

ACID RAIN: A CASE STUDY IN CANADA-US RELATIONS

Brian Mulroney

On the 21st anniversary of the signing of the Canada-US Acid Rain Accord, Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird and Environment Minister Peter Kent co-hosted a reception in the Lester B. Pearson Building at which former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney spoke of the decade-long political struggle for action on acid rain. More than a political and environmental milestone, the acid rain story is an important case study in Canada-US relations.

À l'occasion du 21^e anniversaire de l'Accord Canada-États-Unis sur la qualité de l'air, le ministre des Affaires étrangères John Baird et le ministre de l'Environnement Peter Kent ont donné une réception où l'ancien premier ministre Brian Mulroney a retracé la décennie de combat politique pour une action concertée sur les pluies acides. Plus qu'un simple jalon politique et environnemental, cet épisode aura marqué l'histoire des relations canado-américaines.



On March 11, 1981, when Ronald Reagan visited Ottawa for the first time as president of the United States, he was greeted by thousands of protesters on Parliament Hill. They shouted and held placards that conveyed a single powerful message: “Stop Acid Rain!”

Thirty years ago, acid rain was at the top of the Canadian public policy agenda. Canadians were literally shouting at the rain. But it wasn't even on the American radar screen.

Flash forward to March 13, 1991, 10 years almost exactly to the day from President Reagan's visit, when the first President Bush and I signed the Acid Rain Accord in the Reading Room of the Centre Block on Parliament Hill.

In 10 years, we went from yelling at one another, to talking to one another, to negotiating with one another, to making an important agreement with one another.

Now, as we celebrate the anniversary of the Accord signed 21 years ago, acid rain is no longer a public policy issue. Not only has the dispute been resolved, the problem has been solved.

And the question is, how was it done?

Well, we simply wouldn't let go of it. We got in the Americans' face about it at every bilateral meeting until they realized we were serious about it, that we meant it, and that we wouldn't go away until we had dealt with it to our satisfaction.

I regarded it as a litmus test of Canada-US relations, and said so to both Presidents Reagan and Bush. In fact, on a visit to Ottawa in January 1987, then Vice-

President George H.W. Bush said he “got an earful on acid rain.” He certainly did.

Even then, it took seven years from the time I first raised it with President Reagan in 1984 until the moment we signed the Acid Rain Accord in 1991.

And then at the Shamrock Summit in Quebec City in March 1985, President Reagan agreed to an envoy process on acid rain. He appointed his former transportation secretary, Drew Lewis, as his envoy, and I appointed former Ontario premier Bill Davis as Canada's. They reported directly to the president and the PM.

With the appointment of such outstanding and influential envoys, for the first time, things started to move. Up to then I thought President Reagan was just being polite in hearing me out. Now he had engaged. When the president engages, the White House engages, and when the White House engages the entire administration engages.

On January 9, 1986, the special envoys released their report recommending as a first step that the US invest \$5 billion to create more efficient technology for clean burning energy, especially coal. Then on March 19, 1986, during our Shamrock II Summit in Washington, President Reagan gave his full endorsement to the report of the special envoys.

But while we were talking to the Americans, we were taking action with the provinces and industry, implementing the Clean Hands Policy of leading from the front.

First, in February 1985, even before the Shamrock Summit, we got an agreement with the seven provinces east of Saskatchewan to reduce sulphur dioxide emissions by 50 percent, by 2.3 million tonnes from the base year levels of 1980 by 1994. We did this within only six months of taking office.

Then we told industry they had to clean up their act. For example,

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the Inco smelter at Sudbury was the biggest producer of SO₂ emissions in Canada. When we told them they had to cut emissions by half, they told us they'd go out of business. But we held the line and guess what, they commercialized the sulphur and their profits went up instead!

There were two reasons for adopting the "Clean Hands" approach. First, it was the right thing to do. And second, it provided strong empirical evidence against the argument in Washington that the only reason we wanted an acid rain cleanup was so that Canada could sell the US more clean hydro-electricity.

This was the view held by Senator Robert Byrd, the Senate Majority Leader who was from West Virginia, a coal-producing state.

In April 1987, the *New York Times* captured his adamant opposition in a timely headline: "Byrd opposes legislation to curb pollution that causes acid rain." The story reported: "Robert C. Byrd, the Democratic leader, said today that acid rain 'is not an emergency' and denounced legislation proposed to control the sources of the pollution that causes it." This is what we were up against on Capitol Hill.

To this day, the coal lobby remains extremely powerful in Washington, one of the reasons progress is so difficult on climate change. For example,

the coal-fired energy industry in America produces a carbon imprint more than 50 times the size of the Canadian oil sands. You don't hear that from celebrity demonstrators in Washington.

Things would improve remarkably when George Mitchell became Senate majority leader in 1989, at the same time the first President Bush took office. This was a happy

coincidence. Though he was a Democrat and Bush was a Republican, they had two things in common: they were both committed environmentalists — Bush had said he wanted to be known as "the environmental president" — and both had homes in Maine, one of the states most seriously damaged by acid rain.

