

The View from Europe
By David Jessop

CELAC: a new hemispheric political force?

In a few days time, leaders of European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean will meet in Santiago de Chile.

Among those from Europe confirmed to be there on January 26th and 27th are the French Prime Minister, the German Chancellor, the Spanish Prime Minister, the European Commission's President, the President of the European Council, and Europe's Trade Commissioner.

As far as Latin America and the Caribbean are concerned, most Heads of Government will attend.

From a European perspective the event is intended to give a new impetus to cooperation and to build common positions on global issues. Europe's interest is also on the business opportunities the event may bring from what the EC sees as the fast-growing, emerging market of Latin America. There will also be in the margins, discussions on implementing Europe's recent free trade agreements with Colombia and Peru and with Central America, plus exchanges aimed at trying to move forward an EU Mercosur agreement. There will be a separate EU-Cariforum meeting.

Despite this euro-centric focus and the usual obscure and vague language in accompanying news releases, this meeting may have significance for the hemisphere that justifies the huge costs associated with the event.

What may set this meeting apart is that the hemispheric interlocutor will be the EU's relatively new counterpart for Latin America and the Caribbean, CELAC; a body that is wholly a construct of the South.

Established in 2010 out of the Rio Group, CELAC reflects a desire to reduce the overwhelming influence of the United States on the politics and economics of Latin America and to lessen the influence of institutions such as the Organisation of American States, (OAS) that, in their origins, were constructs of the cold war. Unlike the OAS, which includes the US and Canada but excludes Cuba, CELAC, the Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños, consists of all 33 nations in the Americas other than Canada, the US and the territories of European nations.

Although the grouping has been championed by left leaning Latin nations, it represents a broader desire to establish a political framework based on the similarities in thinking between member nations, and a desire to authentically represent the views of the southern part of the hemisphere to a world in the process of change.

The body, which has had relatively little media coverage in the English speaking Caribbean, is perhaps best known for the decision taken in 2011 by all of its members to support Argentina's 'legitimate rights in the sovereignty dispute' over the Falklands/Malvinas and its surrounding maritime spaces.

That decision, which took the United Kingdom by surprise, ended Britain's belief that it could always count on the support of the nations of Caricom, while making clear that CELAC was a potentially powerful new hemispheric voice for the South.

Although Europe may be approaching the meeting from the standpoint of its traditional global economic and social agenda, its encounter with CELAC offers the opportunity for a quite different dialogue based on the growing economic strength of Latin American nations.

What is far from clear, however, is how much of the Caribbean will benefit from the event when it lacks the economic dynamism to make it attractive; is not moving at the same pace as Latin nations; has failed to integrate or implement new trade relationships; and is in danger of being eclipsed by its Latin neighbours in almost all respects other than its voting weight.

For the last decade China, the European Union, the United States and multilateral institutions have been developing policies that describe the Latin American and Caribbean as if it were a single entity; wishing to see the LAC region, as they describe it, as a coherent political or economic whole.

The reality is very different. Cariforum in comparison to Latin America is fragmented and without contiguous borders, so cannot easily benefit from closer economic integration; is vulnerable in ways that large nations are not; has been slow to negotiate or implement its own treaties with Europe in the form of the EPA and the recent strategic partnership agreement; has members including Belize, Guyana, Suriname, the Dominican Republic and Cuba that are rapidly and maybe in time preferentially deepening economic, security and transport links with Latin neighbours; and for the Anglophone part of the region has a history and culture that leads the region to argue for separate and special treatment.

That said, CELAC's emergence accords with nations like Cuba and the Dominican Republic seeking to find ways to enlarge the space in which they might operate with others hemispherically and internationally.

It also coincides with private exchanges between a number of senior Caribbean figures who are concerned as to where the region positions itself in the next decade.

Their starting point is to characterise the Anglophone part of the region as being driven by the past rather than the future, unable to overcome its fragmented nationalism, with institutions seemingly unable to deliver rapidly integration and change. They see this as the reason why the region as a whole lacks coherence in its international relationships, why it failed in the 1990s to identify a Caribbean response to the Washington economic consensus and is now unable to define an identifiably Caribbean response to changes in the global location of power.

Put another way this informal debate considers traditional ties, observes global economic change, the growing global economic role of China, India, Brazil, Russia, oil rich states and sovereign funds and asks why for the most part, the Anglophone Caribbean remains so focussed on its relationship, with the old world and has not as a region updated its thinking.

Although CELAC offers the Caribbean a new and broader political vehicle through which it can address the concerns that it shares with its Latin neighbours, this is not enough. It is up to the region to show how the new body, through its high level encounter with Europe, can add value to the needs of the Caribbean and Latin America, and can relate this back to the needs of those who pay for their leaders to attend such events.

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