

Canadian Centre
for Foreign Policy
Development



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de la politique étrangère

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**REPORT FROM THE ROUNDTABLE ON
CANADA-CUBA RELATIONS**

CCFPD

January 18, 2000 (Ottawa)

8008.2E

ISBN: E2-254/2000E-IN
0-662-30187-0

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January 18, 2000
Ottawa

On January 18, 2000, the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development held a roundtable on Canada-Cuba relations. The roundtable brought together experts, academics, NGOs, labour, business and government officials to assess current Canadian foreign policy in Cuba and to look toward future initiatives. We are most grateful to Senator Lois Wilson who hosted the meeting at the Senate and to Justin Robertson from the Cuba Desk at the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade for contributing to the report and helping with the roundtable organisation.

1. Executive Summary

The day was structured around four topics: human rights, economic reform, Canadian business and NGOs and civil society. Although most participants expressed fundamental agreement with constructive engagement, there was, perhaps surprisingly, a tough undercurrent to the discussion with a common refrain being that Canada too often capitulates to Cuban pressure. Given this mood, Professor John Kirk's, Dalhousie University, protestations that new ideas could get us back on track (e.g., an eminent persons group visit to Cuba led by Trudeau or Broadbent, or the formation of a Canada-Cuba bilateral commission of diplomats and civil society representatives) fell on deaf ears. Rather, most participants demanded an engagement policy that is tough and hard-nosed when it needs to be while keeping the general contours as they are. It would appear that government actions toward Cuba since February 1999 are in line with the views of many Canadian experts on Cuba.

The critics of Canadian policy were headed by Professor Yvon Grenier, St. Francis Xavier University. Grenier argued that constructive engagement is really a domestically-driven foreign policy issue where successive Canadian governments have sought easy political points by demonstrating independence from the USA on Cuba. Grenier claimed that Cuba is the only country in the world where Canada expends significant time and energy to influence an authoritarian regime. He went to lengths to describe Castro's Cuba as a police state and wondered why so many Canadians avoid discussing the nature of Cuban politics. Nick Rowe, Carleton University, added that Canadian engagement, more often than not, feeds a Cuban sense of self-importance and strengthens Castro's allure. Both recommended that Canada downgrade its relations to a basic form where we "don't provide massive publicity for the regime through

high-level visits,” and we “forget Cuban NGOs and civil society organizations.” Only humanitarian aid would be consistent with this approach. Rowe did argue, however, that Canada could still do its best to “train subversive youth,” e.g., through economics training.

Between the pro-engagement and anti-engagement perspectives, there was another school of thought present in the room. This school can be called the realists, a group of people who advocated the need for greater realism when thinking about Canada’s long-term impact in Cuba. While still supportive of a strong Canadian presence in Cuba, this school warned that Canada’s ability to influence the Cuban system and its institutions over the long run is fairly minimal. Hence, Canadian policy naively assumes that our assistance can make a genuine impact on softening the eventual Cuban transition. What is needed, in this perspective, is clearer programming targets and ultimately more modest long-term goals.

In the human rights session, Laurie Wiseberg of Human Rights Internet congratulated Canada for its timely decision to engage Cuba in the mid-1990s but complained that, in practice, there had been problems with the implementation of human rights engagement. Her foremost complaint was that Canada had shown an unwillingness to exert sufficient pressure on the Cuban regime for greater freedom of association, expression and assembly. Canada has passed up numerous opportunities to press Cuba in the area of basic civil and political rights, she argued. By agreeing to the Cuban agenda of economic and social rights (e.g., by holding seminars on women’s and children’s rights, and by restricting an NGO gathering in Havana to “friendly” NGOs), Canada sends the wrong signal to the Cuban regime. Wiseberg also faulted Canadian NGOs for not balancing their developmental work with calls for better observation of civil and political rights. Despite these criticisms, Wiseberg concluded that engaging Cuba still offered the best hope for promoting change and that Canada was generally on the right track. These points were echoed by many participants in the ensuing discussion.