But I'm getting ahead of the story.

There are three elements to Canada playing an important role on the environment: first, leading by example, claiming the high ground; second, engaging the Americans at the highest level of government; third, involving industry in solutions.

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Winston Churchill had foreseen this in a brilliant speech in 1939. He described our relationship and the promise it held this way: "That long frontier from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans, guarded only by neighbourly respect and honourable obligations, is an example to

every country and a pattern for the future of the world."

This unique relationship so carefully nurtured by some prime ministers and governments was then leveraged exponentially by them vis-à-vis other nations whose support for Canada and its initiatives was affected by the perceived high personal regard in which the prime minister of Canada was clearly held by the president of the United States and the consequent influence we enjoyed throughout the administration and Congress.

This special relationship of two great nations was based on shared fundamental values — liberty and democracy — and we did not hesitate to defend them from attack. There are reminders of that from the trenches of one war to the beaches of the next, places inscribed in the history of valour, where Canadians and Americans have fought together, where Canadians and Americans have died together in the defence of freedom.

No prime minister expressed this better than Lester B. Pearson, whose name graces this building and who wrote in his memoirs: "We should exhibit a sympathetic understanding of the heavy burden of international responsibility borne by the United States, not of her own imperial choosing but caused in part by the unavoidable withdrawal of other states from certain of these responsibilities, or, if you prefer, from imperial power and privilege. Above all, as American difficulties increase, we should resist any temptation to become smug and superior: 'You are bigger but we are better'. Our own experience, as we wrestle with our own problems, gives us no ground for any such conviction."

It is amusing to note that, in some Canadian quarters, friendly relations with the president of the US are viewed with scorn and alarm. A relationship that leaders of other

nations would treasure is derided by these same critics — supercilious and uninformed as they are — as subordination, unworthy of an independent nation.

Frank Carlucci, President Reagan's national security adviser and secretary of defense, describes in an oral history project at the University of Virginia how testy

net officials and senior advisers behind closed doors in the living room at 24 Sussex and amended his speech to Parliament slated for that afternoon.

For the first time ever, he wrote that he "agreed to consider" a bilateral agreement with Canada over acid rain and added a promise "to inject new impetus" into talks regarding

Canadian positions on important questions of public policy.

The Clean Hands approach also gave us moral leverage when I was given the high honour of addressing a Joint Session of the US Congress in April 1988.

Here's what I told them: "You are aware of Canada's grave concerns on acid rain. In Canada, acid rain has already killed nearly 15,000 lakes, another 150,000 are being damaged and a further 150,000 are threatened. Many salmon-bearing rivers in Nova Scotia no

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President Reagan became when his officials continued to stall and stymie my government on issues ranging from acid rain to Arctic sovereignty to free trade:

According to a recent account by Jeffrey L. Chidester, Research Director for Presidential and Special Projects at the University of Virginia, before entering 24 Sussex during a state visit in 1987, President Reagan took Carlucci aside and said: "I think we should do something for Brian." Whereupon Carlucci said: "Mr. President, we're doing well holding our positions on acid rain, the free trade agreement and the Northwest passage." "Oh, no, no, no," said Reagan, "we ought to do something."

Chidester writes, "After lunch, Carlucci continued to push for the American position. 'I said [to the president] no, no, we're holding to our positions. These are well established positions.

"It was the only time I saw Ronald Reagan lose his temper. He turned to me and said: 'you do it.' Carlucci went right from the meeting and grabbed Derek Burney, Mulroney's Chief of Staff and asked: 'Derek would you re-iterate your positions [on acid rain, trade and the northwest passage?]' When Burney asked why, Carlucci said: 'Because they're our positions now.'"

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net officials and senior advisers behind closed doors in the living room at 24 Sussex and amended his speech to Parliament slated for that afternoon.

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Canadian positions on important questions of public policy. The Clean Hands approach also gave us moral leverage when I was given the high honour of addressing a Joint Session of the US Congress in April 1988. Here's what I told them: "You are aware of Canada's grave concerns on acid rain. In Canada, acid rain has already killed nearly 15,000 lakes, another 150,000 are being damaged and a further 150,000 are threatened. Many salmon-bearing rivers in Nova Scotia no longer support the species. Prime agricultural land and important sections of our majestic forests are receiving excessive amounts of acid rain."

And here's where the Clean Hands came in, allowing me to put the onus on the Americans to act. "We have concluded agreements with our provinces to reduce acid rain emissions in eastern Canada to half their 1980 levels by 1994. But that is only half the solution — because the other half of our acid rain comes across the border, directly from the United States, falling upon our forests, killing our lakes, soiling our cities."

I continued: "The one thing acid rain does not do is discriminate...It is damaging your environment from Michigan to Maine and threatens marine life on the eastern seaboard. It is a rapidly escalating ecological tragedy in this country as well. "We acknowledge responsibility for some of the acid rain that falls on the United States. Our exports of acid rain to the US will have been cut in excess of 50 percent. We ask nothing more than this from you."

