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Our Dictatorship: Canada's Trilateral Relations with Castro's Cuba

YVON GRENIER

Over the past forty years, Cuba has developed a highly effective machinery of repression. The denial of basic civil and political rights is written into Cuban law. In the name of legality, armed security forces, aided by state controlled mass organizations, silence dissent with heavy prison terms, threats of prosecution, harassment, or exile. Cuba uses these tools to restrict severely the exercise of fundamental human rights of expression, association, and assembly. The conditions in Cuba's prisons are inhuman, and political prisoners suffer additional degrading treatment and torture. In recent years, Cuba has added new repressive laws and continued prosecuting non-violent dissidents while shrugging off international appeals for reform and placating visiting dignitaries with occasional releases of political prisoners. (Human Rights Watch, 1999: 1)

CUBA WITHOUT CUBANS

The main thesis presented in this chapter is that the Chrétien government's foreign policy towards Cuba is immature, mistaken, and ultimately irresponsible. It is first and foremost immature because it is designed as an identity-soothing ceremonial, not as a serious blueprint for sustainable relations with that country. It is mistaken because we are going out of our way to associate ourselves with an end-of-the-road dictatorship. Finally, it is irresponsible because its only possible impact in Cuba, if any, is the bolstering of a police state.

Canada's 'bilateral' relationship with Cuba is implicitly trilateral in the sense that it has as much to do with the US as with Cuba. It is also a domestic issue because it probably has more to do with us than with the US. Thus, our policy towards Cuba has little to do with Cuban politics or Cubans, beyond the necessary and sufficient condition that Cuba is the United States' enemy and victim. More than any other country or issue, Cuba gives Canada the chance to indulge in cost-free anti-Americanism, a service that Cuba has rendered by simply stopping time. The Canadian left and many Canadian nationalists are mercifully prepared to justify, condone, or simply ignore how Cubans are ruled.

This policy of 'constructive engagement' towards Cuba has been, with its ups and downs, a fixture of Canada-Cuba relations since 1959, though never with as much gusto as under the current Liberal government (Gorman, 1991; Kirk and McKenna, 1997, 1998, 1999). We have paid more high-level political attention to Cuba, had more diplomatic and policy initiatives, and invested more resources in a one-sided rapprochement with Cuba than ever before, and more so than any other Western democracy. Canada's policy initiatives towards Cuba have been misguided and even sloppy, as though the real goal was to offer the spectacle of cosy relations with Cuba in and of itself, quite independent of the so-called objectives that officially justify the pursuit of this relationship. We officially 'support movement in that country in the direction of peaceful transition and eventual reintegration into the hemisphere' (Axworthy, 1998). Yet, we have no specific target, no timetable, no evaluation criteria, not to mention no specific 'demands' or 'preconditions' attached to our diplomatic and economic largesse (unlike the European Union, for instance). With this perspective, our policy of 'constructive engage

ment' (also called 'principled pragmatism') does not have to be constructive and can make do without much response from the 'engaged'. What matters is 'to maintain the dialogue', to 'build confidence' *per se*, a goal for which we are prepared to ask little beyond co-operation in the building of a diplomatic façade.

On two recent occasions Cuba embarrassed Canada and recklessly damaged our spectacular ties. First, when Fidel Castro - who is President, Chief of State, Head of Government, First Secretary of the Communist Party, and Commander in Chief of the armed forces - sent to jail the four dissidents whom Prime Minister Chrétien singled out for clemency during his visit to Havana in April 1998. In other words, Castro imprisoned not just any dissidents, as has happened countless times for four decades in Castro's Cuba, but the ones to whose fate our government attached its credibility. As Mark Entwistle, Canada's ambassador in Cuba from 1993 to 1997, said, Prime Minister Chrétien was very upset 'because he had gone out on a line as a politician' (Scofield, 1999). The second time was when Fidel Castro called Canada 'enemy territory', among other undiplomatic terms, an inflammatory declaration that prompted Foreign Minister Axworthy to be present at the Pan-American Games medals ceremony in Winnipeg to congratulate Cuba's baseball team, thus eliciting some 'warm words' from the offending/offended dictator. What these two episodes remind us is that the rapprochement with Cuba is Canada's initiative and that, contrary to appearances and logic, Canada seems to want the partnership more than Cuba.