The session on Canadian business consisted of a question and answer period with David Allan of York Medical. Allan outlined how the Cuban business climate had changed markedly from the heady and high-spirited days of the mid-1990s. In his company’s case, times had changed to the degree that the word “Cuba” is now buried at the back of his most recent annual report, even though Cuba is at the heart of York Medical’s business plans. This reflects the uncertainty that many investors now carry concerning Cuba. At a broader level, Allan called the Helms-Burton legislation a hugely effective American tool for chilling the business environment, noting that it has turned Cuba into a market that is too volatile for the major multinationals. He also noted that the government’s policy freeze on Cuba had restricted his ability to access senior Cuban officials. Nevertheless, Allan’s optimism and fascination with Cuba was obvious. One of the positive effects of Helms-Burton was that it opened windows for small and medium-sized foreign businesses in Cuba, like his own. While not for everyone, Allan suggested that Cuba’s impressive knowledge capacities and the absence of corruption created good business opportunities for some foreign firms. For those who decide to enter the market, Allan complimented the Canadian diplomatic service, singling out the efforts of Mark Entwistle, Keith Christie, Don Campbell and the Ottawa trade staff.

During the civil society and NGO discussion, strong support emerged for the principle of working with Cuban youth, who will be the next generation of Cuban leaders in politics and social life. The principle, regrettably, was not really fleshed out into policy recommendations. More thinking is required in this area since there is near unanimous support for the concept of engaging youth.

The views of Oxfam representatives were a departure from Grenier and Wiseberg's criticisms. Mark Fried rejected both making the treatment of dissidents a litmus test of relations and making civil and political rights the focus of Canadian activities in Cuba. Fried believes that Cuba is experiencing gradual change for the better and that this improvement is founded on the widening role of grassroots actors. The key role for foreign governments is to open doors to facilitate the slow building of relationships and communities through contact with governments, international NGOs and tourists carrying medicine, clothing and different values. Fried praised the Canadian government's door-opening work in the 1990s and commented on how much the Cubans welcome Canadians because we treat them with respect. He then allowed the two former Oxfam field representatives to detail their on-the-ground experience. Their most important point was that Cuban citizens and social groups are constantly adapting their economic and social practices and these street level changes are often sanctioned after the fact by the Cuban government. Thus, Cuban NGOs and social organizations are seen by Oxfam as a source of innovation in communities that are gaining limited policy influence and are worthy of support. In their view, a society's elite does not always represent the population and in Cuba's case, there are many reform-minded and innovative people at the grassroots level.

2. Canadian Foreign Policy and Human Rights in Cuba

Overview

Canada's engagement in Cuba has been long-standing. The end of the Cold War presented a good opportunity to enhance Canada's presence on the island, to build confidence and offer Canadian expertise. However, soon it became clear that Cuba would remain an anachronism in a democratising world. As pressure from the U.S.A. increased, through the Helms-Burton legislation, for instance, Cuba became even more isolated.

Canada's two-track engagement aims at influencing the regime (especially on human rights) and engaging players (especially the young generation of Cubans). Meanwhile, the ultimate objective is a peaceful transition to a prosperous democracy and the reintegration of the island into the Hemisphere. To that end, Canadians will continue to reach out to Cubans, before and after a change occurs.

Hard negotiations resulting in the signing of the Canada-Cuba Joint Declaration (January 1997) have yielded some results. While implementation of resolutions has been uneven, dialogue and activities moved forward. Cuban officials signed anti-terrorism covenants and a number of CIDA and Revenue Canada projects were negotiated. Some positive movement on human rights

was also detected. Trade has been ongoing but difficult. A reversal of these relatively positive developments occurred in late 1990's. In February 1999 a group of high profile dissidents was arrested and tried even after Prime Minister Jean Chretien personally requested their freedom. Cuban government rhetoric intensified and academic freedom was further restrained. As a result, Canada stopped implementing agreements and considering new initiatives. Efforts to reintegrate Cuba into the Hemisphere also halted. Despite these setbacks, the relationship between Canada and Cuba has been maintained and no change in the relationship is expected.

