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Latin America à la Herrera

Felipe Herrera, ex-President of the Inter-American Development Bank, used the 12th World Conference of the Society for International Development (SID) in Ottawa as a forum for telling his somewhat surprised audience the truth about Latin America. He corrected the false picture which the world has formed of developing countries in general and Latin America in particular.

So we now know at last that our information about conditions in the states of this region was quite wrong. Violence is practically unknown. The true Latin American must be horrified of war atrocities in the industrial countries during recent decades and that there are still countries where people are persecuted or murdered because of their religion or for national reasons. Latin America, Herrera said, is one of the more peaceful regions of this world.

Equally erroneous is the idea that arms play a big part in Latin America. The Governments of these peaceful countries account for 1-2 p.c., at most, of the world's arms expenditure. (Considering the low standard of living in these states, it is to be hoped that nobody will think this still rather a lot!)

And these Governments are genuine guardians of stability. It is not true that Latin America is incapable of holding inflation at bay, lacking a sense of fiscal responsibility or allergy to budget deficits and balance of payments shortfalls. Such negative features admittedly pertain to some states but this is due to external, not internal, causes: Other states are exporting their inflation to Central and South America.

Some of the listeners in Ottawa may have been unable to suppress a few critical thoughts as they listened to one of the best-known development politicians who is also the President of the SID: Why, for instance, is so little heed given to economic and social progress in these "more peaceful countries" — although there are competent governments. And also: Is it not just a handful of influential and wealthy men who deem the present state peaceful while large sections of the population, eking out a scanty livelihood, are more receptive to calls for a little less peace and more bread instead. Some quite misguided individuals may even wonder whether the low arms spending

may not in part be due to generous aid from the USA and whether these supplies on credit do not also tend to bring "a little" inflation into these countries.

But these are the—let us hope, pardonable—thoughts of people who have been exposed to wrong information for years past. After Herrera's speech one knows that Latin America is much better than its reputation. The people who impede progress sit in other countries. Their acts are well known and often enough criticised in public by all developing countries (One has only to refer to the UN and UNCTAD minutes). These enemies of progress have for years exploited the states of Latin America and still do so today. They infiltrate the countries as development aiders and spread their neocolonialist and imperialist power by setting up private enterprises, occupying key posts and eventually holding sway over whole industries. When granting public credits, they always want some measure of control over the use made of these resources, and until now they have permitted press and radio in their own countries to paint a distorted picture of Latin America. Needless to say, they do not meet the legitimate demands of the Governments of these countries.

Having reached this point, even the wrongly informed inhabitant of Europe cannot help suspecting that this black-and-white treatment is too harsh. Latin American nationalism cannot be compared with the European brand. That much is unquestionably true. But is it any less nationalistic?

Those who always see faults in others and overlook their own shortcomings prevent necessary efforts being made in their own countries. There is no doubt that the industrial countries have committed many errors in their development policies right up to date. But the developing countries, the states of Latin America included, must accept some of the blame for the failure of many programmes. Such mistakes can be largely avoided through an improved partnership such as Lester Pearson desired — provided there is good will on both sides. But this partnership is not made any easier by advocates for the developing countries who argue on Herrera's lines.

Dietrich Kobschull