Canada's reaction to Castro's splendidly incautious acts-putting some of our co-operation initiatives and some top officials' visits to Havana 'on hold', and delaying the opening of a new Cuban consulate in Vancouver-suggests that our government is anxious to save face without changing the parameters of its flawed policy. As Canada's ambassador in Cuba, Keith Christie, affirmed in October 1999, 'relations between both countries are growing and will continue to improve' (Radio Havana Cuba, 1999).

REVISITING THE BASICS

A review of the scant literature on Canada-Cuba relations reveals a fascinating incongruity. On the one hand, the most vocal intellectual defenders of our rapprochement with Castro routinely downplay the question of how Cubans are governed. The authors of the only recent

book on the subject, John Kirk and Peter McKenna, hardly mention it at all, methodically redirecting their fondness for the Caribbean dictator towards a nationalistic defence of ever closer relations with a US foe (Kirk and McKenna, 1997, 1998, 1999). This clever strategy befits the key Canadian disposition towards Cuba, which is to use it as a symbol against the US while remaining serenely unbothered by the life of real Cubans. In the 1990s, one could not come across as a Castro groupie and expect to be taken seriously by the movers and shakers in Ottawa. On the other hand, criticizing Castro harshly, which few do in Canada, immediately tags one as pro-American, or worse, as pro-Cuban American, as though the Castro regime ranked a distant third as a violator of human rights in Cuba. Consequently, the whole issue of how Cubans are governed is routinely expunged from the discussion on Canada-Cuba relations.

Yet, the way Cubans are ruled has everything to do with our policy there. In fact, Cuba is the only political regime in the world that we officially want to change in a dramatic fashion. Our policy in Cuba, Foreign Minister Axworthy routinely reminds us, is 'to encourage further commitment to human rights and assist in the economic and institutional development of the country'.¹ On that account, the importance of knowing what is to be changed is self-evident. So to put the problem clearly, let me start with four propositions about this four-decade-old government! regime.

Castro's Cuba

1. Cubans have been ruled by an authoritarian regime for the past 40 years, one that conjugates the fairly standard Communist paraphernalia with a Latino type of 'charismatic' or 'caudillistic' leadership. Cubans are systematically deprived of some of the most basic freedoms: speech, association, and movement. The Cuban government has refused to engage in anything like 'glasnost'. As Raul Castro stated less than a year before the Joint Declaration on Canada-Cuba Co-operation (more on this later), 'The glasnost which undermined the USSR and other socialist countries consisted of handing over the mass media, one by one, to the enemies of socialism' (Castro, 1996: 35). The dynamic brothers are not about to let that happen in their island. In sum, one looks in vain for solid indicators that this regime could significantly change as long as Fidel Castro is in power-that is, as long as he lives.

2. Signs of liberalization have been few and far between. Over the past decade, the regime has tested enclaves of economic liberalization (mostly from 1993 to 1995). All the evidence suggests that they remained 'tests' and 'enclaves', not first steps towards a fundamental change in the island's economic policy.² Over and over again (especially since 1996), Cuban officials have stated that these experiments were attempted reluctantly, out of necessity, that none of these experiments should be understood as a 'transition' to something other than Leninist socialism, and that what matters most and is at the centre of the economy, i.e., politics, is not affected by these experiments and should never stray from its time-honoured path.

3. According to human rights organizations, the situation of human rights in Cuba has deteriorated during the past several years - this corresponding, roughly, to the period of our government's rapprochement with Castro's Cuba. According to Human Rights Watch, 'in recent years, rather than modify its laws to conform with international human rights standards, Cuba has approved legislation further restricting fundamental rights. Only a restoration of religious freedoms [the Cuban state has not been officially 'atheist' since 1992] stands out as a notable exception to this trend' (Human Rights Watch, 1999: 2). Hundreds of political prisoners are in jail. Cuba's constitution and criminal code are tailored to give the highest political authorities all the leverage necessary to exert the most absolute and arbitrary power over its citizens. Human Rights Watch is particularly severe in its assessment of the criminal code (the section is called 'codifying repression'), which criminalizes non-violent dissent with highly malleable provisions against (the list here is incomplete) 'Enemy propaganda', 'Persons demonstrating criminal tendencies', 'Dangerousness', 'Anti-social conduct', 'Contempt for the authority of a public official', 'Defamation of institutions, mass organizations, heroes, and martyrs', 'Insulting the Nation's symbols', 'Clandestine printing' (the state is the only provider of typewriting machines, computers, and photocopy machines, and it strictly controls their use), 'Abuse of freedom of religion', 'Disobedience and resistance', 'Illegal exit', 'Illegal entry', 'Failure to comply with the duty to denounce', 'Insult, calumny, and defamation', and so on. All of these are subject to all possible interpretations in a context where, according to Human Rights Watch, 'due process is denied', 'courts lack independence and impartiality', trials are held behind closed doors 'violating