Critique and Analysis

Yvon Grenier, St. Francis Xavier University, offered a critique of the Canadian approach. He argued that a regime's nature should guide foreign policy. The fact that Cuba is a repressive police state should, therefore, bear on our attitude towards it. A positive outreaching policy may not only appear to sanction such a regime, but may also inadvertently reinforce it.

According to Grenier, the policy of constructive engagement is an end in and of itself. The ultimate objective of Canadian engagement in Cuba is unattainable so long as Cuba remains a police state. Constructive engagement only fulfils the Canadian government's commitment to having a foreign policy independent from that of the U.S.A. Driven by domestic pressure, the Canadian government has thus made a conscious choice between cooperation and human rights in favour of the former. In fact, there is very little constructive engagement with Fidel Castro on human rights. Cooperation with Cuba will not lead to the improvement of human rights on the island, instead, it may legitimise a regime that represses them.

The constructive engagement should be dropped and replaced by an approach similar to the one adopted by the European Union, while maintaining grassroots initiatives and aid assistance. A Code of Ethics for Canadian companies in Cuba could also be beneficial to fostering human rights. Canadian foreign policy should conceptualise our national security as separate from human rights. The Human Security approach can conflate the two policy objectives and may lead to misguided policy.

In response to Grenier's critique, some participants argued that the motivation for constructive engagement has been the anticipation of chaos, should the regime collapse. While the Canadian government should not have underestimated the siege mentality of the Cuban political apparatus, fostering good relations with a potentially reform-minded administration seems prudent.

Laurie Wiseberg, pointed out that some specialists on the region often consider economic and social rights as separate from other human rights. Since the former have been promoted in Cuba, some observers tended to overlook the lack of the civil and political rights. According to Wiseberg, such separation is no longer viable, especially as economic and social rights begin to deteriorate. While Canada should be more critical of the human rights violations perpetrated by the Cuban government, isolating the regime is not an answer. On the contrary, spaces within the well educated Cuban society exist where Canada's engagement may bring some positive results.

There are people interested in change. Therefore, the policy of constructive engagement should be continued. However, it should be made clear that Cuba's policies on human rights are comparable to the most repressive criminal regimes of Latin America and are indefensible. Canada should push and cajole the Cuban government into changing attitudes by signing human rights conventions and opening up to domestic as well as international scrutiny.

Nick Rowe, commented that while the policy of constructive engagement made much sense a few years ago, it has completely failed. Fidel Castro demonstrated that the only time he is willing to relax his personal power is when it is threatened by riots. As soon as dissent is reigned in through semi-liberal economic policies or repression the thaw ends and liberalisation is reversed. Canada's ability to push and cajole is minimal. Therefore, a policy of strict economic conditionality should be implemented.

Mark Fried, said that Canadian foreign policy must be conceptualised in a broader "diplomatic" context. While symbolic acts may seem meaningless or seem to reinforce repression, they often open doors to actors that can have real impact. Canadian foreign policy is not only carried out by diplomats but also by NGOs, Canadian tourists and businesses. Therefore, constructive engagement may have been much more successful than one may think. There are Cubans working for a gradual change and Canada should be there to assist them.

John Kirk, also endorsed the Canadian approach. He argued that there is no doubt the Cuban government has been repressing human rights. However, Canada has an interest to positively influence the administration through any minimal means available. Over all, according to Kirk, constructive engagement has been balanced and productive. Despite some recent setbacks and disagreements on human rights, a number of CIDA and IDRC projects have been negotiated, trade has actually increased and the policy may have contributed to Canada's respected position in the OAS. The ultimate objective of Canadian foreign policy must be seen as a long term project.

Similarly Hal Klepak, Royal Military College, pointed out that rather than focussing on the nature of a country's regime, Canadian interests should be the *sine qua non* of Canadian foreign policy. Canada has always been engaged in Cuba, to varying degrees, and Cuba has always been a police state. Those who support good relations with the island do not necessarily condone the system. Constructive engagement does not lead to deterioration of human rights. The Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and the Department of National Defence have not been wrong in formulating Canada's stance. On the contrary, the danger of an explosion is real and bloodshed is possible (with potential U.S.A. intervention). Changing our approach now could only help the extremists.

