

The SPP Is Dead, So Where's the Champagne?



by **Stuart Trew**

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Protestors take to the streets at the North American Leaders' summit in August opposing expanded integration plans through the Security and Prosperity Partnership.

Stuart Trew

In October 2007, *Globe and Mail* reporter John Ibbitson predicted that a then two-year-old effort to deepen and expand NAFTA called the Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP) would die unless North American leaders put some backbone into it.

Too much of the discussion was happening behind closed doors, wrote Ibbitson, himself a big supporter of the SPP and one of the only journalists to ever write about it in the Canadian media. “If you’re going to negotiate freer trade,” he said, “sing it from the rooftops. Keep the media informed. Make it a Big Deal.”

Well, governments didn’t sing (or not loudly enough) and they barely informed the media, and it fell to alter-globalization and social justice movements in Canada, Mexico and the United States, including the Council of Canadians, to highlight its many flaws. As a result, the NAFTA-plus agenda died at the latest North American Leaders’ summit in Guadalajara, Mexico, August 9-10, 2009. We killed it. And we should be singing that from the rooftops.

So why the stage fright? Maybe it’s because things don’t feel all that different. Many of the SPP’s underlying principles – integrating energy and electricity markets, jointly policing the continent against Osama bin Laden and other common perceived threats, and cutting regulations to help businesses make more money – remain in place as official North American priorities after Guadalajara.

The lack of media attention might also be killing our buzz. But should we really let this oversight, from a tri-national press corps that missed the SPP’s corporate conception in 2003, its official birth four years ago, and almost every major initiative since, stop us from dancing in the streets?

Maybe we’re distracted by the odd persistence of the name “Security and Prosperity Partnership” in Liberal Party press releases, and desperate statements from corporate lobbies trying to keep the SPP agenda alive. But let’s try to see the former as grief (the SPP was a Liberal creation) and the latter as a sign of perhaps our most significant victory: the end of the North American Competitiveness Council (NACC).

Before Guadalajara, there was a lot of speculation about whether North American leaders Barack Obama, Stephen Harper and Felipe Calderón would extend another invitation to the NACC, that blue-chip panel of powerful North American CEOs, which had for the past two years submitted reports to leaders directing them on where to take the SPP dialogue.

The NACC was institutionalized in June 2006 “so that the work will continue through changes in administrations,” said former U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez. And “directing” is not too strong a word to describe the panel’s relationship to the SPP process. Access to information requests by Saskatchewan blogger Joe Kutchta in early 2008 uncovered proof that the Canada



LEFT: Activists used street theatre as a way to get their messages across during North American Leaders' summit held in August in Guadalajara, Mexico. **ABOVE:** Stuart Trew, Council of Canadians trade campaigner, (left) and John Dillon of Common Frontiers (right) were members of the Canadian contingent in Mexico fighting for public involvement in SPP negotiations.

Border Services Agency was under pressure to respond to business sector priorities for the department.

Unfortunately for the CEOs, neither the SPP nor the NACC could survive a change in U.S. administration. Perhaps still waiting for an invite to Guadalajara, and clinging desperately to a powerful but now useless moniker, the NACC meekly offered North American leaders one last five-page report about the evils of protectionism.

"We and the business communities we represent trust that our advice to date has assisted Leaders in choosing priorities and driving progress," it said. "Going forward, the NACC stands ready to offer our ideas and expertise, and we hope the three governments will continue to consult with the NACC."

The NACC may continue to exist. It might even meet every now and then to dream up new priorities for the three North American governments. But we have successfully robbed these CEOs of their privileged spot inside North American summits. Heck, our leaders even opened the door a crack to broad public consultation on annual summit priorities.

There was a legitimate concern prior to Guadalajara that Obama would simply continue the SPP under a different name. One authoritative report from the Brookings Institution even recommended that. And we know that some NAFTA/SPP working groups will continue to operate. An example is the North American Biotechnology Initiative to develop a

common regulatory environment for genetically engineered crops.

But the fact remains that the SPP as a venue for North American integration, like the Free Trade Area of the Americas as a venue for hemispheric integration before it, has perished.

This presents challenges and opportunities for human rights and environmental groups, civil liberties and social justice organizations, farmers, and unions that had come together, often across borders, to fight the anti-democratic Security and Prosperity Partnership. We may not have a big target to thump away at any more, but the separation of trade and security policy under the Obama administration helps us shed more light on the injustices perpetuated by both.

The de-linking of Mexico from the Harper government's vision of North America also opens up room for targeted solidarity work with Mexican groups fighting the militarization of drug and border enforcement under the Merida Initiative. (Harper's contribution, announced in Guadalajara, of RCMP training for Mexican police, on top of the new visa requirements for Mexican travellers, makes this solidarity work even more important.)

Furthermore, a new space has opened up for a reinvigorated civil society push to renegotiate NAFTA.

Obama has, in a way, gone back on his promise to enter into discussions about renegotiation within 100 days of being elected. If you read carefully his state-

ment before Guadalajara, the President says he still wants to strengthen the labour and environment side agreements by possibly bringing them into the body of NAFTA, but that now is not the time to do it. We can't give up that space so quickly, even if we know deep down that now is the perfect time to renegotiate NAFTA, when the old "free trade" model bears so much responsibility for the current economic downturn.

Finally, as Canadians, the death of the SPP (and the change in U.S. administration that preceded it) forces us to focus more on our own government. Former U.S. President Bush provided a convenient target to embody all the evils of NAFTA expansion through the SPP. In the new dynamic it's Harper and Calderón playing "free trade" bullies to Obama's more pragmatic approach to economic development – an approach that encourages investment in America's local and national economies even at the risk of appearing "protectionist."

It's definitely time to regroup and rethink. But please let's do it with a bottle of champagne – even if it's one from the cheap shelf. The SPP is dead and we killed it.

Let's recognize what we have achieved, and then get back to work.

Stuart Trew, Trade Campaigner for the Council of Canadians, was in Guadalajara, Mexico, for the North American Leaders' Summit. To read more about the SPP and see our latest report on the issue, visit www.canadians.org/integratethis.