the right to a public trial' (this year, 60 dissidents were jailed as a preventive measure to keep them away from the closed trial of the four prominent opposition leaders mentioned by Prime Minister Chrétien during his April 1998 visit to Havana), and there is widespread use of 'arrests and pretrial detentions', 'confessions and witness tampering', 'restrictions on the right to a lawyer', and the failure to 'inform detainees of the charges against them'.

Appeal exists but it is 'worthless'. Human Rights Watch reports that 'in an extraordinary June 1998 statement, Cuban Justice Minister Roberto Diaz Sotolongo justified Cuba's restrictions on dissent by explaining that, just as Spain had instituted laws to protect the monarch from criticism, Cuba was justified in protecting Fidel Castro from criticism, since he served a similar function as Cuba's "king" , (ibid.). Human Rights Watch also denounces the presence of labour camps in Cuba, as well as the overall treatment of prisoners (namely, torture). It reveals that 'prison authorities insisted that all detainees participate in politically oriented reeducation sessions, such as chanting "long live Fidel" or "Socialism or Death", or face punitive measures including beatings and solitary confinement' (ibid.).

4. The freedom that Cubans are known to enjoy more than their fellow Latin Americans is the freedom from want. The Cuban government has invested more in health and education than any other Latin American state. In health the achievements have apparently been significant. This effort has earned Cuba a great deal of legitimacy in Latin America and beyond. At the same time, it is clear that the ruinous economic model stubbornly maintained by the Cuban leadership for political reasons has cancelled out the potential benefits of these policies, especially after the cessation of the Soviet subsidy. Alarming reports on the overall health of Cubans are commonplace. On the 1998 UN Human Development Index, Cuba ranked 85th out of 174 countries, between Jamaica and Peru (UNDP, 1998: 128-9). In education, the greater accessibility to resources is offset by the systematic repression of freedom in the educational system, as in society in general. In sum, a pragmatic assessment of Cuba's trade-offs between liberty and standard of living leads to the conclusion that the absence of civil and political liberties is an exorbitant and unnecessary price to pay for what practically amounts to not much at all in terms of tangible benefits for the population.

The Use and Abuse of the US Embargo

According to all supporters of the Castro regime, much of what is wrong in Cuba results from the US embargo, imposed by Washington in the early 1960s and further tightened by the Torricelli law (1992) and the Helms-Burton Act (1996). During Prime Minister Chrétien's visit to Cuba in April 1998, the first by a Canadian Prime Minister in 22 years, President Castro compared the US embargo to the Nazi genocide—without so much as a twitch from the Prime Minister. (Chrétien was remarkably uncritical during his visit to Havana, in comparison to the Pope, the Governor of Illinois, and more than half of the delegates to the 1999 Ibero-American Summit.) Apparently, Chrétien wanted to go to Havana to be seen in Havana. Foreign Minister Axworthy can hardly talk about Cuba at all without criticizing the embargo, which in his view is the cause of most problems in Cuba, all the way from 'economic crisis' to 'prostitution'.³ When criticized for the deteriorating human rights situation in Cuba, Foreign Minister Axworthy typically responds: 'What have the Americans accomplished?' (quoted in Kirk and McKenna, 1997: 173). These comments suggest one more benefit of lifting the US embargo: it would force our legislators to think about Cuba as a country inhabited by Cubans, not merely as a symbol in Canada-US relations.

Nobody can absolutely ascertain how different the situation might have been in Cuba if history had unfolded differently. Four brief comments on the economic and political significance of the embargo are worth making.

