

HARPER GETS BY WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM HIS (CORPORATE) FRIENDS

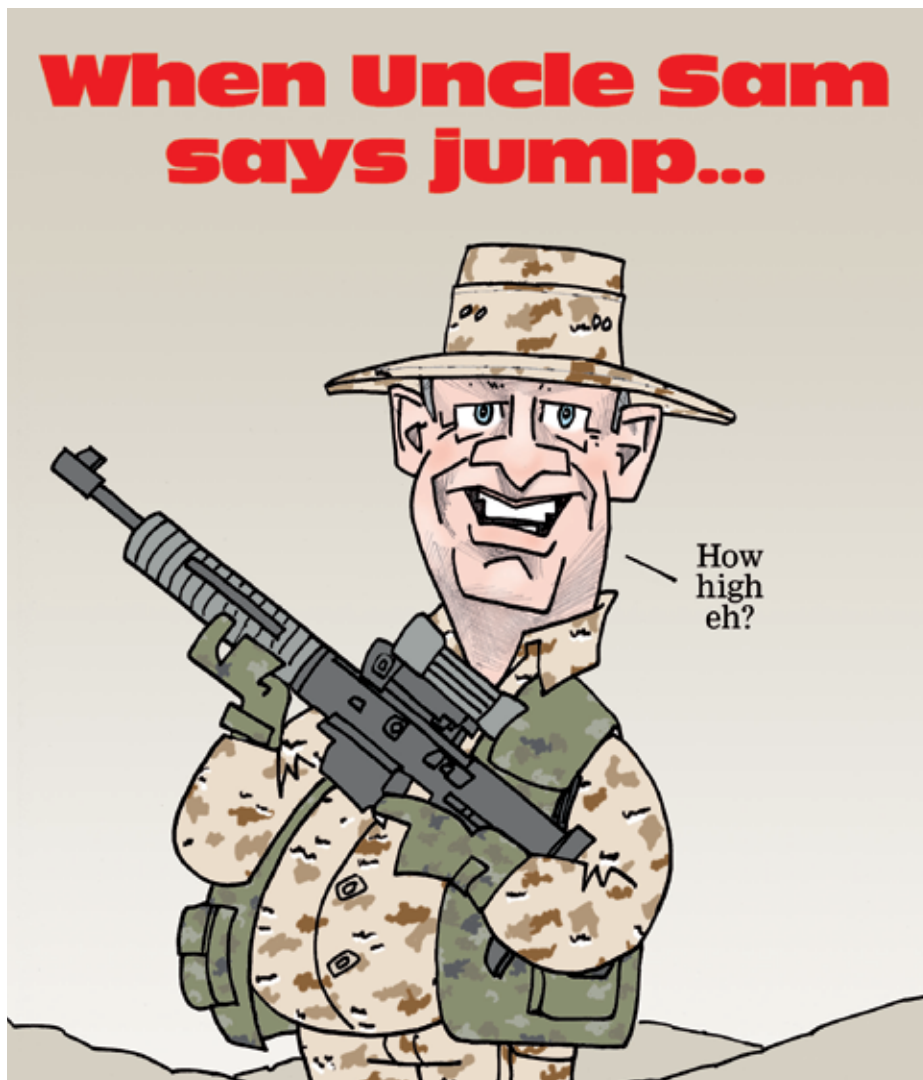
CANCUN SUMMIT WELCOMES CEOS TO THE TABLE

by Jean-Yves LeFort

When Stephen Harper went to Cancun, Mexico, to meet with U.S. President George Bush and Mexican President Vicente Fox, he brought a few friends with him – blue-chip executives from the Bank of Nova Scotia, Ganong, Suncor Energy, Home Depot Canada and Power Corporation, to be exact. While he was busy participating in photo ops beside Mexican ruins (in that infamous fishing vest), Harper apparently let the executives do the real negotiating. By the end of the summit, the three leaders had given corporations a new, permanent seat at the table, creating the North American Competitiveness Council.

WHO ELECTED THESE GUYS?

Multinational corporations have never been big fans of social programs – or of the federal government playing a strong role in the Canadian economy, for that matter. They've promoted the same agenda for over 20 years: small governments, low taxes for business, privatization, and free trade. The Canadian government has been happy to oblige, often implementing policy recommendations taken directly from the Canadian Council of Chief Executives (CCCE), a lobby group made up of 150 CEOs from the most profitable corporations in Canada (many of which are American-owned branch plants). The Conservative government's first budget certainly takes its cue from the CCCE, with its emphasis on corporate tax cuts and reduction in funding for social and environmental programs.



