
Triumvirate: A North American Interparliamentary Innovation

by Christine Fréchette

Eleven years have passed since Canada, Mexico and the United States adopted the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Since then, trade has increased dramatically. U.S. trade with its North American neighbours has more than doubled. Exports within the North American region, as a percentage of total exports from the three countries, jumped from 30% in 1982 to 58% in 2002. Travel among the three countries has also increased significantly, with more than 400 million people crossing the two North American borders in 2004. Despite the economic and strategic importance of the North American region to the NAFTA partners, the politicians did not find it necessary when the free trade agreement was signed to establish any mechanisms for consultation and coordination to manage NAFTA's successes and failures and guide the integration process as it developed. However, strengthening our economic and societal ties cannot be effectively managed by market forces alone. This article covers the Triumvirate event, an initiative of NAFI, a non governmental organization. This project was imagined as a potential political cooperation mechanism for NAFTA partners.

In March 2005 at a summit in Waco, Texas, the American and Mexican presidents and the Canadian prime minister expressed interest for the first time in meeting regularly and increasing trilateral dialogue. Parliamentarians, for their part, continue to meet only occasionally through friendship groups, which never bring together representatives from the three countries at once. However, establishing a regional economic block such as NAFTA should require the constant attention of policy-makers; if only to address the many trade, security and development issues that arise.

On the initiative of the North American Forum on Integration (NAFI), universities in Canada, Mexico and the United States set a precedent by holding the first North American model parliament, called Triumvirate, in May 2005. Based in Montreal, NAFI is a non-profit organiza-

tion devoted to developing dialogue among those interested in the future of North American relations and identifying strategies to reinforce the North American economic region.

Over five days, 70 students from 10 universities simulated a meeting of Canadian, American and Mexican legislators from federal and federated states. Through the Triumvirate, NAFI gave the youth the opportunity to participate, in a constructive way, in the renewed North American dialogue.

With the Triumvirate initiative, NAFI has created an interparliamentary consultative model within the scope of the North American political structure that meets the need for political coordination mechanisms. In this context, NAFI invited university students to bring the model to life by simulating a meeting based on the constitution and rules of procedure that they prepared.¹

Christine Fréchette is the President and founder of the North American Forum on Integration (NAFI).

A One-of-a-Kind Event

Unlike other model parliaments where participants simulate the functioning of real organizations, participants in the Triumvirate had the opportunity to break new ground by simulating a meeting of a nonexistent, at least for now, parliamentary assembly.

Indeed, the Triumvirate is more a parliamentary innovation than a parliamentary simulation. It is this novel aspect that makes it especially interesting.

Given the constraints of the North American political structure, the model developed by NAFI is not a North American copy of the European Parliament or a supranational structure. Rather, the Triumvirate is an interparliamentary assembly uniting representatives of existing parliaments.

In this context, a meeting of legislators from the three federal parliaments might have seemed ideal. Yet this approach seemed inadequate, since North American integration affects an entire range of sectors extending well beyond the traditional area of foreign affairs. Indeed, are there any sectors still today that can ignore the existence of NAFTA?

North American integration impacts a number of government and legislative sectors, from transportation and energy to the environment, trade, education, immigration and agriculture, to name only some. Many of these sectors fall partially or entirely under the jurisdiction of federated states. It therefore seemed important, or rather essential, that these sectors be represented within the Triumvirate.

This approach is well suited to the North American political framework, which is made up of three federations. It also gave a voice to binational border regions, which were and continue to be the driving force of integration, dealing with transborder issues daily.

NAFI therefore adopted a parliamentary model composed of members representing the three federal legislative assemblies and 100 federated legislative assemblies.² Within the Triumvirate, legislators from the federal assemblies of Canada, Mexico and the United States sit side-by-side with representatives of federated states, such as California, Ohio, Nuevo Leon and Alberta.

One of the advantages of this approach is that it allows a wide range of regional and national interests to be discussed, while fostering the creation of political alliances between various regions that are not necessarily neighbours or part of the same country but that share common interests.

Within the Triumvirate, some governments were represented by more than one legislator, so as to ensure



Student participants came from American University, Carleton University, Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económica (CIDE), École nationale d'administration publique (ÉNAP), Harvard University, Instituto Mexicano de la Juventud, Simon Fraser University, Tecnológico de Monterrey, Campus Estado de México, Universidad de Monterrey and Université de Montréal.

some degree of proportional representation. A purely proportional representation model was ruled out from the beginning, since it would have resulted in a huge imbalance among the three countries — keep in mind that the United States' population is ten times greater than Canada's and three times greater than Mexico's.³ NAFI preferred to use a model that reflected, to a certain degree, the demographic differences between the North American countries.