1. It is highly probable that without the embargo the political regime in Cuba would have been a dictatorship anyway because its fundamental configuration responds to a conception of authority and leadership that has much deeper roots than a mere ad hoc response to adversity. Anti-Americanism, caudillism, and authoritarianism were already dominant in the '26th of July Movement' at the time of the insurgency. The Communist model fixed on these predispositions left little room for institutional improvisation, emulating a fairly standard model that Russians or East Europeans would immediately recognize. Reading the human rights organizations' reports on Cuba year after year makes one realize how systematic and extensive oppression is in that country, how it affects citizens for the most benign offence, and how it targets groups for a wide variety of political, religious, and sexual reasons (persecution of

homosexuals in Cuba is well documented). It is hard to imagine how this regime could cope differently with freedom of the press, freedom of association, and freedom of movement if the embargo were lifted.⁴

2. The US embargo is certainly the most dramatic that Cuba could possibly experience from any single country. The US is a neighbour and a world giant with unparalleled sway in international institutions. Nevertheless, in the end, it remains the embargo of one single country, a country, incidentally, on which Cuba was dependent prior to 1959 and that was blamed for most of the political and economic woes of pre-Castro Cuba by the same observers (or same type of observers) who now lament the severing of economic ties with the imperial United States. Cuba can trade with Canada, Mexico, France, England, Germany, or any other country—any country, that is, except the US. Since the downfall of the Soviet Union, Cuba has concluded co-operation agreements with 142 countries and attracted foreign investment into key areas of the economy, including mining, petroleum, manufacturing, telecommunications, and tourism. Spain, Canada, Italy, and Mexico are the leading sources of investment. According to *Oxford Analytica*, 1999: 3) Cuba has also been

engaged in renegotiating its debts with other countries, and since 1997 has begun to tap medium and long-term credit markets, raising 500 million dollars over the past two years. There are to date some 370 joint ventures with foreign companies in Cuba, and in 1995 the government introduced legislation to permit completely foreign-owned operations on Cuban soil. The EU is the source of more than 50 per cent of the foreign capital. Spanish companies are involved in 72 association agreements, with total investments in the island of about 200 million dollars.

The same source indicates that 'Havana claims that more than one-third of its 370 association agreements with foreign companies have been concluded since the Helms-Burton Act was passed.'

Legislation such as the Torricelli law (1992) or the Helms-Burton Act (1996) was largely a response to the embargo's failure to prevent Cuba from purchasing US goods through trading houses in third countries or the black market. (The US embargo is generally said to harm Cuba because it prevents the country from buying US goods and services, not because it closes its market to Cuban products.)

What is more, the US embargo is somewhat ameliorated by remittances from Cuban Americans, who in 1998 injected \$800 million US into the Cuban economy - roughly twice the amount of the *total* two-way trade between Canada and Cuba during that year. And that was before the relaxation of rules for remittance transfers announced by President Clinton in 1999. Furthermore, the Helms-Burton Act, adopted a month after two civilian aircraft were shot down in international air space by Cuban MiGs in February 1996,⁵ never had the dramatic impact denounced by Canada and other countries because President Clinton repeatedly (every six months) suspended the right of otherwise eligible claimants to file lawsuits against some of Cuba's foreign investors (clause three). As Sherrin International, the only Canadian company targeted by Helms-Burton, noted in its 1998 *Annual Report*, 'the Foreign Extraterritorial Measures Act (Canada) was amended as of January 1, 1997, to provide that any judgment given under the Helms-Burton Act shall not be recognized or enforceable in any manner in Canada' (Sherrin International, 1998: 24). The Helms-Burton Act did not prevent the Vancouver-based multinational from investing in Cuba in properties expropriated from American owners in 1959. As both Mark Entwistle, the Canadian ambassador to Cuba from 1993 to 1997, and Allan Ibbison, the president of Leisure Canada, another Canadian company with sizeable investment in Cuba and involved in the tourist industry, recently told a conference of people interested in doing business in Cuba, the embargo is 'essentially dead' and Helms-Burton 'has no teeth' (Scofield, 1999).

The embargo is an obstacle, but not an insurmountable one, for US investors and companies who want to do business in Cuba. There are now many exceptions to the embargo allowing US companies to sell medical and agricultural supplies (provided that they go to nongovernmental organizations for distribution). As *Washington Post* journalist John Lancaster recently pointed out, 'their salesmen regularly travel there under licenses granted by the Treasury Department', adding that 'the law also gives exceptions to the entertainment and communications fields, among other areas' (Lancaster, 1999). Cuba's limitations in purchasing goods and services derive primarily from its lack of hard currency and the overall insolvency of its economy.