I left the Joint Session of Congress with this question: "What would be said of a generation of North Americans that found a way to explore the stars, but allowed its lakes and forests to languish and die?"

That is why I am confident in the future of our most important bilateral relationship. Both Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Foreign Minister John Baird have the skill, tenacity and perspicacity to persuade the American leadership to accept the value of many



McGill University photo

Former President George H.W. Bush and former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney at a McGill University conference in 1999. Their partnership was crucial to producing the Acid Rain Accord, signed in Ottawa on March 13, 1991.

Fortunately we averted such a damaging verdict of history, by forging ahead until we got an agreement.

In addition to raising acid rain at five annual meetings with President Reagan, including the G7 summit in Toronto in 1988, I also scheduled meetings with George Bush when he was vice-president, both in Washington and Ottawa.

I invested heavily in my relationship with George Bush, and we have remained very close friends

over 30 years to this day. There were three reasons why I spent so much time with him when he was vice-president. First of all, I liked him a lot. He was and remains a highly principled and accomplished man whose presidency added to the lustre of America's great international achievements. Second, I thought he was going to win the Republican nomination and the presidency in 1988 and I wanted Canada to have a privileged relationship with him.

And third, he cared about the environment and the acid rain file.

And I knew that if we were going to get it done, it would be on his watch as president.

There were two things that stood out about George H.W. Bush. First, he knew his files cold. He didn't just take his brief, he knew his brief, and he knew the acid rain file better than any of his officials.

And second, by the time he became president in 1989, he had

served as vice-president for eight full years, and arrived in his office with a fully formed agenda of what he wanted to do in the White House.

And one of the things he wanted to get done was an acid rain accord with Canada.

After he took office, and just before his first State of the Union Address, he called me and

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said he wanted to come to Canada on his first foreign visit, and we quickly arranged for a working session at 24 Sussex.

He also told me on that call that he had gone to Camp David with a briefing book that dealt with nothing but acid rain. And when he came down from that mountain, he was clearly determined to press ahead.

And he did, even later during the recession of 1990-91, at a moment when the environment would normally have fallen off the table as a priority in Washington or, for that matter, in Ottawa.

There was a lot of resistance from inside his own administration. His chief of staff, John Sununu, opposed action on acid rain, even though he came from New Hampshire, one of the states most affected by it. The vice-president, Dan Quayle, was the chairman of the Competitiveness Council, and he was hearing a lot of opposition from the business community to our proposed actions.

President Bush was having none of it. When he came back from that weekend at Camp David, he told his team: "We owe this to Canada. We owe this to the Mulroney government, which has been pressing this issue on us now for five years nonstop.

And we owe it to our common environment to do this."

On his visit to Ottawa on February 10, 1989, standing at the front door of 24 Sussex, President Bush stated his "determination to move forward with setting limits (on acid rain pollutants) with legislation and then moving to a discussion with Canada leading to an

accord that I think will be beneficial to both countries."

It was everything we had been asking for, and he delivered, big time. On June 12, 1989, President Bush proposed amendments to the US *Clean Air Act*, which would be, in his own words, "a comprehensive program to provide clean air for all Americans." He proposed to reduce SO₂ emissions by 10 million tonnes from 1980 levels.

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It took another year before the legislation passed. But in the end, for an issue that had been so contentious, it wasn't even close. On October 20, 1990, the US Senate passed the amended House bill by a margin of 89-10. On October 26, the House passed it by a margin by 401-25.

Finally on November 15, 1990, President Bush signed into law amendments to the *Clean Air Act* and established the Acid Rain Program. The Act would cut emissions by nearly 10 million tonnes by 2000.

And then on March 13, 1991, President Bush and I signed the bilateral *Air Quality Agreement*. This was

the Acid Rain Accord, but it was more. As the Parliamentary Research Bureau noted in a 1998 paper: "The significance of the Agreement is much broader than acid rain in that it establishes a framework for dealing with other trans-boundary air pollution problems."

Thus, it could well serve as a template for a bilateral accord on climate change, as it has on other cross-border air issues.

The bilateral accord built on both the US *Clean Air Act* of 1990 and the Canadian Acid Rain Program of 1985. The goal of 50 percent reduction of SO₂ emissions below 1980 levels in Canada had been set for 1994.

As the Parliamentary Research Report notes: "That goal was met ahead of schedule in 1993."

As it happens, that was the year I left office.

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excellence in relations between Canada and the United States.

Today's young people are the inheritors of a bountiful land, whose pristine beauty and resources have been preserved and enhanced by our action on acid rain.

Today — many years later — that fact gives me enormous personal satisfaction.

Brian Mulroney was prime minister of Canada from 1984 to 1993. Adapted from a speech delivered at the Lester B. Pearson Building on March 13, 2012, the 21st anniversary of the Acid Rain Accord between Canada and the United States.