

OPINION

A CONVERSATION WITH MEXICO CONSUL GENERAL CARLOS GONZÁLEZ GUTIÉRREZ

The San Diego Union-Tribune Editorial Board recently met with local Mexico Consul General Carlos González Gutiérrez. He took over the job in the San Diego office July 1. Here is an edited version of the interview. For the full transcript, go to uniontrib.com/mexicoconsul.

Q. Tell us how you came to this position and a little about your background.

A. I have been a member of the Foreign Service for the last 32 years. I have the rank of ambassador. I have been able to develop a career that has been pretty specialized in Mexican community and the United States mostly. This is my third mission. First was Sacramento. Then it was Austin, the capital city of Texas. And now it's San Diego. Before that... I was appointed executive director of the Institute for Mexicans Abroad, which is the agency that promotes relations and tie with our diaspora, all over the world but mostly in the United States. The IME as it's called in Spanish, *Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior*... is located within the Foreign Ministry. My first tour of duty overseas was to be the consul for community Affairs at the Mexican Consulate in Los Angeles. I was also counselor for Latino affairs at the Mexican Embassy in Washington, D.C.

Q. How would you characterize the state of affairs three years into the Trump administration on the border? Specifically here in San Diego?

A. Well, things have changed. And not. Perhaps the most important change is that people are not crossing for the most part in between ports of entry. I would say that things have changed to the extent that Mexicans are still either negative... I mean the net flow of Mexicans coming is either zero or negative. It has changed as well to the extent that now... here in this area is half Mexicans, and... the other half is other than Mexicans who not between ports of entry but to try to take advantage of the administrative law of immigration and, and nationality. So... they try to speak up they raise their hands, they ask for asylum. And that's the strategy to remain in the U.S. That is a significant change in terms of how things used to be in terms of immigration. In terms of the flow of goods and people, well, it keeps on growing. I'm always amazed every time I come... to the border. I'm always amazed at how much this has changed. And how fast it changes. Today approximately 145,000 people commute between San Diego and Tijuana in both directions. Approximately 50,000 cars go through the Chaparral [border crossing], 25,000 pedestrians. No wonder that San Diego was the place where Senti, the system to facilitate the access of trusted frequent travelers, was created. No wonder that it was in San Diego where CBX, the only binational airport crossing in the world, was invented. I see the border as I used to see it 30 years ago as a place where innovation and forward-looking experiments to facilitate crossings are always trying to be implemented.

Q. The integration of the binational economies down here is remarkable and amazing and I think the hope was of a lot of people that we would be such a success story that it would be easy to push back on the narrative of Mexico as a malign force. And yet Trump has managed to pull that off. So it seems particularly frustrating from San Diego to look at what's become, when we have this amazingly productive relationship with Baja California Norte. It's troubling.

A. Yes. It is very frustrating and I would say it's very frustrating on two aspects. One... it has a lot to do with Mexico bashing. And Mexico bashing is not just anti-Mexican speech. It is the reflection of a type of isolationist talk that unfortunately has taken hold in certain circles of the American political spectrum. And that is a very significant threat not only to Mexico, but for our two countries. And particularly it's a threat for regions like San Diego that depend so much on free trade. And the shared production processes that the integration of what economies depend on. But that's only one aspect. The other aspect has to do with how much we have lost by not being able to control better the narrative. Instead of talking about a smart border, we are still in 2019 talking about closed borders and whether we should close the border for six hours or six days or six months or whatever. To talk about smart borders means to talk about filters. A filter that is capable of stopping criminal activity. But at the same time that is capable of facilitating the access of goods, peoples, and services. And it is incumbent upon all of us on both sides of the border to change that narrative. Because the well being of the U.S. and Mexico and particularly border communities, depend on it. We should push aside the concept of closed borders and try to reframe this whole debate around the challenge that smart borders represent.

Q. Beyond the rhetoric, how about the administration's actions in the last week or so leading up to the roll out of... if you can't prove that you were here longer than two years you can be deported immediately without a hearing?

A. It's important for us and Tijuana to realize that things have changed. And that the way we perceive the immigration phenomenon between the U.S. and Mexico has changed significantly. The U.S. has assumed a series of unilateral actions. Starting in 2016, when they de facto created that backlog of asylum seekers who had to wait in the U.S.... in the Mexican side for their current hearing on the U.S. side. A series of unilateral actions that created this backlog to which we had to respond. And starting with the application of Section 235 of the Immigration and



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Carlos González Gutiérrez is the new consul general of Mexico in San Diego.