3. By far the most tragic impact of Helms-Burton is the one methodically overlooked by the promoters of our 'constructive engagement' in Cuba: its political consequences in the island, with

the adoption of new repressive legislation. Eight months after the US Congress enacted Helms-Burton, the Cuban government responded with the Law Reaffirming Cuban Dignity and Sovereignty (Ley de Reafirmación de la Dignidad y Soberanía Cubanas), explicitly a response to Helms-Burton. According to Human Rights Watch, this law criminalized 'even the appearance of support for U.S. policies' (Human Rights Watch, 1999: 4-5). A follow-up on the 'Law for the Protection of the National Independence and the Cuban Economy' (Ley de Protección de la Independencia Nacional y la Economía de Cuba) was adopted in February 1999, only a few weeks after an important visit by Foreign Minister Axworthy to Havana. During that visit, new areas of 'co-operation' were announced between Canada and Cuba, and a new treaty on the 'transfer of offenders' was signed between the two countries.

4. There seems to be a consensus (even in the White House) that the US embargo has not worked, presumably because Fidel Castro is still firmly at the helm. Still, the debate on this issue is confusing. Most opponents of the embargo neglect to explain what precisely they oppose: the goal of forcing Castro to change his policies or step down (roughly the US position), or simply the means used by the US government to achieve this goal.⁶ Officially, Canada and the European Union share the US goal, albeit with less fanfare. Of course, the result is the same in Havana but their policies towards Cuba are never denounced as a 'complete failure'. True, many critics of the embargo, including Foreign Minister Axworthy, do not display much enthusiasm or clarity in pursuing or affirming this goal, preferring oblique declarations about Cuba's political and economic transition from an unqualified present to a mysterious future. (Declarations by Axworthy against the fall 1999 military coup in Pakistan indicate that neither he nor his government is opposed to economic sanctions *per se*.) Thus, although Ottawa officially shares Washington's goal in regard to Cuba, the confusing signals coming from Axworthy prompted the *Globe and Mail* to devote an editorial to the issue, arguing among other things that 'Mr. Axworthy seems not even to understand his own policy' (*Globe and Mail*, 1998):

No doubt the lifting of the embargo would have a tremendous impact on Cuba, but the bulk of the shock would be political, not economic. President Castro would have to find another justification for his failures - or maybe not (the US lifted its embargo but we still suffer the consequences of it'). In the end, those products that the

US, and only the US, produces and that Cuba wants would remain unaffordable for the Cuban government.

Cuba's fate lies in Cuba, not in Washington, Ottawa, or Brussels. In fact, the world can help Castro much more than it can harm him. But again, if the proposition is accepted that the world's policies towards Cuba do make a huge difference for the better, then why is it that the US embargo is said to have failed and not the absence of embargo by all other nations? Are there two Cubas: an authoritarian and bankrupt state victimized by the US, and a prosperous, democratizing one rescued by the rest of us?

CANADA-FIDEL RELATIONS

Since 1959, all Canadian governments have had more than cordial relations with Castro's Cuba, primarily because it was consistent with our tradition of having normal relations with 'constituted' and not overly monstrous governments. Before long, as the US and Cuba kept poisoning each other's well, Cuba provided an easy way for Canada to demonstrate its independence vis-à-vis the Yankees. In Canada, there is only one way to be independent: it is to be independent from the US. And the only unmistakable way to be independent from the US is to oppose the US.

My point here is not that Canada should have emulated US policy towards Cuba or that Canada craved to do so but refrained, choosing instead to hold its nose and score easy political points. Rather, I suggest that our decision to have cordial relations with the new Cuban regime, while being consistent with our diplomatic tradition, took on an extra dimension (Canada-US relations) that inflated its overall importance in our foreign policy. This is true for all the governments since Diefenbaker's. What has changed is the magnitude of this 'extra dimension' and how much it has affected (and distorted) our relations with Cuba. The governments of Diefenbaker, Pearson, and Mulroney shaped Canadian foreign policy towards Cuba with a mixture of opportunism and benign neglect. All of them sent enough positive signals to Cuba to distinguish clearly our policy from the one formulated in Washington. Even under the openly pro-US government of Brian Mulroney, the Assistant Deputy Minister for Latin America and the Caribbean (and subsequently Canadian ambassador to the UN), Louise Fréchette, visited Cuba in April 1990, reiterating Canada's policy of good relations and calling for enhanced

co-operation. Four years later, Canada's Secretary of State for Latin America and Africa, Christine Stewart, publicly stated that it was her 'impression that Castro is still supported by a majority of Cubans' (Fagan, 1994). Nevertheless, none of these prime ministers went as far as the Trudeau or Chrétien administrations in making friendly gestures to Castro. Indeed, in the case of the current government, it has the warmest policy towards Cuba, with the fewest strings attached, of any Western democracy. To put it simply: with Diefenbaker, Pearson, and Mulroney we had relations with Cuba. With Trudeau and now Chrétien, we have a relationship with Castro.

