



Poetry in motion

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In March, President Barack Obama flew to Latin America, an event which I wrote about in last month's column, and in April, Brazil's president, Dilma Rousseff, made her first long-haul trip to China, her country's biggest trading partner. It seems that both trips highlight each president's trade priorities in this first half of 2011 and, at the same time, speaks volumes about the change in the order of things, reminding me of King Arthur and the lucid poetic lines written by Lord Alfred Tennyson: "The old order changeth, yielding place to new,/And God fulfils Himself in many ways,/Lest one good custom should corrupt the world."

The United States of America, in its own best political and economic interests, needs to re-engage with Latin America, especially with Brazil which has moved into the international arena. China, of course, is but one (albeit the largest) of several important international trading relationships that the Brazilian government is developing. In doing so, however, the greatest hurdle facing Brazil is its stifling bureaucracy and the state's high level of inefficiency. The country ranked 129th out of 183 countries (a ranking worse than Nigeria's) in a World Bank Doing Business report.

I wonder what the US president's own private thoughts are following his visit to the region? He went to three countries (Brazil, Chile and El Salvador) and in each case it was for the first time. The way that many, probably the majority of people, if not the president, in the US view Latin America can be illustrated at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts which has a new four-storey addition housing "Art of the Americas". There are 53 galleries containing over 5,000 objects but if you wish to see art from ancient Central and South America it is necessary to visit the basement. Whilst US items from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries are of much interest, the Americas truly historical artefacts are surely the wonderful Mayan painted pottery (250 – 900 AD) and the magnificent sculptural gold jewellery from Colombia and Panama – not to mention the Peruvian fabrics from the first millennium.

Perhaps the art of diplomacy being practised by President Obama, as he seeks to improve relations with South America's population of 580 million people, will feature more prominently. President Obama once said of former Brazilian President, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, "I love this guy"; whether in time this sentiment will extend to President Rousseff remains to be seen. In many ways Brazil and the US share similarities: both countries are the size of continents in the western hemisphere with federal democracies and also powerful state governments; they were colonised by small European seafaring nations and gained independence within 50 years of each other. Both can claim melting-pot populations although, as I have written before, Brazil has probably achieved the most successful blend between the two; one astute commentator has observed that there are no hyphenated Brazilians. Conversely, whereas the US fights international wars (the President's stay in El Salvador was cut short in order to return to Washington to deal with the Libyan crisis) Brazil does not; the South American country is left-wing and where the US passionately espouses the virtues of unrestrained capitalism, Brazilians favour its markets to have government involvement.

Intellectually, Brazil has been previously influenced by France and by the UK in its economic thinking. It was, therefore, an unfortunate situation that three days before the US president en famille arrived in Brazil, the host country played its non-interventionist card and joined China, Germany, India and the Russian Federation in abstaining from the United Nations Security Council vote to approve military action against the Libyan government, recalling Harold Macmillan's answer when, as UK prime minister, he was asked what he most feared: "Events, dear boy, events".

If Brazil shares any common ground (besides profit) with China it is probably pragmatism – especially in politics, and recent events in Libya and the Middle East have also shown China's commitment to keeping a low profile. I have quoted Deng Xiaoping, the former Chinese politician, statesman, theorist and diplomat before and suggest that it is propitious to do so again: "Keep a cool head and maintain a low profile. Never take the lead – but aim to do something big".

Professor Yan Xeutong, director of the Institute of International Studies at Tsinghua University, says that China wants to avoid the label of superpower seeing it "as a trap to exhaust our limited resources". The current US administration which recently employed its military machine in North Africa can appreciate this – as should the European Union. The US president's expansive gestures on display during his recent Latin American tour were a positive signal, but eventually Brazil and Chile (China's biggest trade partners in the region) might, in the end, mirror Professor Yan's view on future co-operation between his country and the US: "We are not friends. We are business partners".

When the US president moved on from Brazil to Chile, the address he delivered in Santiago served as a platform for his message to the whole of Latin America. He spoke of the importance of the region to the prosperity and security of his own country. And while, in an Orwellian moment and a nod to Animal Farm, he said: "There are no senior partners or junior partners, only equal partners", will reality support the rhetoric? "We are all Americans" he declared and not so long ago, with momentary hands of friendship stretched across the sea, these words came from the lips of many Europeans after 9/11, before the advent of freedom fries. Unfortunately, President Obama's speech was light on substance and did not live up to the optimistic seeds planted during his attendance at the Summit of the Americas in Trinidad in 2009; rather than moving forward, it seems he was treading water. The right things were said (as they were in Brazil) but there was not much in the way of new policy announcements.

When the former UK prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, first saw São Paulo's skyscrapers she is supposed to have said: "Why has nobody told me about this city before?" She never visited Panama but since then representatives of successive UK governments often display

similar wonderment on their first trip to Central America's powerhouse. In a similar context the US president said in his Santiago speech that it was time that the world recognised Latin America's status as a dynamic and growing region. Much of the world already has and it behoves the sole superpower; its congress and senate, to do the same.

The fates conspired to make his final stop, El Salvador; somewhat of a damp squib. Besides being cut short, no major new initiatives were announced, which left the US ambassador in San Salvador, Mari Carmen Aponte, stressing that her president's visit had to be viewed in more than monetary terms. The day after the visit Moody's downgraded the country's credit rating. But benefits there were, and despite his left-wing roots, President Mauricio Funes, who does not share the same opinion of the US as his Venezuelan counterpart does, is seen as an important part of Central America's defences against the Chávez doctrine; so a US visit to strengthen security ties was worthwhile.

Chile, which established diplomatic ties with China in 1970, was the first Latin American country to sign a free trade bilateral agreement upon China's entry into the World Trade Organisation, recognising China's new economic status. Chilean president, Sebastián Piñera, paid a three-day state visit to Beijing last November during which three economic co-operation agreements were signed. This was his first visit to China as president and he said he was "full of passion" to see relations with Beijing continually improve. The Chilean president referred to pragmatic co-operation and it is pragmatism, not puffery, that needs to be applied in relationships with Latin America.

Edmund Burke, 18th-century Anglo-Irish politician, orator and political thinker, vehemently opposed the French Revolution but not America's. In dealing with the US colonies he urged the British government to be less inflexible and be more realistic, accepting, and adapting to, the inevitability of change, as King Arthur did. Americans on both continents, but particularly their governments, should contemplate Burke's argument that "All government, indeed every human benefit and enjoyment, every virtue, and every prudent act, is founded on compromise and barter".

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