

CANADA EUROPE POLICY BRIEFING

Fifteen Years of Neglect and Distraction

By Paul Wells

You know what makes no sense? The mutual incomprehension that too often colours Canada-EU relations—that's what.

If Canada has a natural ally in the world, it's...well, yes, you're right, it's the United States. But surely it's not greedy to want more than one? And if Canada has another natural ally, then surely it must be Europe. So many Canadians' cultural roots lie there. Not only the British and French founders, but the waves of German, Italian, Hungarian, Polish and other immigrants who followed. Even the immigrants from Africa and Asia whose own home countries had British or French colonial histories. Put us all together and we're practically family with that great Union across the ocean.

But it's not just family interests and folkloric traditions that link us, or should. Europeans are rich. There are a lot of them. They work, produce, buy, enjoy culture, high and low. When they look at the rest of the world they see the same challenges we do. And yet. Over the years I've grown used to meeting European diplomats who've slowly realized, a few months into their stay here, that they're in for a pleasant, quiet time—undisturbed by hard work because their Canadian hosts are barely aware of their presence among them.

kingpin, isn't he? I mean, nothing gets decided without his say-so, from what I'm told." This guy was clearly a lot more plugged in than the average *Globe and Mail* reader.

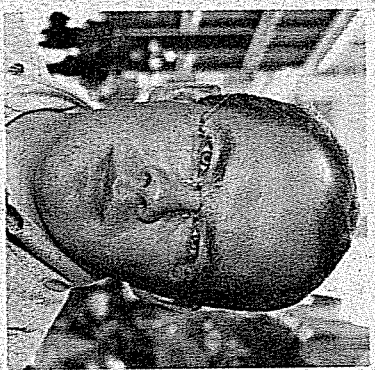
Meanwhile back in Ottawa...
Once while he was Opposition leader, Stephen Harper paid a visit to a European diplomatic delegation. (I am being indiscreet here, because the list of Europeans Harper would ever have visited is not long.) Talk soon turned from bilateral concerns to Canada-EU matters—because to a European, there's often no significant distinction between the two—and Harper started chatting about "Europe." It soon became clear that his understanding of European institutions was about three decades out of date. He went home with gentle suggestions for a reading list to get him up to speed.

Now the thing about Harper is you can be nearly certain he read and remembered that homework. But he's not the first Canadian leader to be out-of-date or off-track in his understanding of Europe. In fact, since the dawn of post-Maastricht Treaty Europe, near the end of 1993, Canada has been led by a succession of prime ministers with only a shaky understanding and an intermittent interest in what's going on in Europe. And we've all paid a price for that.

Maastricht replaced the European Community with a Union that would soon have a common currency and, for many members, a border-free interior (the Schengen

zone). The level of economic integration required by these changes is formidable, and the level of legal and regulatory integration to accompany it meant that more than half the laws passed by member states' parliaments are now designed to harmonize internal practice with EU norms.

Hello! Hellooooo? Any Canadian politicians left with us? No, I didn't think so. We always skip the required reading. To skip over the fine print, then, every country in Europe became significantly less autonomous and a lot more "European" after 1993. So Europe grew deeper even as it was growing bigger, adding Sweden, Poland, Romania and a host of smaller countries. The EU as an institution, with its sometimes arcane rules, but also with its incredible human and economic potential, should have grown all the bigger in



Paul Wells.

the Canadian political idea space.

Should have.
In Brussels, Jean Chrétien was seen as a man in love with French politics, too often to the exclusion of other European countries and with anecdotes about De Gaulle and Pierre Mendes France, and I don't want to paint him as a yesterday's man in general but Europe changed long after he'd formed his ideas of Europe. He never bothered to catch up. The agenda for the twice-annual Canada-EU summits was invariably stultifyingly technical and boring. This annoyed the Europeans, who meet only annu-

ally with most of their other partners but who get a lot more done at those meetings.

In foreign affairs, as in other domains, Paul Martin was more interested in what was next than in what was actually going on. He was obsessed with China and India—his speechwriter started calling them "Chindia" in conversation. But what are Chindia? Only this: Hundreds of millions of people who may soon have a massive, highly educated, globally-connected consumer class. The kind Europe already has. Europe today looks a lot like the Asia that so fascinated Martin, but nobody could get his attention.

Well, anyone could get his attention, but nobody could keep it.
Harper is a Realist, an Anglosphere Man, a Get-Things-Done Kind of Guy. He has no patience for froo-froo stuff like Brussels, with its Commissions and its weird rites. He made a show of cancelling the first Canada-EU summit after his election because he didn't find the agenda worth his time. But then strange things started happening. His beloved Australians failed to re-elect his friend John Howard. The Iraq war stalled and Afghanistan, a burden he was happy to inherit, turned out harder than anyone expected. Harper discovered Canada could use friends. But the transatlantic relationship has suffered from a decade and a half of neglect and distraction.

Europe has grown up while Canada has grown apart. The opportunity cost—the things we could be doing together, but aren't—is enormous. Maybe one day soon a Canadian prime minister will figure that out.
Paul Wells is the senior columnist at *Maclean's* magazine. He recently returned from a year in Paris.
editor@embassy.mcg.ca