Some observers suggest that commercial interests have determined Canada's Cuba policy. Indeed, our government has never spent so much time and energy facilitating Canadian investment in Cuba as it has in the past few years. The Canadian government, through the Industrial Co-operation Program, 'has contributed more than \$6 million to 30 activities such as feasibility studies, training, and environmental and technology transfer' (CIDA, 1999). This policy is coherent with Prime Minister Chrétien's tendency to see foreign policy as trade by other means. The real story here is not the volume of trade with Cuba *per se*: our two-way trade with Cuba in one year represents about a third of our exports to the United States in one day. Rather, it is the fact that trade with Cuba has grown significantly over the past five years and increased more in percentage terms than our trade with any other Latin American or Caribbean country.

Canadian investors do take full advantage of the undemocratic environment offered by Cuba. For instance, Human Rights Watch mentions laws 'barring employees from forming unions or even from entering into independent, direct discussions of labor rights with their foreign employers' (Human Rights Watch, 1999: 18). But these investors are not naive about the risk incurred. Canada and Cuba are still trying to negotiate a bilateral investment protection agreement that would presumably protect Canadian investments from unreasonable expropriation—this being an indicator, more than anything else, of the Canadian officials' belief in the existence of the rule of law in Cuba. The biggest Canadian investor in Cuba, Sherritt International, may have underestimated the risks of investing in Cuba, but it did not ignore them completely: 'the Corporation is entitled to the benefit of certain assurances received from the Government of Cuba and certain agencies of the Government of Cuba that protect it from adverse changes in law, although such

changes remain beyond the control of the Corporation and the effect of any such changes cannot be accurately predicted' (Sherritt International, 1998). There are no guaranteed property rights in Cuba, and foreign investment is welcomed only as a necessary evil, as a way of importing capital without capitalism. Sherritt concedes that its 'experience to date in Cuba has been satisfactory', a rather modest adjective that still rings like an overstatement given that the ratio of capital assets and goodwill versus revenues in Cuba is by far the worst of all Sherritt's global investments. Sherritt's chairman, Ian W. Delaney, who unlike academics cannot afford to stray too far from reality when addressing his audience (shareholders, auditor), admits that his company is overstretched in Cuba, that it is examining 'a broad range of investment alternatives', and, implicitly, that its performance in Cuba explains the company's failure to 'meet management's internal targets' (ibid.). The idea that our companies will be better positioned than those of the US after the downfall of the Communist regime, merely because they were there before, is a monument to our political naivety. Being there before by cutting deals with the dictator may well be a powerful magnet for hostility in the new regime.

In sum, our trade relations with Cuba, while strengthened over the past years, are still relatively marginal and remain negatively affected by the uncertainties that necessarily derive from dealing with an aging and temperamental president-for-life in a volatile political and economic environment. Trade opportunities are not and cannot be the overarching factor explaining Canada's infatuation with Cuba.

The Chrétien-Axworthy Policy

Soon after the Liberal government assumed office in October 1993, Canadian policy towards Cuba went from being moderately friendly to a level of engagement unprecedented in Canadian history. No other democratic government in the world is as close to the Castro regime as the current Canadian government. We have never before had so many high-ranking officials visit Cuba, something that the Castro regime, always striving to break out of its perceived isolation, openly relishes. Most prominently, Prime Minister Chrétien visited Cuba in April 1998 and Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy went there in January 1997 and again in 1999. In addition, there have been visits by cabinet members, the speakers and clerks from both houses of

Canada's Parliament, other high government officials and provincial premiers, and, of course, the many visits by Cuban officials to Canada. Only missing is a visit to Canada by Fidel Castro himself, which might very well happen in the year 2000 for the Organization of American States (OAS) meeting in Windsor and/or in 2001 for the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City. Canada never offered as much assistance to Cuba as it has done over the past several years, so much so that it is now one of the largest donor countries for Cuba. The Canadian government spends little in development aid in Latin America, and Cuba is not an exception. Still, statistics from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) show a sharp increase in development aid to Cuba under the current Liberal government, going from \$0.96 million in 1993-4 to \$10.97 million in 1997-8. Significantly, this took place while the government was submitting its foreign aid budget to severe cuts.

