

Broken friendships

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Four hundred years ago, a failed attempt was made to blow up King James I, most of his family and all the Lords and Commons of England who were assembled in Parliament. In essence, the plan was to destroy the Protestant monarchy and return the country to Catholicism. Ever since, the failed attempt, on 5th November 1605, is celebrated in England by firework displays and bonfires.

Perhaps in South America, the world's most Roman Catholic continent, the populace could identify with the seditious plot. Certainly, last 5th November saw bonfires in South America. However, these were lit by protestors when a failed attempt was made by the US president to convince South Americans to adopt a free trade policy during the Summit of the Americas meeting held in the Argentine seaside resort of Mar del Plata.

Unfortunately, the 2005 summit (the first was held in 1994) was spoiled by a clear division between those (including Mexico, Central America, Colombia and Chile) who support Washington's aim to create a free trade zone stretching from Alaska to Chile, and those (including Brazil, Argentina and Venezuela) who do not. It was Benjamin Disraeli who said that "finality is not the language of politics" and 29 of the 34 countries represented did agree that talks on the free trade zone should continue this year. The significance, however, lies in the fact that three of South America's biggest economies (Brazil, Argentina and Venezuela) were the principal objectors.

The situation was exacerbated by the US negotiators focusing only on trade rather than addressing poverty and joblessness and then insisting that a deadline be set for resuming trade talks. But Brazil and Argentina, with the region's most efficient farmers, have no assurance of gaining access to the US market. Trade

discussions, particularly with those two countries, will, indeed, be a hard field to hoe.

H. G. Wells said that "the path of social advancement is, and must be, strewn with broken friendships". The tiff over trade has weakened ties between the US and Brazil and Argentina at a time when regional stability is a real issue, mainly because of Venezuela. Last year, a high-level bipartisan US delegation, led by representative Henry Hyde, chairman of the congressional International Relations Committee, arrived at Simón Bolívar airport in Caracas "on a mission to seek ways to reduce strains in the increasingly troubled relationship" between the two countries. However, the delegation left never even having made it to the terminal after being kept on the aircraft by customs officials for two hours. Compare this with the arrival, less than 24 hours earlier, of Spain's defence minister who passed through the airport's VIP channel and was escorted by an official motorcade to meet Hugo Chávez. Truly, for Henry Hyde's delegation, it was a flight of fancy.

The incident occurred just a few weeks after the Mar del Plata meeting where the protestors also voiced the deep resentment shared by many South Americans over the Iraq war. They see both the war and the hoped-for free trade zone as examples of exploitation of natural resources and people. Hugo Chávez, addressing over 10,000 demonstrators in the seaside resort, stoked this fire of resentment with the support of Diego Maradona, the legendary former Argentine football star. Maradona, a self-confessed cocaine addict, no longer plays football and has embarked on a new career running a popular television show which has featured interviews with famous personalities, including his close friend, Fidel Castro. It seems that he is still playing ball – only the game has changed.

Hugo Chávez can draw comfort from the fact that the frosty relations between the US and both Brazil and Argentina are working in his favour. Sergio Berensztein, a political analyst in Buenos Aires, believes that Argentina's president, Néstor Kirchner, who is imbued with a radical leftwing ideology, is becoming more isolationist and is drawing closer to Venezuela. Mr. Chávez has already bought hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of Argentine bonds (to date almost a third of all debt issued) and has supplied Argentina with fuel oil to alleviate a domestic energy crisis.

Argentina has had its share of eccentric presidents (think Perón) and this president from Patagonia is no exception. Perhaps it is the fact that Patagonia is so close to the Antarctic which accounts for the silver-haired, former debt-collector's cool demeanour and less-than-warm relations with George Bush. Concerning awkward relations, the election of Evo Morales as president of Bolivia will not help either. He is a former leader of the coca growers' union and is the first representative of Bolivia's majority indigenous population. More importantly, he is a staunch ally of Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro. His first foreign trip as president-elect at the end of last year was to Cuba.

On his way home from the disappointing Summit of the Americas meeting last November, President Bush stopped off in Panama which, by contrast, must have seemed a balm to his soul. During his short stay, he was allowed to operate a set of locks that controls the flow of water which assists ships to transit the country's famous canal. Perhaps by operating a few political levers with precision he can generate a flow of more positive dialogue between Washington and South America. It will be needed.

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