

NAFTA, First Nations and National Identities

By Olive Patricia Dickason



One of the most significant prospects raised by the North American Free Trade Agreement was not directly considered during the negotiations: that of the development of a North American identity. The importance of this possibility was signaled by the speed with which The North American Institute organized its National Identity Colloquium, held in Washington early in May, with representatives from Canada, the United States, and Mexico.

This was not the first such initiative in this regard. Two years ago, for example, the University of British Columbia in Vancouver held a conference on what was seen at the time as threatened identities—the influence of continentalism on nationalism in North America. It was attended by scholars from all three North American countries. More recently, the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California in Tijuana invited two University of Alberta professors to speak on Canada and its relationship with its First Nations, and also on Canada's development as a confederation. As the Universidad Autónoma explained, since our countries were now partners in trade, it behooved us to learn about each other. The first visit took place the last week of April, followed by the second in June.

Neither Mexico nor Canada have traditionally paid much attention to each other in their educational systems. In fact, Latin America as a whole has not impinged to any extent on Canada's consciousness, either politically, socially, or academically. Canada only became a member of the Organization of American States within the past few years, and even then with some hesitation. Her loyalties have traditionally been engaged by her membership in the British Empire, and subsequently in the British Commonwealth. Only comparatively recently has the influx of refugees from Latin American trouble spots begun to sensitize the Canadian public to American hemispheric politics. In the past, Canadians have habitually looked no further than Mexico, and then mainly as a holiday resort, or sometimes as a place to retire.

As the first visiting professor involved in the project at the Universidad Autónoma, I was impressed with the numbers of people who came out to hear my lecture, which was given in English. A translation of my talk had been distributed among the audience, but the question period was also in English, with occasional help from an interpreter. My topic was Canada during its early days of interactions between Europeans and Amerindians, a period when commercial partnerships developed between the two in both fisheries and the fur trade. These partnerships lasted two hundred years—not without conflicts and confrontations, but relying heavily on negotiation and compromise, still strongly characteristic of the Canadian confederation. Colonial wars, as they were fought in Canada, did not so much pit settlers against Amerindians (although there were instances when that happened), but saw Amerindians allying with whichever one of the contending colonial powers they were connected with by trade. Once the wars ended, however, and the fur trade diminished in importance, alliances gave way to domination, and Amerindians found themselves marginalized, as elsewhere in the Americas.

The question period following my lecture quickly revealed how far apart the Canadian and Mexican experiences have been, particularly in the early days of contact. Yet there is a connecting thread: in both cases Europeans overran indigenous societies, although much more slowly in Canada than in Mexico. Different as the details may be, the essentials are very similar. In the atmosphere being encouraged by NAFTA and developed by such initiatives as those of the Universidad Autónoma and NAMI, there is already a move toward looking at commonalities rather than differences. In the process it is uncovering the continental North American history that has been upstaged for so long by the three separate national histories.

John D. Wirth, NAMI co-founder and President, pointed out at the Washington meeting that history is defined

by relationships with others. The global information network that is being developed by electronic technology is making isolation less and less feasible. For Canadians and Mexicans, this raises a common concern: the danger of being overwhelmed culturally by a United States that has tended to be insensitive to the cultural needs and historical realities of its sister American nations.

The incorporation of indigenous peoples into North American national identities was barely touched upon at the NAMI meeting. Mexico has long recognized that out of the interaction of Europeans and Amerindians in the Western hemisphere, a new culture was formed. One manifestation of this is that most people who speak Spanish today are Amerindian in origin. "Mexican" is not synonymous with Spanish, nor "Canadian" with either French or British. What is more, all three share a common characteristic: their national heritage is both European and Amerindian, and both have contributed to the American nations of today.

Centuries ago, long before the arrival of Europeans, Amerindians pointed the way when representatives from various tribal nations, speaking different languages, interacted to establish Xochicalco (in today's Mexico) as a Centre of learning. Today Mexicans have incorporated 30 centuries of Amerindian achievement into their national memory, rather than thinking of themselves as a nation that began with the arrival of the Spaniards. Instead of diminishing their sense of self, this has greatly enriched it. As a conference participant observed, it has had the effect of transforming the phrase "a rich diversity of cultures" into one word - perhaps one should say one nation. Different cultures can live together with varying power relations within a nation, and still function as a unit. This is a challenge that faces all American nations, but particularly Canada at the present.

Culturally, NAFTA has the potential of developing the atmosphere which will allow the three North American nations to continue creating themselves, both separately and within a continental context.

Olive Patricia Dickason is Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Alberta and the author of numerous books and articles.