

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? A misleading rosy glow

Over the many decades of chasing around after politicians of all stripes, I've often been uncertain whether to applaud the shameless chutzpah of politicians or be horrified by their studied hypocrisy.

Either way, it seems to go with the territory.

Take last week's 'good news' tour by Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland, for example, a studied attempt to portray the opening of new NAFTA trade talks with the U.S. and Mexico as a wonderful opportunity to 'modernize' the agreement and include things Canada didn't get the first time around.

Freeland 'arguably the most competent minister in the current Liberal government' was spouting the 'sunny ways' rhetoric which helped Justin Trudeau win the last election, nattering on how the new deal can include such things as increased environmental protections, studiously avoiding the fact that the only reason both Canada and Mexico are currently sitting at the negotiating table is because a major plank in Donald Trump's successful election upset was essentially to nuke NAFTA, a deal he called the worst in U.S. history.

Whatever you may think of Trump on other fronts, he is first and foremost a wheeler dealer when it comes to trade and, given the size of the U.S. economy compared to Canada and Mexico, there is little doubt who holds the strongest hand here.

Freeland can post all the happy faces she wants, but it's not going to change the reality that Trump is determined to impose his 'buy American, hire American' agenda to the extent that it is possible.

Freeland, for her part, dismissed calls for buy-local rules as poor public policy, or, 'political junk food' superficially appetizing but unhealthy in the long run.

She's probably right about that, but, alas, that's not likely to matter much.

That's because a while back, Trump issued an executive order instructing every federal department to study ways to increase 'buy America' and report back to him in the fall, a clear indication that whatever Freeland thinks of the policy won't amount to a hill of beans when Trump continues his campaign to 'as he describes it' 'Make America great again.'

This is not to suggest that the 'modernizing' of NAFTA will necessarily be a disaster for Canada 'it's more likely to be tougher on Mexico than it is on us' only to point out that the rosy glow presented by Freeland in a series of staged pre-negotiation events is farcical and deliberately misleading.

A big sticking point for Canada has always been the clause which allows U.S. businesses to challenge decisions made by the Mexican or Canadian governments. Critics of that clause 'particularly those on the left' see it as allowing corporations to overrule decisions by elected governments that, they claim, are in the 'public interest.' Actually, just as corporations make most of their decisions in their own 'corporate interests,' governments tend to make their decisions in their own 'partisan interests,' all the while claiming they are only thinking of what's best for the unsuspecting public.

More to the point, however, there is no way the Trump administration will change that clause. Ain't gonna happen.

In his Globe and Mail column last week, Campbell Clark made a similar argument about Freeland's transparent attempt to put a 'sunny spin' on the NAFTA talks, pointing out as well that while there are areas where things can be improved from a Canadian perspective, the overall outlook is not terribly encouraging at this point.

He cites Freeland crowing that 'Trade is about people. That is why we are modernizing NAFTA,' writing that, 'Well, no. This was not Canada's idea. Ottawa's negotiators are not heading into talks . . . because Canadian officials had nifty ideas to make a 23-year-old deal, as Ms. Freeland said, 'even better.' It is happening because Donald Trump campaigned for the U.S. presidency asserting that NAFTA caused many of the ills affecting U.S. workers . . . (and) promised a better deal for Americans, or to tear it up . . . we got here because of what the Americans want.'

Among Freeland's six priorities for the talks, just one demanded new access to U.S. markets 'a clause to get freer access to government procurement. But that has already been nixed by the Americans because of their 'buy American' policies, so there you are.

No doubt at the end of the day, both Canada and Mexico will end up with a few crumbs to help save face in this affair.

But it seems to me Freeland would have been better served heading into the talks by dampening expectations 'and therefore, anything could be presented as a gain 'rather than raising the hopes of Canadians that this forced 'modernizing' will make it 'better' for our side, thus almost guaranteeing disappointment in the end.