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Nationality Act in December of last year, the U.S. assumed again a unilateral action, much more openly and openly defiant under that section to which we responded in accordance to our domestic law, human rights probations. And our obligations to human rights treaties to which we are part.

That was a significant change. We agreed to receive non-Mexican nationals back into Mexico. Non-Mexican nationals who have entered the United States through Mexico. We agreed to receive them... so that they could wait in Mexico for their court hearing as long as they have dated hearing with an immigration judge. We reacted to that again because of the Mexican government's commitment to human rights obligations because we thought that it was the humane and appropriate path to take. And because we have a new government in Mexico that places at the heart of its migration policy the need to protect the human rights of immigrants regardless of their nationality. That's certainly a very important change. With regards to what was announced... What I can tell you is that obviously we respect the sovereign capacity of the United States to define their immigration domestic policies and legislation, just as Mexico does. We will be continuing to protect the rights and interests of our nationals as the Vienna Convention and consular relations allows us to do.

And to continue our efforts to strengthen partnerships with local and state allies throughout the U.S.

Q. You mentioned how Mexico is trying to help the immigrants that are coming from Central America, but a lot of the immigrants coming from Mexico [are] from Michoacán and Guerrero, what is the solution that Mexico is working on to also help those people that are running for their lives?

A. Yes, you're right. If you check the statistics from the INM, *Instituto Nacional de Migración*, in this border... three states are always there as the main source of immigrants. Guerrero, Michoacán and Oaxaca. I do think that we have a very clear signal, that we should not lose the fact that there's significant people in the southern part of Mexico particularly in those three states. What we should not lose sight is that there's still people in those three countries willing to migrate. And that we should not fool ourselves saying that nobody in Mexico wants to migrate. The government of Mexico has been very clear in terms that the southern part of our country needs to be the focus of social spending during this administration. I think that in different public policies that have been announced, it is pretty clear that the priority is the southern part of our country. Where the poorest income levels exist today. Because the government

realizes correctly, that income distribution is a serious challenge. And that we should devote all needed resources in order to attend the special needs of those states and a few others who are in the southern part of the country.

Q. The economy of Mexico is doing really well. Bank of Mexico says payments from the United States total \$33 billion last year. And yet if a country with nearly the economy of a Germany for example saw this many people lining up at its borders trying to get out, there's... some really serious activities to figure out what's going on. So what is going on to make sure that there is reason to stay in Mexico?

A. Well, I would challenge that idea that it's a significant number of people. This is part of the narrative that I was saying at the beginning that we need to change. Instead of talking how can we make the border smarter? We are, instead of talking about whether we have a crisis on the border, we're talking everywhere about the "invasion". At a time in which the numbers of Mexicans coming to the United States it's either zero or negative. I think that however I just said, that those three states, Oaxaca, Guerrero and Michoacán, keep on sending people to the United States not in the volumes that we saw a few years back.

But it's still a flow. And you are right, we need to have specific strategies to

keep their... in their communities of origin. This government is committed to redistribute resources massively to the poorest states in Mexico. Without breaking the macroeconomic stability of our country. Without disrupting the low inflation and relatively low deficit that we have right now. I do think that this has to do as well at least in the case of Michoacán and Guerrero, with the impact in certain regions, of organized crime. Security is still top domestic priority for us. And a critical aspect of our bilateral agenda with the United States. This administration has decided to change strategy and with the unanimous consensus Congress, President Lopez Obrador has been able to create the National Guard, *Guardia Nacional*. Which will be a national police that will be complementing the state and local police departments all over the country. In Baja California right now the deployment of the National Guard has begun. Has 500 elements already. And I'm not sure how many are being sent to Michoacán and Guerrero. And the other priority areas for our government. This is a very interesting effort in which the military training and discipline is being used in order to contain corruption. But under a civic civilian authority that will ensure working closely with the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights. That human rights are protected. But it's a tough challenge.

