

“The Ugly Canadians”: Ottawa imposes Visas on Mexicans travelling to Canada

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On Bastille Day (July 14th), I went to see the pathetic situation at the Canadian embassy. Two weeks earlier on Canada day July 1st, all seemed quite normal, even though, I was not invited to indulge or partake on this festive occasion, in the succulently fresh Atlantic lobster flown in from Halifax, at a cost of about 50\$ a piece to the taxpayer, as was the case during my more respectable reporter days in Prague during the 1990s. Yet in view of the current dreadful state of bilateral relations between Canada and Mexico, being invited to the “French house” in the Mexican capital, to celebrate their national day instead, was quite fine with me. Anyhow on Tuesday, the super scoop that Ottawa was going to slap visas on all Mexicans travelling as of Wednesday July 15th, to Canada eluded us all; even my very astute and well connected Mexican media colleagues were surprised by this shocker.

When I arrived by taxi around 1 P.M local time this Tuesday, it was a dismal scene to be seen, which reminded me of similar situations which I had witnessed, when in post communist Europe, outside the Canadian embassy in Sophia or Bucharest. Outside the embassy gates leading to paradise were guarded by well dressed goons. There was absolute confusion and chaos or a mini sort of hell there. Angry, irate frustrated crowds unable to get their visas in time for their flights out, with looks of exasperation greeted me. “Are you Canadian?” one woman asked me anxiously. I replied positively with a hint of hesitation and quickly flashed my old press card, issued some time ago in the great white north by a “pure wool” semi sober Quebecer, who still runs the provincial journalists’ guild and who after years still can barley pronounce or even spell a foreign sounding name like my own.

There I was in this sort of no man’s land. I felt like a persona non grata among angry throng of Mexicans. But then I could not gain access to the embassy either, whose main entrance was blocked by the fuming and frustrated locals, who if provoked to the slightest degree, looked as if they might turn into a raging mob and lynch me. Mexicans or those so called North American “amigos”, Canada’s close commercial NAFTA partners after all, are now being shunned, rejected, spurned by incompetent bureaucrats and politicians fanning the flames of anti immigrant sentiment back in Ottawa, as if they were Soviet refugees during the cold war days or European Jews fleeing Hitler. The Mexican who welcomed me here many times, who awarded me with an honorable mention for my reporting on Canadian environmental predations in Belize during the Chalillo dam affair, were now being ignominiously treated by Ottawa’s finest diplomats with such utter and scandalous contempt and disrespect.

They were being humiliated and portrayed publically like lepers, or worse than their compatriots fleeing to the “land of the free”. Being mistreated like those thousands of temporary Mexican migrant agricultural workers or serfs, who are unceremoniously

expedited each year by the Canadian government to toil and sweat in the fields and farms of Ontario and Quebec . Mexicans who are exploited shamelessly and silently by their unscrupulous employers in the Northern country. And then forcibly returned to Mexico , sometimes sick or dying from cancer due to overexposure to deadly pesticides during their indentured stay in Canada .

In this discontented crowd, I spoke to an elderly couple, who told me they came to do the paperwork for their children who lived in Monterrey . I looked around for some Canadian colleagues to speak with and exchange information and facts. But there were none to be seen. This important news story would surely get big news coverage, if it were a diplomatic dispute between the French, or the Chinese or even the Czechs who have also been slapped in the face with a visa by Ottawa . Perhaps in the Canadian case, it was deemed unimportant by newspaper and electronic media editors in Toronto or Montreal to cover this highly embarrassing imbroglio. Or perhaps it was such an obvious and shameful proof of how dysfunctional Canada 's immigration and refugee policies had become over the years and hence it would be preferable not to cover this story from here at all?

But then, there was always the convenient official excuse that Ottawa could come up with whenever it wanted a total blackout on news emanating from here or elsewhere in the world diplomats were trying to cover up their government's dirty deeds: those dreaded budget cuts. Indeed there was hardly any more coverage from Mexico or Latin America for that matter, since Ottawa cut funding to the national broadcaster (CBC/Radio Canada) forcing it shut down, its last remaining regional bureau. And with good reason, so Canadians won't be aware nor see, just how reviled they are in Mexico and in the rest of Latin America due to their government's perfidious malfeasance.

Chaos under the Maple leaf

I was told by the aspirant travelers that the apparently underfunded and understaffed Canadian consulates in Mexico are unable to issue the prized visas for the thousands for Mexican waiting travel to the land of the "Maple tree". The procedure can only be done in Mexico City . This fact enraged the Mexicans even more. As for appearances, the embassy here, reminded me of a building which looked ominously like the ministry of Information in Bagdad under Saddam Hussein, I visited back in 1990. It resembles an above ground bunker or part of a prison block or a dark brown rectangular monolith designed by an Albert Speer copycat. One of the ugliest Canadian embassies I have ever seen abroad, unlike the more stylish and elegant ones in Paris or Moscow or Washington . Inside, the compound paper pushers were most likely frantically running around, overwhelmed by a backlog of visa applications, unable to process them all in time.

