

## Conspiracy theorists given a free run at continental pact

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An inept public relations strategy has led to raging hysteria from critics in Canada and the U.S. about a common-sense effort under way to strengthen the position of North American business and ensure continental security.

The Security and Prosperity Partnership was first conjured up in March 2005 at meeting in Waco, Texas, of George W. Bush, Paul Martin and Vicente Fox. One year later in Cancun, Bush, Fox and newly elected Stephen Harper announced a North American Competitiveness Council to help implement the continental strategy.

Then, last September, a subsequent meeting was held without fanfare in Banff. It featured business leaders and politicians from the NAFTA partners. No media were invited. The so-called "secret" Banff meeting set off alarm bells among nationalists and protectionists in both Canada and the U.S.

But the competitiveness council is composed of none other than 10 prominent business leaders from each country. In Canada, the membership is from the Canadian Council of Chief Executives and the group's chair is Linda Hasenfratz, CEO of Linamar Corp. in Guelph.

Now, as business leaders and politicians are preparing to knock heads on the venture once again next month, websites are warning of the perils of "North American Union" and asserting that the Security and Prosperity Partnership is tantamount to treason.

A posting on the Canadian Action Party website raises that notion, stating the Banff group conspired "to commit the unconstitutional act of castrating three national entities by planning ways to remove the constitutional powers and protections granted to the citizens of Canada, U.S. and Mexico."

An opinion piece in November in the Tucson Citizen, by Arizona State Senator Karen Johnson, a Republican, asks: "Do we want our laws harmonized with socialist Canada and corrupt Mexico? The U.S. will become nothing more than a


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province in an emerging North American superstate."

Opponents, which in Canada include the Council of Canadians, say the scheme reflects a cozy deal between big business and government. Supposedly "the Deep Integration Agenda" is to feature a new currency -- the "amero" -- and residents of the three countries are to become "North Americanists."

There's simply no basis for such claims.

It is accurate, as opponents assert, that one concept under consideration by a North American business consortium is a secure Canada-U.S. -Mexico superhighway corridor. A North American Supercorridor Coalition, or NASCO, is presiding over a conceptual plan for an integrated rail, port and highway transit corridor stretching from Vancouver to Manzanillo.

Big deal. The fact is the three countries encompass a market of several hundred million, doing hundreds of billions worth of trade annually. A whole lot of jobs rely on a smooth trade network.

Why would the trio not have its business communities work with the governments to streamline business activity? This effort is overdue.

Specifically, what the project aims to do is harmonize a flotilla of disparate regulations in the three countries, draft energy integration policy and ensure border safety in an age of terrorism so commercial activity can proceed without undue constraint.

These imperatives flow from current events and the trilateral trade agreement the three countries penned 13 years ago, an agreement Canadians broadly endorse.

True, any standardization of regulations for commerce across the three countries could lead to a race to the bottom, but that's only if political representatives allow that to occur. Same goes for any potential sellout of Canada's energy resources to power-hungry Americans.

The checks and balances are in the parliamentary system. The business types are making presentations to ministers at this point, not the other way around. Canadian business people will report on border security, the most crucial issue domestically. The energy aspect is being tackled by the Mexicans while the Americans are looking at regulations.

The longer term plan is to have a final report to present Bush, Harper and Mexico's new president, Felipe Calderon, at a meeting in Kananaskis, Alta., on June 26.

With all the time and effort going into this worthy project, it's unbelievable that someone hasn't figured out the importance of hiring a PR agency and scheduling some media briefings to inform the public and combat the conspiracy theorists.

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