Q. What do you think is next? And how much of it has to do with the 2020 election?

A. My top priority as the new consul general of Mexico in San Diego. And that is to represent Mexico in a positive and constructive way. My second top priority is to find and identify local partners who can help me and help the consulate shape the image of Mexico in such a positive way. What's next is effort, systematic discipline effort on my part and of my colleagues at the Consulate to identify those potential partners. People interested in representing Mexico in helping me and others in representing Mexico, in a positive and constructive way. And make sure that we can work together.

I want to have a strong presence in 2020 Comic-Con, I love the festival, I had never been and I spent three days there and... I want to return with a big delegation. I want to take ADL to Valle de Guadalupe and have their board meet over there. I want to visit all the mayors that are part of SANDAG and work with them because I know that regardless of party, most of them all of them I would say have a very pragmatic approach towards immigration that contrasts with the sometimes dogmatic and very rhetorical approaches that you hear in Washington, D.C. So that's what's next for me.

DAN WALTERS CALmatters

WILL LARA MESS GET LEGISLATIVE SCRUTINY IT DESERVES?

This has been a long, hot summer for Ricardo Lara, a former state legislator from the Los Angeles area who was elected as California's insurance commissioner nine months ago.

He's been hammered by a series of journalistic revelations, mostly in The San Diego Union-Tribune, about how he has indirectly reneged on a campaign promise not to accept campaign contributions from insurance industry sources.

Union-Tribune reporter Jeff McDonald wrote that Lara's office "intervened in at least four proceedings involving a company with ties to insurance executives and their spouses who donated tens of thousands of dollars to his re-election campaign, records show."

Lara quickly did a mea culpa, saying, "I appreciate The San Diego Union-Tribune bringing this to my

attention" and promising to return the tainted contributions.

However, the revelations have continued, not only in the Union-Tribune but in other media.

Lara portrayed himself as a tough regulator of the insurance industry during his hard-fought campaign against a former holder of the office, Steve Poizner, last year.

However, Politico, a political website, reported this week that during a private speech to insurance executives in July, Lara declared support for a long-sought goal of giving insurers more access to drivers' vehicle data, something that privacy advocates oppose. He told the executives, "I'm prepared to get creative, just like all of you have been for so many years."

Lara's situation recalls

that of Chuck Quackenbush, another former state legislator who was elected as insurance commissioner in 1994 and was also seen as a rising political star.

In 2000, after Republican Quackenbush won a second term, the Los Angeles Times reported that he had

special funds he controlled in lieu of being fined. The funds were used for "public service" television ads in which Quackenbush appeared — a way of building his public profile.

As revelations about Quackenbush mounted, the Legislature, controlled by

crat Lara's former colleagues in the Legislature would subject him to the same kind of embarrassing scrutiny that led to Quackenbush's much-deserved downfall.

There is another aspect to the situation that drips with irony.

The Quackenbush and Lara imbroglios stem from the wrong-headed conversion of a regulatory office to a political plum.

not only collected campaign contributions from insurers but directed some of the money into his wife's nascent hopes for political office.

Quackenbush, the Times reported, also made deals with insurers who had been accused of unfair practices in handling claims from the Northridge earthquake, allowing them to donate to

Democrats, launched investigations. He denied any wrongdoing but within a few months resigned. He later moved to Hawaii, then to Florida to become a sheriff's deputy, but that came to a bad end as well; he was forced to resign from the Lee County force after making Facebook postings considered to be racist.

It's unlikely that Demo-

Some of the loudest criticism of Lara is coming from Consumer Watchdog, a Los Angeles organization that sponsored a 1988 ballot measure to make the insurance commissioner an elected official rather than one appointed by the governor and give the office new regulatory powers.

After the Union-Tribune's revelations, Consumer

Watchdog dispatched a letter to Lara giving him until the end of July "to reveal details of these fundraising contacts or face a lawsuit to compel his answers."

The Quackenbush and Lara imbroglios stem from the wrong-headed conversion of a regulatory office to a political plum. It infuses the sort of horsetrading and mutual backscratching one finds in the Legislature into what should be a dispassionate and objective regulatory process.

If Consumer Watchdog wants to clean up insurance regulation, it should sponsor a ballot measure to undo what it did 31 years ago.

CALmatters is a public interest journalism venture committed to explaining how California's state Capitol works and why it matters. For more stories by Dan Walters, go to calmatters.org/commentary.