Other points included an opinion that Cubans have a stake in the system and are not likely to endorse a massive structural change. Martha Thompson, Oxfam Canada, drew attention to language and the importance of discourse and words in communicating with Cubans and formulating policies. Nobina Robinson, FOCAL, reminded us that human rights are not exclusive to a few dissidents but impact the entire Cuban population. Lynn Mancino, Revenue

Canada, said that since Cubans are very entrepreneurial people, Canada could help them liberalise and offer its expertise in tax collection systems. "Taxes are necessary to pay for a democratic society," he noted.

3. The Cuban Economy and Canadian Businesses in Cuba

Julia Sagebien, Dalhousie University, pointed out there has not been much economic reform in the past three years. The introduction of incremental market reforms was used as a vaccine against full blown capitalism rather than a step towards liberalisation. Indeed, the hard-line discourse intensified in the recent past and the language of reform was practically banned. Tax reforms have been halted. Presently, new economic reform is very unlikely. Everybody is waiting either for Fidel Castro to die or for the U.S.A. to lift the embargo. Canadian foreign policy should therefore adjust its expectations. While dialogue should be maintained, Canada should keep its own ground, especially on human rights, and find gaps through which real change can be promoted. Young Cubans should be targeted, the Cuban diaspora involved and potential transition challenges considered.

David Allan, joining the roundtable by phone, shared his experiences in doing business in Cuba. His company markets Cuban medical inventions in North America. It submits pre-clinically tested drugs to Health Protection Canada -- a body which approves them for human clinical trials and general use. The company has to raise money to finance the endeavour and find partners capable of manufacturing the inventions. A number of Cuban invented drugs are now in use and generating revenues. In response to a question posed by Anna Nitoslawska, Canadian Labour Congress, about the impact of York Medical on the labour relations in Cuba, Mr. Allan responded that there is no measurable direct effect since the revenues are not redistributed among individual workers. Instead, they finance the operation of those medical institutions involved in the project (through a joint venture).

He pointed out that while the medical research and development system in Cuba is good, there is a pervasive shortage of capital. (Researches are put in charge of manufacturing and are guided by a policy of "if you can not make it do not research it.") Well educated Cubans often live in poverty. Some are being forced to abandon their intellectual work for more lucrative jobs such as driving a taxi. Meanwhile, the most wealthy are often those with access to foreign currency (i.e., prostitutes, hotel workers, and so on).

The challenges of doing business in Cuba are numerous. They include, for instance: red tape or arbitrary use of rules and regulations. Without the help of the Canadian Ambassador and the officials at the Canadian Embassy, business in Cuba would be unimaginable. A friendly stance on the part of the Canadian government also facilitates operations of Canadian businesses. The visit of former Prime Minister Trudeau to Cuba in 1995 was a case in point.

Currently, Cuba is not the flavour of the month for Canadian companies. It has become a country where there is nothing but red tape. Total domestic credit is minimal and the banking

sector underdeveloped. Moreover, Cuba is a small island economy and does not offer significant market outlets for the big multinationals. The U.S.A. embargo has also had a significant negative impact on the growth of business in Cuba. Notwithstanding the welfare from drugs invented by Cuban scientists (for cancer treatment, for instance), American companies will not consider manufacturing them.

Both the poverty of the Cuban economy and the restrictive and repressive state environment force Cubans to employ survival tactics that are often illegal or semi-legal (i.e., self-employment, secondary part-time work, theft from the state, payment for services in foreign currency, bribes, etc.). This duplicity undermines the social fabric of the Cuban society and poses further challenges to a potential transition to democracy. Legalising some of these survival activities may solve the problems related to "double morality." Reform could be gradual. It has already hesitantly started with legalising foreign currency accounts and private lending, granting licences to export and import on a small scale, and transferring some state-owned farms to farmers. While the growth of a small market economy has been beneficial for a select group of people, some roundtable participants emphasised that social justice must be maintained. The danger of dollarisation should also be considered.

