a night club, drinking and smoking Marlboro cigarettes like crazy, she and her friends got together improvising parties at their homes to smoke Broadway cigarettes, the new cheap Mexican version of Marlboros.

When I saw her going out and fighting with my parents over her lifestyle, saying that if she worked and studied hard all week long, she had the right to be free and happy during weekends, I knew this was not the country that the writer Octavio Paz had described 30 years ago.The pyramid imposed by the Aztecs and then by the Spaniards was being challenged. The traditional authoritarian family, where both imposition and submission starts, was being replaced by a more tolerant institution. However, unlike in many developed countries, where the family only serves to take care of you while growing up, the crisis had also prevented extreme individualism and selfishness from emerging. Besides having to pay her university-fees, my sister was still giving money to my parents for the household expenses.

On the other hand, Vanessa, along with my female friends from kindergarten, was less and less the troubled Mexican torn between her Spanish and Indian spirit. Mexicans were less and less living in the past, being always afraid of the future. They were sick of social pyramids and they wanted individual success in a system that allows it. Most of my female friends were not married and were all working. And even if their salaries were low, many of them were studying other languages, taking training courses and looking ahead with hope -- unbelievable as it seems.

They did not have a safety net to help them in the transition; they were making the effort on their own. And although many of them still believed that the PRI continued being

the least offensive of all the political alternatives, they were determined to change their current situation. They were not victims, and they were certainly very far from being passive. And just as the Indians in the south had decided to transform their historical status as victims to that of revolutionary heroes, more and more urban people were determined to channel their historical strength as survivors through political means.

"I think I will still vote for the PRI for the presidency in the year 2000," said 26-year old Irma, a computer expert. "But this time, I will vote for the opposition for Congress. I will never forgive the PRI deputies for having voted to increase our taxes."

After that trip, I knew I would never go back to the country I had left more than three years ago. Mexico was re-inventing itself. Just as my father and grandfather, I realized how fortunate I was to be part of it -- even in the middle of the pain that the birth of a new Mexico was creating.

I knew that I was witnessing much more than the birth of a new country from another one fighting for its territorial survival. Separated and united by the U.S., the fire and ice were melting into a new North America, a North America that my grandfather would have certainly wished for me.

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