The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and its Canada-U.S. predecessor, the FTA, were developed mostly at the request of big corporations, and for their benefit. We've always known that business has had the ear of the government in a way that ordinary citizens and civil society groups do not.

It's no surprise that the CCCE supports the Security and Prosperity Partnership – they pretty much wrote it. The CCCE released a report in 2003 entitled "The North American Security and Prosperity Initiative." The document called for a North American security perimeter, economic integration, and harmonization of several public policies with the United States.

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Within two years, the three countries delivered, signing the Security and Prosperity Partnership at a meeting in Waco, Texas, in 2005. This led to the development of cross-border working groups that have spent the last year finding ways to harmonize and integrate the three countries' policies for the greater benefit of big business. Officially, of course, it is not about that; it is about making sure that "citizens" are safe and prosperous. Funny thing though — citizens are given no say about what will make them safe and prosperous.

MEETINGS FOR BUSINESS ONLY

The first sign of trouble was the Partnership's decision-making process. The first report in 2005 described it this way: "meetings" for business, "consultations" for stakeholders and "briefings" for Parliament. In other words, business people meet to decide things, then they "consult" with stakeholders, whoever they are, and then our democratically elected Members of Parliament are told what to do.

But the Cancun summit took things a step further. With the creation of the North American Competitiveness Council, the three countries formalized the involvement of the corporate sector in negotiations about Canada-U.S. relations. Let's be blunt: government "working groups" are busy paving the way for the wholesale integration of Canada's security, trade, food and drug regulation, and natural resource policies. No parliamentary debate is taking place whatsoever. And to make matters worse, un-elected corporate appointees are now key participants in this secretive decision-making process. Some have

compared this to asking the fox to build the hen house, and then putting it in charge of security.

Why are things being done this way? Because the people behind the deep integration agenda know that the Security and Prosperity Partnership would never pass the test of public scrutiny. Each leader knows that their opposition at home would assail them if they tried to get a majority of elected representatives to vote on a treaty that purported to do what the Partnership does. So without a whiff of debate, our political leaders are working hand in hand with the richest corporations in Canada to impose the biggest integration agenda that this country has seen since NAFTA was signed 12 years ago.

NO REGARD FOR THE PUBLIC

As Harper commented at the summit's closing news conference, "It's not a case of the leaders of countries seeking to impose [integration] upon society and upon the economy. What it is a case of is the business community, in particular, increasingly inviting us to co-operate more fully and to address a lot of structural inadequacies in NAFTA."

According to Maude Barlow, "Stephen Harper brought Canadian CEOs with him to Cancun and yet there has been no public consultation and no parliamentary debate. He campaigned on 'standing up for Canada' but he has proven, at this summit, that he is standing up for the corporate sector without regard for what the public really wants or needs."

I suppose we shouldn't be surprised. In 1855, when Washington put an end to free trade with British North America, our panicked business class reacted with calls for annexation to the United States. Marketing has evolved a lot since those days. Annexation is so passé; now we call it a Security and Prosperity Partnership.

Jean-Yves LeFort is The Council of Canadians' Trade Campaigner.

BOOTS ON THE GROUND

If you go to www.CanadianAlly.com, you'll see, in the words of the website itself, "an electronic newsletter maintained by the Canadian Embassy in Washington, DC, designed specifically for an American audience . . . The intent is to give American citizens a better sense of the scope of Canada's role in North American and Global Security and the War on Terror."

Along with this website, the *Toronto Star* reported that the Canadian Embassy in the United States has spent \$18,000 to have "huge signs and banners posted in seven strategic subway stations in the District of Columbia and suburban Virginia [to] tout the Canadian contribution in Afghanistan, showing that the fight Stephen Harper calls 'our war' is also meant to curry favour in Washington. The poster features a Canadian soldier, weapon in hand, standing alongside Afghans, with the words, 'Canadian Troops in Kandahar, Afghanistan. Boots on the Ground.'"

A key recommendation from the Council of Canadians' Citizens' Inquiry on Canada-U.S. Relations was that "the Government of Canada should renew and rejuvenate its status as a peacemaker, rejecting participation in unilateral U.S.-led wars." We believe that this is the direction Canada should be taking.

We encourage you to contact Prime Minister Stephen Harper at pm@pm.gc.ca and Ambassador Michael Wilson at canada@canadianembassy.org and demand that the "Boots on the Ground" posters be pulled, that the Canadian Ally website be dropped, and that Canadian foreign and defence policies reflect Canada's commitment to peacekeeping.

—Brent Patterson, Director of Organizing, The Council of Canadians