4. NGOs and Civil Society in Cuba

Mark Fried said that Oxfam has been engaged in Cuba since 1994 and today has between 12 and 15 Cuban counterparts. The NGO community in Cuba has been developing throughout the 1990's and is quite lively. Cuban NGOs stem from several sources including: the government ministries, mass organisations, religious communities as well as concerned citizen groups. The NGO leadership is fairly consolidated. It has the respect of the Cuban authorities and influences policy to a certain degree.

Cooperation between Canada and Cuba intensified in 1995 when an exchange programme was launched in Havana. Canadian foreign policy has greatly facilitated this cooperation. Since then the relationship had its ups and downs. Canada-Cuba projects are especially successful in the agricultural sector and in housing. These projects bring new ideas, promote the virtues of the Canadian system, and generate new contacts. Nonetheless, communist systems are not set up for NGO operations. Despite the fact that these are limited activities and their impact is often muted, NGOs often attract innovative people who want change.

In response to Fried, some participants pointed out that except for humanitarian assistance, cooperation between Canadian and Cuban NGOs requires collaboration with the repressive state structures. Moreover, independent NGOs do not exist in Cuba. A more appropriate term for these state-sponsored bodies would be "GONGOs" or Government Organised Non-governmental Organisations. Therefore, Canadian NGO engagement has little to do with Cuban civil society. Others argued that notwithstanding these points, the work of Canadian NGOs is often beneficial to Cubans since it aims at improving their life, lets them pursue their interests and builds confidence. A warning was made not to overload the NGOs with

political sub-texts and subversive objectives. Instead, attention should be paid to the on- the-ground benefits of their grass roots activities.

Senator Lois Wilson reflected on her experience with the Protestant Church community in Cuba. She said that while congregations often have a socialist leaning they are generally not pro-government. The atmosphere in Cuba seems to be now more relaxed. The Communist ideology is bankrupt. Joining a church no longer has serious repercussions and the Protestants have been fostering links with the outside world.

5. Concluding Remarks

At the end of the roundtable, the Chair asked all roundtable participants for their final word. The following is a summary of what they wished to emphasise or recommend for Canadian Foreign policy:

- Economic survival activities, including self-employment and some "black" market activities, should be legalised and adequately taxed.
- Foreign policy towards Cuba should remain positive. The "Canadian filter" put aside, Canada should heed the hostilities of the U.S.A. towards the island and have a non-rhetorical, more realistic and consistent approach. Canada has some room to be tougher.
- A peaceful transition in Cuba is of great geopolitical importance to Canada. Canada should help in any way possible to prevent collapse, paralysis or the growth of rabid anti-Americanism on the island. Cuba has also a symbolic value for Canadians and the Hemisphere. Cuban revolution survived and the Cuban leadership stood up to "American hegemony." Therefore, the nature of Canada's relationship with Cuba reflects itself positively in Canada's dealings with the rest of the Hemisphere and the OAS. Nonetheless, the prospects for a radical and rapid change in Cuba are minimal at this point. Transition will likely require a generational change. Canada should not invest much more in the Cuban economy than it presently does.
- Canadian foreign policy should target people in the administration likely to lead Cuba during and after a potential transition, as well as youth.
- Canadian foreign policy should pay attention the role of the armed forces in a potential Cuban transition. The Cuban military not only has contact with the rest of the world but also a working connection with the U.S.A. military.
- Canadian foreign policy and NGOs should capitalise on the good reception and reputation of Canadians in Cuba in fostering dialogue for change.
- Support for NGO projects in Cuba should continue.

- In dissent from the generally positive feedback Canadian foreign policy received during the roundtable, the point was made that human rights and democracy should not be compromised for the sake of dialogue. "Any dialogue is not better than no dialogue."
- The profile of Canadian foreign policy towards Cuba should be lowered. "Cuba is not the centre of the universe." Canada should not provide any further photo opportunities for Fidel Castro (through VIP and military visits). Training of youth could be a part of Canada's longer term strategy to influence change. Canada's policies should be harmonised with those of Europe and Latin America, perhaps by forming a "contact group of like-minded countries."
- Information sharing about Cuba among Canadian experts and interested parties should be sustained and the discussion taken to others. Well informed dialogue in Canada will result in a more comprehensive foreign policy.