The rapprochement with Cuba deepened after Lloyd Axworthy became Foreign Minister in 1996. Axworthy is identified with the 'left' of the Liberal caucus (red tory is probably a more accurate label). This may not mean much, considering his role in the reform of Unemployment Insurance, but it points at least to this: in harmony with the Canadian left, Axworthy has both interest in, and sympathy for, Cuba. As Kirk and McKenna point out, Axworthy 'has taken almost a personal interest in things Cuban' (Kirk and McKenna, 1999: 397).

An interview with Axworthy when he was Foreign Affairs critic for the Official Opposition indicates that for him the most pressing problem in Canadian foreign policy is its closeness to the United States. Axworthy identified this as 'a flaw that must be overcome if we are to play an effective role in world affairs....it is for this reason that the priority of a Liberal foreign policy centres on how to develop a more independent role for Canada' (Axworthy, 1992-3: 7). In this same interview, the future minister asserted that Canada should de-emphasize its commercial relations with the US, courting instead the markets of the Caribbean region and Central America. Furthermore, the government should seek the participation and support of non-governmental organizations (NGOS), churches, universities, business organizations, and Aboriginal groups in the implementation of our foreign policy.

None of these statements contradicts the Liberal Party's public objectives to pursue a more 'independent foreign policy' (i.e., dif-

ferent from the US) and to 'democratize' foreign policy (platforms of 1993 and 1997). Nevertheless, this government has never felt bound by its electoral promises, and Lloyd Axworthy was the most suitable candidate to turn what could have been little more than another electoral manoeuvre into something more concrete, that is, into a real effort to distance ourselves from the Americans whenever it could be done with maximum publicity and minimal economic and political cost. If Cuba did not exist, the Liberals would have to invent it.

Interestingly, in this interview, Axworthy did not say in what particular cases Canada's policies mistakenly converged with those of the US: the convergence itself is the problem. Similarly, one can only guess for what purpose Canadians should trade more with Lilliputian economies and less with the closest neighbour and biggest market in the world, or how the input of unaccountable, if politically correct, interest groups would better the outcomes of our foreign policy. To side with the right people, not with the US, is not a means but an end in itself, one that requires few resources beyond a microphone and a roomful of journalists to broadcast the words and deeds of the minister. Incidentally, our defence and peacekeeping capabilities, as well as our foreign aid budget, seem inversely proportional to the frequency and immodesty of the Foreign Minister's utterances. Under Axworthy, the message is the medium.

A FRAMEWORK FOR CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT

The Joint Declaration on Canada-Cuba Co-operation signed by both countries in January 1997 constitutes, according to Axworthy, 'an officially sanctioned framework for constructive engagement' with Cuba (Axworthy, 1998). The Declaration contains 14 points, the first six of which are quite far-reaching since they aim at reforming the core of the state machinery (the other points deal with issues such as sport, audiovisual co-operation, and so on). One immediately realizes that our government is interested in slogans and image-making rather than in serious initiatives when one considers the amount of funds allocated: \$1.2 million (through CIDA) over three years. Given how mistaken the key points of the Declaration are, we (and especially the Cuban people) can only rejoice that they were never given the chance to be fully implemented. The key points of the Declaration (DFAIT, 1997) were:

1. co-operation in the area of the administration of justice and the judicial-legal system, including exchanges of judges and judicial training;
2. support exchanges between the House of Commons and the [Cuban] National Assembly, focusing on the operations of both institutions;
3. exchange of experiences between both countries relating to the Cuban intention to strengthen within the National Assembly of People's Power a Citizens' Complaints commission;
4. broadening and deepening co-operation on the issue of human rights, which will include the preparation of seminars on diverse matters of mutual interest, academic exchanges between officials, professionals, and experts, as well as sharing experiences and positions on the work of the specialized organizations of the United Nations;
5. supporting the activities of Canadian and Cuban non-governmental organizations within the framework of bilateral co-operation between both countries and in accordance with the laws and regulations of each country;
6. continuation of macroeconomic co-operation, with an initial focus in the areas of taxation and central banking, while studying joint areas in which Canada might continue to support the Cuban policy of economic reform.

