

Interview with The Right Honourable Paul Martin

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SEF: In March last year the Coalition for Dialogue (CoDA) on Africa was launched. Being the successor forum to the Global Coalition for Africa (GCA) and the Big Table forum (Africa-OECD), it distinguishes itself for it is completely African-owned and based in Africa. You are one of the few Western members in the advisory council. How do you define your role?

Martin: Well, I love Africa and I have spent a lot of time in Africa. I am involved in a number of African projects at the present time and have been throughout my political career. So I think they felt that having someone who knows Africa but nonetheless can take the outside perspective would be valuable. The purpose of the coalition, which is going to compose 9 people and is headed by the former President of Botswana, is to have someone what they might call “grey-hairs” or “emeritaes” who are able to bring in a view of what Africa must do and where it must go. Africa’s biggest problem: it does not speak with one voice and it is to really encourage that. The sponsors of CoDA are very important in the African scene: the African Union, the African Development Bank and the Economic Commission for Africa.

SEF: You mentioned in your keynote speech that Africa was lacking a common voice during the Copenhagen Summit negotiations. Among others you underlined the importance of a lead negotiator of global stature for Africa. Why do you believe it is so hard for the African continent to conceive and push for such a personality?

Martin: You know that the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, was the lead spokesman. The problem is he has a country to run, and a country that has some problems. So he does not have 100% of his time to devote to this. The Ministers of the environment of all of the big democracies or in fact China or India have, because their only focus is on that. Meles Zenawi did a tremendous job, but what you have to have is under him a person of equal stature who can in fact bring Africa together. The second thing is of course that Africa has to begin its work on this much earlier. There are divisions within every country. In Canada there are divisions, but the fact is that they start to discuss and negotiate those years ahead of these kinds of meetings, whereas in Africa it is usually left to the last minute.

SEF: Among others the Coalition for Dialogue on Africa considers it a priority to convene meetings and dialogue on niche issues regarding the African continent in order to release effective policy recommendations. What do you consider a niche issue? Do you believe that the impact of climate change and economic and financial crises are the most crucial contemporary threats to Africa?

Martin: I think that climate change is a huge threat to Africa. Africa is not a cause of climate change, but it suffers more than any – the poor always suffer from these kinds of changes and Africa has got more poverty, more fragile states and more states in conflict. But it really is the effective drawing on its ability to produce food. Food security is a huge issue in poor countries and certainly in the case of Africa.

Another niche issue is the question of African economic integration. If you take a look at Europe: would Europe be the power that it is if it was still a series of independent countries? Well, Africa is 53 countries, small, shallow markets, with a couple of large countries like South Africa and Nigeria. If there is any continent that needs to come together, it is Africa. I tell you a story, just to give you an example in terms of Africa's ability to speak to the world, where Africa stands. About 3 years ago, there was an African-China summit. 48 countries of sub-Saharan Africa went to China and they had a summit with the Chinese. The discussions went fairly well, but at one point on the stage there were the 48 heads of government from Africa, some large countries, many small countries, shallow markets and then on the other side came in one man, Hu Jintao, the President of China. You had one man representing a billion people and you had 48 countries representing 700 million people. Where do you think the power is? And that is why I believe that the common market is so important, because if this one person representing China had been faced with one person representing not a political union, but an economic union of 750 million or a billion. Just think where the power would have lied? And then ask yourself this: in the year 2030 China's population is going to start to flatten out, Africa's is going to continue to grow (it is the youngest population in the world). 2050 Africa's population will be 2 billion, think what that would have represented. And that is why the common market is so important.

SEF: Coming to back to the environment. You chose to chair the governing council of the Congo Basin Forest Fund (CBFF). Tell us a little about it. There are plenty of environmental problems and initiatives in Africa. Why did you consider this one worthy of support?

Martin: Well, the Congo Basin Forest is an area twice the size of France. It is made up of 10 countries and it is the largest tropical rain forest in Africa, and the second largest in the world. It is really the world's second lung. But unlike Brazil, or unlike even in Asia, where they got their act together, where in fact they are saying: "if you want us to maintain these trees, then there must be credit compensation from the rest of the world, we got to work together to preserve the trees and alleviate poverty". That was not happening in Africa. And so the African countries came together to form an organisation, but they were not well-funded. And they had a problem pushing and so Great Britain and Norway founded this 200-million-dollar-fund. They asked Wangari Maathai, who was the former winner of the Nobel Prize from Kenya, and myself to chair, to essentially try to bring the Congo Basin Forest to the world's attention, but also with 200 million dollar to be able to fund projects that will preserve the forest.

SEF: And this leads me to my last question. How is it for you like to work with a strong African lady, such as Wangari Maathai?

Martin: She is terrific. She is knowledgeable and she is immensely accessible to Africans and non-Africans around the world. She is a rock star in Africa. It is real pleasure working with her.

SEF: Sir, we thank you very much indeed for this interview and your time.