

OUT OF THE BOARDROOMS AND INTO THE HEADLINES

HOW THE COUNCIL OF CANADIANS MADE THE MEDIA TAKE NOTICE OF THE SPP

by Meera Karunanathan

In recent months, we've seen the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America mentioned in the mainstream press almost daily. We've read reports on secret meetings designed to export our water in bulk to the United States. We've been warned about higher pesticide levels on fruits and vegetables, and read criticisms of a controversial no-fly list that could ground thousands of people and compromise all of our civil liberties.

This summer, we could hardly open up a newspaper without reading about the SPP and its potential consequences on Canadians' day-to-day lives. But it wasn't always this way. Until recently, it was virtually impossible to get the media to take notice of the SPP, and it took months of strategic planning and hard work to pull the issue out of the boardrooms and get it into the headlines.

LIMITED ANALYSIS

When I was first hired as the Council of Canadians' media officer in August 2005, I was surprised at how difficult it was to get the mainstream media to take us seriously. Maude Barlow, our National Chairperson, had been tracking the issue of deep integration since the Canadian Council of Chief Executives first drafted a proposal in 2003 for a "Security and Prosperity Initiative" that would later serve as the blueprint for the SPP.

Her book, *Too Close for Comfort: Canada's Future within Fortress North America*, provided a detailed account of how the CEOs of Canada's largest corporations used the context of 9/11 to launch a plan to integrate the economies of Canada, the U.S. and Mexico.

The speaking tour for *Too Close for Comfort* in the fall of 2005 received decent media attention, but reporters'



Christina Riley

Brent Patterson, the Council's Director of Campaigns and Organizing, being interviewed on the streets of Montebello on Aug. 20.

analysis on deep integration was limited. I remember a phone conversation with Maude after an interview at a television station in Toronto, where she joked, "when I told them about the SPP, they looked at me as if I had three eyes."

It was frustrating that even with the hard facts Maude had compiled in her book, the Council of Canadians was being treated like a group of conspiracy theorists.

SELECTING CONCRETE TARGETS

In early 2006, we concluded that "deep integration" was too vast an issue to tackle all at once, so we decided instead to focus on the Security and Prosperity Partnership, an actual agreement that serves as a vehicle for the deep integration agenda.

Focusing our messaging on concrete issues was crucial not only in our media campaign, but also as a strategy to mobilize other activists. It was hard to get people to hit the streets to protest against regulatory harmonization. But activists started to listen when we told them about the North American Competitiveness Council (NACC), the SPP advisory body that allows big busi-

ness to make policy recommendations behind closed doors.

When U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Homeland Security chief Michael Chertoff came to Canada for a pre-summit meeting in February 2007, we decided we would hone in on the NACC. After all, it highlighted everything that was wrong with the SPP process. Anyone could see the problems with health and safety standards or environmental norms being set by rich corporations.

It worked. The Canadian Press and CanWest News both ran stories about the NACC, which were syndicated in several other papers. Even though the CanWest piece dismissed most of our concerns, it helped raise awareness of who was really driving the SPP agenda.

TARGETING RECEPTIVE JOURNALISTS

After months of reaching out to journalists who seemed receptive, an editor at the *Ottawa Citizen* showed interest in the SPP and deep integration. When we managed to obtain a leaked document proving bulk water exports would be discussed at an April tri-national meeting in Calgary, we gave it to a reporter at the *Citizen* who had shown an interest in our work. Kelly Patterson's investigative piece about the North American Future 2025 Project and its relationship to the SPP ran in every CanWest paper in the country, including the *Montreal Gazette*, the *Calgary Herald* and the *Vancouver Sun*.

Having a mainstream journalist follow this issue was vital. Suddenly, the SPP and bulk water exports were at the forefront of Canadian news. This put the Conservative government on the defensive.

Prime Minister Harper told the media his government was not involved in the

Calgary meeting or any discussions related to water exports. We later found out that the Canadian government delegation had been stopped at the airport on their way to the above-mentioned meeting. Environment Minister John Baird's office issued a factually incorrect press release in a feeble attempt to reassure the public that Canada's water was safe from bulk water exports. But Canadians knew better, and they started to put the pressure on the government to ban bulk water exports and open up the SPP to public scrutiny. Their efforts continue today.

BROADENING THE OPPOSITION

One of the frustrations that the Council of Canadians and many other progressive groups face is the mainstream media marginalize our opinions, characterizing them as being unrealistic or "ultra-nationalist." But we are stronger when we work with our allies to prove that there is a broad consensus out there that opposes the SPP and deep integration.

In March 2007, we worked with labour organizations, environmental groups and

academics in a massive public education effort that showcased the range of opposition to the SPP. This culminated in our Integrate This! teach-in, which brought hundreds of people together to challenge the SPP and promote a more sustainable vision for the relationship between Canada, the U.S. and Mexico.

We launched a similar initiative in August, on the eve of the Montebello leaders' summit, bringing together representatives of all of the major opposition parties at a public forum aimed at denouncing the SPP.

In the days leading up to the Montebello summit, the Council of Canadians' criticism of the SPP was picked up in almost every daily newspaper in the country. We spoke on national radio shows such as CBC Radio's *The House* and *The Current*. We were repeatedly on *Global National News*, CBC television's *The National* and *CTV National News*. Maude Barlow and other Council representatives were interviewed on local radio shows across the continent. We even

managed to take our message beyond Canada through BBC World's television and radio networks, National Public Radio in the United States, Radio France International, Agence France Press and Radio Canada International.

The quality of the coverage on Montebello was mixed. As with other major anti-globalization protests, we were frustrated to see conflicts between protesters and the riot squad take centre stage as some of the key issues were overlooked.

But with all four opposition parties now criticizing the SPP – including Liberal leader Stéphane Dion, whose party crafted the agreement in the first place – neither the media nor the Harper government can dismiss our criticisms as marginal any more.

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