

BACK TO SQUARE ONE?

CORPORATE ELITE WANT A NEW SPP BUT POLL SHOWS CANADIANS OPPOSE CONTINENTAL INTEGRATION



By Stuart Trew

It was probably the most secretive Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP) summit yet. Journalists were offered nothing beyond painstakingly staged press conferences to help flesh out the fourth annual meeting of North American leaders, which took place in New Orleans April 21 and 22. Not surprisingly, the media reported nothing much happened at the summit, that the SPP has stalled, and that the real story was U.S. President George W. Bush, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Mexican President Felipe Calderón's defence of NAFTA in response to calls for renegotiation from the U.S. Democrats.

For possibly the first time in SPP history, the journalists got it right.

Members of the Council of Canadians' Windsor chapter participated in a mock funeral procession to mark the death of Canadian sovereignty in protest of the SPP summit taking place in New Orleans.

According to an article in *Maclean's* magazine, many of the business leaders on the elite North American Competitiveness Council didn't bother to show up (although those who did got an hour and a half of President Bush's uninterrupted attention). And despite renewed executive-level political support for the SPP's projected harmonization of Canadian, American and Mexican border security, energy and regulatory policies, no new plans were announced this year.

Is there something to celebrate here? The answer is yes ... no ... and maybe so.

CANADIANS ARE OPPOSED TO THE SPP

The SPP is clearly not dead, as Canadian columnist John Ibbitson prematurely proclaimed after the Montebello SPP summit last August. But public opposition in all three countries – particularly in Canada – has mortally wounded it. This is good news.

According to an Environics poll conducted for the Council of Canadians in April, Canadians are overwhelmingly opposed to the main tenets of the official “security and prosperity” agenda.

Instead of energy integration, 89 per cent of Canadians want an energy policy that protects the environment and Canadian supplies, and would support limits on exports and foreign ownership.

Instead of regulatory harmonization of pesticides and toxic chemicals, 87 per cent support independent environmental, health and safety standards.

And rather than including water in SPP discussions, 88 per cent of Canadians want a national policy that would ban bulk exports and recognize water as a basic human right – something the Liberals and Conservatives have been unwilling to do at the United Nations.

Most importantly, 86 per cent of Canadians want the SPP agreement brought to Parliament for a full debate and vote.

In other words, there is no democratic mandate in Canada for Prime Minister Harper to continue the secretive SPP discussions with his American and Mexican counterparts.

The bad news is that the Prime Minister isn't listening. Rather than cease all further SPP talks until the agreement can be debated, or even open up these annual summits and periodic SPP working group sessions to public scrutiny and input, the Harper government has endorsed yet another corporate brainstorming session to develop a post-SPP bilateral agreement with the United States.

DUSTING OFF SOME “BIG IDEAS”

On April 21, as the fourth SPP summit was getting under way in New Orleans, a review body composed of academics, government officials and private sector representatives was set up to develop a post-U.S. election (November 2008) strategy for approaching Canada-U.S. relations. To be clear, this is not an all-party committee or anything nearly so democratic. Instead, a handful of free-trade ideologues have been asked to develop Canadian foreign policy.

The players involved are as familiar as will be the conclusions of their summer discussions. Derek Burney, a former ambassador to the U.S. who now sits on the boards of directors for both Shell Canada and TransCanada Pipelines Ltd., will be a strong voice for further energy integration, arguably the U.S. government’s major priority in the SPP. And Thomas D’Aquino, the Canadian Council of Chief Executives’ (CCCE) top corporate lobbyist, will probably fill in the details. He gave us a hint of what those would be at a lecture in Ottawa this past March.

Canada should respond to U.S. concerns about NAFTA’s effect on workers and the environment with “a winning strategy,” said D’Aquino in a speech organized by Carleton University’s Norman Paterson School of International Affairs. “It requires a compelling vision, a big idea that will motivate Americans and Canadians alike to redefine their co-operation with one another in 21st century terms.”

Sounds like 2001 all over again. In fact the “big idea” he’s talking about involves exactly the same components he and his business associates infused into pre-SPP documents like the CCCE’s Security and Prosperity Initiative, and the Council on Foreign Relations’ Task Force on the Future of North America. Even though recent Statistics Canada data show the poor getting poorer, the rich getting richer and the middle class stuck in neutral as a result of the course of free trade with the United States,

D’Aquino is again promoting intensified integration.

We need to move the U.S. border (and U.S. border agents) into Canada through a network of pre-clearance stations, said D’Aquino. We need regulatory convergence in most policy areas, a new binding legal infrastructure for handling international disputes, and a common external tariff. We also need a common security perimeter, U.S. police officers in Canadian enforcement teams, and joint military bases for the air and naval defence of North America, he said.

Thus the post–New Orleans shift toward a bilateral SPP with teeth.

SOVEREIGNTY IS IMPACTED BY CONTINENTAL INTEGRATION

In his speech this March, D’Aquino concluded that a new bilateral agreement with the United States is crucial “because a significant number of the more far-reaching proposals I have discussed in the context of the new big idea cannot be implemented trilaterally – at least not in the near term. Mexican concerns about sovereignty would not allow it ...”

As the Council of Canadians’ Environics poll in April 2008 proves, Canadian concerns about sovereignty and democracy also should keep further integration talks from continuing, whether tri- or bilaterally. But they are continuing, without any of the parliamentary checks and balances you would expect from a democratic nation.

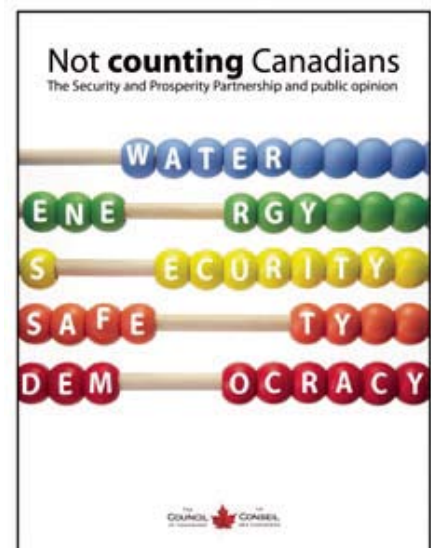
Despite widespread public opposition, Prime Minister Harper has significantly intensified the pace of regulatory harmonization with the United States in the areas of food, drugs, pesticides, toxic chemicals and consumer product safety. He has further undermined Canada’s energy security by allowing the approval of several new pipelines to carry tar sands crude to U.S. refineries, despite the environmental costs. And he continues to undermine the real security of Canadians through U.S. law enforcement and military pacts, hopelessly

flawed cross-border no-fly lists, and integrated biometric databases that put our privacy at risk.

So should we celebrate the fizzling out of the SPP just yet? If only we could. Unfortunately the “security and prosperity” agenda will be rehashed again and again by Canada’s corporate and political ideologues unless we continue to fight it in all its forms.

The good news is that NAFTA renegotiation – a strong possibility if the Democrats are elected in the United States – is not a threat to Canada, but an opportunity to confront and then reverse the course of integration being plotted through secretive SPP meetings. The challenge for us is to be ready and organized when the next U.S. president comes knocking on Canada’s door with his or her own “big ideas” for North America.

For the full results of the Council of Canadians’ poll, visit www.canadians.org and click on the report “Not Counting Canadians: The Security and Prosperity Partnership and Public Opinion.”



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