January 13, 2000

Dear Friends,

We are pleased to invite you to an informal roundtable on Cuba to be held **January 18, 2000, in Ottawa, from 10:00am to 4:00pm, Centre Block, Parliament, Room 356-S.**

The purpose of this roundtable will be to provide expert advise on current Canada-Cuba relations and future directions. Topics for discussion could include, positive and negative developments in bilateral relations, possible future initiatives and contacts, relations in civic life (i.e., business, sports and the arts).

We hope to assemble experts from a number of sectors including; universities, business, NGO's. The agenda is attached.

Please, try to book air travel early to take advantage of lower fares. Read the reimbursement policy for more details.

I look forward to seeing you on the 18th of January.

Sincerely,

Steven Lee
National/Executive Director

AGENDA

Canada-Cuba relations Roundtable

January 18, 2000

10:00am to 4:00pm

Ottawa

Centre Block, Parliament, Room 356-S

- 9:30 - 10:00 Coffee and Doughnuts
- 10:00 - 10:10 Welcome (Steve Lee - Chair)
- 10:10 - 10:25 Opening Comments on Canadian Foreign Policy and Cuba
- 10:25 - 10:40 A Critique of the Canadian Approach (Yvon Grenier)
- 10:40 - 11:30 **Panel 1: Human Rights**

Opening comments by Laurie Wiseberg (Human Rights Internet)
Open Discussion
- 11:30 - 12:20 **Panel 2: Economic Reform**

Opening comments by Hal Klepak (Royal Military College)
Open Discussion
- 12:20 - 1:30 Lunch
- 1:30 - 2:20 **Panel 3: Canadian Business**
Opening comments by David Allan (York Medical)
Open Discussion
- 2:20 - 3:10 **Panel 4: NGOs and Civil Society**
Opening comments by Mark Fried (Oxfam)
Open Discussion
- 3:10 - 3:20 Coffee Break
- 3:20 - 4:00 Putting the Pieces Together: Recommendations for the Future of Canada-Cuba Relations

List of Participants

Canada-Cuba Relations Roundtable

January 18, 2000

10:00am to 4:00pm

Ottawa

Centre Block, Parliament, Room 356-S

Steve Lee - CCFPD

David Allan - York Medical Inc.

Marketa Geisler - CCFPD

Lynn Mancino - Revenue Canada

Senator Lois Wilson

Jean-Jacques Bastien - CIDA

Jean Paul Ruszkowski - Office of the Secretary of
State for Latin America

Stephen Free - CIDA

Hal Klepak - Royal Military College

Paul Durand - DFAIT

Julia Sagebien - Dalhousie University

Simon Wade - DFAIT

John Kirk - Dalhousie University

Justin Robertson - DFAIT

Yvon Grenier - St. Francis Xavier University

Suzanne Gobeil - DFAIT

Mark Fried - Oxfam Canada

Regrets

Arch Ritter
Carleton University

Elaine Henderson - Oxfam Canada

Brian Stevenson
University of Alberta

Minor Sinclair - Oxfam America

Juanita Montalvo
Sherritt International

Martha Thompson - Oxfam America

Nobina Robinson - FOCAL

Mark Whittall
Intelcan Technosystems Inc.

Christina Warren - FOCAL

Nick Rowe - Carleton University

Juan Antonio Blanco
Human Rights Internet

Laurie Wiseberg - Human Rights Internet

Christine Climenhage - Researcher

Father Goulet - Canadian Conference of Catholic
Bishops

Pierre Beemans - IDRC

Msgr. Schonenbach - Canadian Conference of
Catholic Bishops

Anna Nitoslowska - CLC

Ryszard Komenda - Consultant

John Clarke - Office of the Minister of Foreign
Affairs