Outside, I saw what appeared to me to be young embassy employees, perhaps from Moose Jaw or Medicine hat Alberta, who mumbled something in semi literate Spanish or barely understandable English to the distraught Mexican students, or retired couples waiting for permission to enter Canada as tourists or temporary visitors. The red and white maple leaf flag which usual flutters above such foreign representations, was oddly absent or gone; as if the flag had disappeared or maybe was lowered from its mast and folded or maybe even discarded in haste and in shame, perhaps at nighttime as not to attract any attention, before the new visa restrictions were made public . By contrast, the nearby Australian embassy had its flag flying high. Despite the fact that Canberra had already imposed visas on Mexicans, before the Canadians, the embassy from "down under" was almost quite, calm

as if business was being conducted in the usual manner inside.

Canadian gringos in Mexico

My own situation here is tenuous. My Canadian passport had expired in June and Air Canada cancelled my flight back in May due to the influenza pandemic and I was unable to leave the country back then. Hence maybe I am already contaminated with the deadly virus, and practically stranded here, but thankfully for me, on a still valid tourist visa. In this context of rapidly deteriorating relations, I am almost considered as an outcast by the natives, coming from an enemy nation, stuck in a country, which my own government has branded to almost be a pariah state, or as integral and key member of the H1N1 human virus "axis of evil", which exports deadly ailments abroad by means of its migrating citizens. This must be stopped! Luckily, I still have a Canadian citizenship card and a Medicare card which proves, I am from the land of cute and cuddly seals which federally funded hunters, bludgeon to death each spring. I am from the land of the "maple syrup" as is referred to here so fondly and sweetly here. But alas, the bitter fact is, I am also from the land of "tar sands" in Alberta. A place transformed by big oil with the help of Ottawa, into a huge open air toxic sludge filled cesspool. I am from the land of a reactionary right wing conservative government which sees lots of political gain from imposing visas on evermore undesirable peoples coming to Canada to apparently take advantage of its very liberal refugee policy and overly generous welfare policies.

Canada's open door policy comes to an end.

For all the years I have lived and travelled abroad which about half my lifetime, it always struck me how Canada portrayed itself in the world. As if it was a multicultural paradise on earth. Unlike old xenophobic Europe or imperialist America, but more of a kindly and gentle place that is highly receptive country to the miserable masses of the planet seeking the peace and bliss of Arcadia. In search of a "good news" story, I would at times visit those recruitment fairs which advertised their services on huge display placards on the streets of Mexico City or in the local publications. The events would be held at the "World Trade centre", such as the one in Mexico City held each year, or in a big posh hotel conference hall in Istanbul, Santiago or Jakarta perhaps. There would be "information sessions" on how to come to Canada. Many Mexicans are willing to shell out a handsome amount to these scam artists and charlatans who offer expert immigration advice on how to obtain the necessary immigration papers and landed immigrant status to stay in Canada.

The reality of course once you arrive, is quite different from the pep talks many get at this semi official (sponsored at times by the Canadian embassy) orientation sessions. Many of those potential migrants or recruits to Canada with their university degrees and marketable skills in hand, would often find themselves unemployed or unemployable, six months later and several thousands dollars poorer, after their arrival in the dreamland of the North driving taxis in Toronto or delivering pizza in Montreal to make ends meet. Their hopes and dreams of a better life bitterly disappointed perhaps dashed forever. In November 2008, I sat in a Montreal convention centre as part of the Bouchard Taylor commission (which was supposed to lessen frictions between newly arrived immigrants and old time residents resentful of the influx in hard economic times). I listened intently to the bitter tales of woe and complaints of neo Canadians, who came from the Middle East or Africa but who could not get a decent job or ever practice the profession they studied in their country of origin in their new adopted homeland. These were indeed heartbreaking tales.

Canada's dirty little secret is big news in Mexico

Perhaps it's the timing of it all. But Canada is getting lots of bad press here lately. This week splattered on the front page of the influential daily " La Jornada " was a well documented yet scathing article about Canadian mining activities in this country. The headline in the midst of the bilateral diplomatic row denounced the fact that more than 70% of all mining operations are owned and operated by Canadian based firms, which systematically destroy the local land, poison the water supply with harmful chemicals (using cyanide and mercury to extract ore, gold and silver) and imperishing communities while driving them off their land too. This is old news. I have been covering this for years, but now it finally front page material. Canada has been plundering and fleecing Mexico of its mineral wealth since the NAFTA was signed in 1994. Of course not all can be blamed on Canada ; this is done with the active knowledge and complicity of Mexican government officials. But having spent years investigating and campaigning against Canadian mining operations abroad, I found it odd it not a bit too coincidental that the media has suddenly obtained official government documents and other such information just as the Canada Mexico diplomatic tiff worsens. Local government officials, it seems, have declared war on Canada in the Mexican media.

The tiff becomes a full blown crisis.

This week Mexico imposed visa restrictions on Canadian functionaries travelling to this country. The tit or tat visa war goes on. The ugly Canadian including me perhaps had better keep a low profile while in Mexico from now on. Thankfully, I have dual nationality and an EU passport from a country which still maintains excellent ties with Mexico . My advice to the Canadian tourists coming here to enjoy a cheap brew and get a suntan, or dig a big hole in the ground looking for gold, is to remove the Canadian flags sewn to their backpacks or those attached to their cheap Canadian tire brand baggage. Being Canadian abroad especially in Mexico now as it descends furthermore into a vortex of self mutilating violence is nothing to cheer or gloat about these days. My advice to my fellow Canadian is just to stay invisible, if you can, until this crisis passes over, just like the Canadian embassy officials are doing so far with little success. In the mean while I will pretend to be an American. But then, that's very easy for Canadians abroad.

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