The Canadian federal legislature had three delegates, the Mexican federal legislature had six, and the American federal legislature had nine. Each federated state was entitled to one delegate, plus one additional delegate per population of ten million people. Accordingly, California (4), Florida (2), Illinois (2), Mexico (2), Michigan (2), New York (3), Ohio (2), Ontario (2), Pennsylvania (2) and Texas (3) were entitled to more than one delegate.

Because the Triumvirate was not a parliament but an interparliamentary assembly, it was agreed that the delegates would not debate bills, but draft resolutions, which would act as recommendations and then sent to the parliaments whose representatives made up the Triumvirate. The draft resolutions adopted by the Triumvirate therefore had only political, not legal, significance. This choice respected the North American political dynamic, which is rather resistant to supranational political assemblies.

Two months before the event, each legislator had to send NAFI a draft resolution for the political commission

to which they were assigned. Based on the drafts submitted, NAFI prepared and sent the legislators the official resolutions to be debated during the meetings, which were held under the honorary chairmanship of Mr. Raymond Chrétien.⁴

Throughout the week, legislators discussed issues in plenary sessions, which took place in the Senate Chamber of the Parliament of Canada, and in political commissions. These meetings were punctuated by caucus meetings, which brought together legislators from the same country and same legislative level.

The chosen themes had to relate to real political concerns and pertain to at least two of the three North American countries. Four themes were discussed this year: the creation of North American trade corridors, immigration, the use of renewable energy and NAFTA's chapter on investments. To date, immigration has never been a subject of trilateral discussion. Yet this theme turned out to be by far the most popular among participants. Some may think this indicates that future generations will be more forthcoming when approaching more sensitive issues. Only time will tell.

Resolutions were not passed based on the majority support of all Assembly members. All three countries had to give their support before the draft could go forward. Moreover, for the reasons outlined above, each resolution had to have the support of a majority of federal and federated delegates.

As a result, six majorities were required for a resolution to be adopted officially by the Assembly: a majority of each group of federal legislators and a majority of the group of federated legislators, for each of the three countries. This multiple veto formula fostered dialogue among countries and legislative levels, promoted consensus-building and led to the creation of solid trilateral alliances. Despite this particular method of voting, all four draft resolutions submitted by the commissions obtained the required majorities in the General Assembly.

To introduce legislators to the power relationship between elected representatives and lobby groups, lobbyists were directly involved in the simulation and mandated to influence the views of legislators toward the goals of the organizations they represented. In so doing, NAFI wanted to give a voice to stakeholders such as

businesses, which were and are a driving force behind integration, and to groups that feel they have no voice in NAFTA discussions. This also drew legislators' attention to the many interests that they must balance in their decision-making.

A team of five journalists reported the Triumvirate's highlights throughout the week. Partners and Web surfers could follow the progress of the debates by reading the daily *TrilatHerald*, issues of which are posted on NAFI's Web site (www.fina-nafi.org).

Utopia or a Real Possibility?

Was the simulation a far-fetched idea? Not according to Canadians. A CROP survey commissioned by *L'Actualité* in August 2002 found that 54% of Canadians already foresee a North American parliament; this figure jumps to 62% in Quebec. The day is maybe not that far off when parliamentarians realize it is in their interest to take a more active role, like federal government officials are now doing, in debates on North American relations.

Perhaps the Triumvirate will set the stage for a North American parliament in the relatively near future. At any rate, it appears that a group of 70 university students are now convinced of the exercise's value and are better equipped to understand and meet the challenges of North American integration. Almost all of them hope to repeat the experience again, and that is why preparations are currently underway for a second edition, to take place in the United States or Mexico in the spring of 2006.

Notes

1. All working documents prepared for this project are available in English, French and Spanish on NAFI's Web site (www.fina-nafi.org) under the Triumvirate section.
2. The 100 federated states are divided among the three countries as follows: Canada 13, United States 55, and Mexico 32.
3. Canada's population is approximately 33 million, Mexico's population is 105 million and the United States' is 295 million.
4. Mr. Chrétien is a strategic advisor at Fasken Martineau and Chair of the Board of Directors of CÉRIUM, an international studies centre at the University of Montreal. He is the former Canadian Ambassador to the United States and Mexico.