

More balanced debate needed on North American integration

The theme of the June-July issue of *Policy Options* is North American integration, one of the IRPP's many research areas. Each of the contributors on the topic, save perhaps Laura Macdonald, share the premise that further integration is inevitable. Bill Dymond and Michael Hart write "Canada has no choice but to develop and nourish the highest degree of cooperation with its neighbour" and many of the articles discuss what form enhanced cooperation should take, with George Haynal writing about doable specifics and Sidney Weintraub of big ideas.

The work of the IRPP in the area of North American integration - the holding of conferences, the commissioning of papers, and this issue of *Policy Options* — is an important contribution to the mandate of the Institute in fostering discussion but perhaps not to wider debate. My current, and recent, research project is to explore and understand the future of Canada in North America. And the work of the Institute is an indispensable resource. Perhaps I am out of date and still hostage to the arguments of the free trade debate of 1988 but it comes as a shock to learn through an institute devoted to "nonpartisan research" that the debate is over and building upon NAFTA is inevitable.

The work of the Institute in this research area, perhaps unintentionally, seems to fit what Laura Macdonald in her article describes as "Recent widespread circulation of proposals by corporate actors and conservative think tanks on deepening North American integration." Macdonald argues that if these proposals are to go ahead attention must be paid to other voices in civil society. As she says, the last time

integration proposals came up, those voices almost derailed free trade.

Maybe the premise of much of the Institute's focus in this area is flawed. Maybe further integration can't happen while affirming sovereignty, maybe the US does pose a constant danger to Canadian sovereignty, independence, and cultural identity. And maybe the IRPP is not taking into account the full range of civil society voices — those calling for human rights, environmental security, and democratic participation. If that is the case then perhaps the IRPP is presenting itself not so much as a loci where debate can be joined but as a vehicle in advancing one side of the debate.

How could such a situation arise? The Liberals have been in power a long while and think tanks have a tendency to have particular relevance as nodes of influence, employment, and leadership for those no longer at the centre of government policy making. The president of the IRPP has called for Canadians to overcome their "contagion of self-doubt and insecurity" and to plan for an elected North American Assembly in an article in *Inroads* titled "North American Community: A prospect to excite and inspire." The director of the Institute's work on North American integration is the author of an IRPP paper "Deeper, Broader: A Roadmap for a Treaty of North America" which is billed by the Institute as the "IRPP's Proposed Treaty on North America."

The IRPP on this issue may have moved further than it intended from being a neutral and balanced contributor to informed public debate and closer to Laura Macdonald's characterization of a generator of "proposals by

conservative think tanks on deepening North American integration."

A former economic nationalist and prominent Liberal and a former NDP premier have articles in the issue and both see managed integration as inevitable and desirable. So perhaps the suggestion of 'conservatism' is off the mark. Yet such contributions are perhaps insufficient to overcome a perception that, in general terms, the IRPP finds itself as a source of succour on this issue to the right wing of the Liberal Party and to Conservatives as surely as left Liberals and the NDP find support for their views in the work of the Council of Canadians.

In the middle of an election campaign Stephen Harper proposed Canada build on NAFTA and pursue deeper integration by preparing for a customs union. In power, he will implement policy in part collated and developed by the IRPP.

For a significant body of Canadian opinion the jury is not in on the merits and desirability of ongoing integration in North America. Which for some is understood as integration with the United States. The IRPP's efforts in this area — as manifest in its related conferences, papers, and the June-July issue of *Policy Options* — are invaluable to discussion. But the debate is not over, and the IRPP is not capturing all of the debate — maybe it is too polarized to be under one tent. Yet there is no issue more important for Canada, and to bring what are still two sides of the debate into a constructive exchange could perhaps on this issue be the IRPP's highest calling.

*David M. Dymont has a Ph.D. from the Université de Montréal and is a research affiliate at the University of Ottawa.
david.dymont@sympatico.ca*