Let us examine each of these points briefly (the human rights issue will be discussed separately).

Canada's proposal to help make the Cuban judicial system more efficient with new computers and Internet technology is tantamount to perfecting what Human Rights Watch calls 'Cuba's repressive machinery'. The problem with the administration of justice in Cuba is hardly technical in nature. As Human Rights Watch notes, 'Cuban courts continue to try and imprison human rights activists, independent journalists, economists, doctors, and others for the peaceful expression of their views, subjecting them to the Cuban prison system's extremely poor conditions' (Human Rights Watch, 1999: 1). Professor Stephen Toope, then Dean of McGill Law School, went on a CIDA mission to Cuba in June 1998 to give advice on the possible parameters of a program of legal and judicial reform in Cuba. Not surprisingly, Professor Toope 'came away convinced that there was

very little room for engagement with Cuba right now; there was simply no openness to legal reform' in Cuba. In reply to a letter outlining my misgivings about our government policy, he responded: 'I agree that a fundamental overhaul of the legal system is needed, and that this cannot be accomplished through "technical assistance" with court registries, etc.' Particularly interesting is his assessment that 'the Minister had made promises during his visit before adequate scoping had been done.'⁷ This is what happens when you rush to co-operate for the sake of showing the world that you are co-operating.

The other dimension of point one - exchanges of judges and judicial training - is deflated by the unwillingness of Cubans to discuss seriously the fundamentally unlawful and anti-democratic nature of their legal structure. As in other points of the Declaration, Cuba is willing to accept free technological resources but has no interest in the Canadian 'content', even if this does not mean much. Canada, on the other hand, pleads to maintain the dialogue, hopefully without losing face. So we are going nowhere, going 10 feet in their direction and imploring them to give an inch, all of which is in order to 'build confidence' and 'maintain the dialogue'.

Supporting exchanges between the House of Commons and the Cuban National Assembly, with a focus on the operations of both institutions, is absurd at best since the National Assembly in Cuba is not a legislative assembly in any meaningful (democratic) sense of the term. It meets four days a year to rubber-stamp the laws adopted by the Council of State under the dictatorial rule of President Castro and his single-party state. What exactly House of Commons Speaker Gilbert Parent had in mind when he publicly affirmed that our elected representatives have much to learn from Cuban 'parliamentarians' (among other irresponsible comments of his)⁸ is anyone's guess. Parent visited Havana in March 1997, resulting in the establishment of a Parliamentary Co-operation Program financed by CIDA. The House of Commons also delivered computer hardware to the Cuban National Assembly. In sum, not much came from this project, apart from giving some badly needed credibility to a discredited Cuban institution and providing our House Speaker with an opportunity to embarrass himself.

A Citizens' Complaints Commission (Oficina de Atención a la Población) is presumably like an ombudsman's office where citizens can go to complain about their government. In Cuba, the idea is rem-

iniscent of the famous practice of the '*cabiers de doléances*' of France's *ancien régime*, with the difference that the Bourbons never had the opportunity to use Rapid Response Brigades, Committees for the Defence of the Revolution ('the eyes and the ears of the revolution'), or a modern police state to handle complaints. Cuban citizens who complain too much do not go to a commission: they go to jail. Thus, it is not clear what Foreign Minister Axworthy meant when he publicly affirmed that such a commission could 'provide transparent due process for citizens' complaints', since in Castro's Cuba due process *does not exist*, not by accident or temporarily, but because of the very nature of the political system in place (Axworthy, 1997). Although the Commission has apparently been in place for quite some time, there is no evidence that it was ever 'used' (or could be) in any proper way. *National Post* journalist Isabel Vincent went to Havana in the fall of 1998 to learn more about the Commission and found that 'the commission's activities have never been mentioned in the official Cuban press', 'there is no sign on the commission's main office door', 'it is not listed in the Havana telephone book, and even those who live next door to it do not appear to know that it is there' (Vincent, 1998). Even the staff at the Canadian embassy in Havana did not seem aware of its location in town. When Vincent finally located the Commission office, the three officials refused to talk to her 'without government authorization'.

There is also no evidence that Canada's plan to 'strengthen' the Commission (or to consolidate into one single office the various legal institutions where citizens, in theory, can express grievances) ever went anywhere. This is probably good news, for it is clearly misguided and always will be as long as it fails to take into account the political environment in which this Commission (or anything similar) must operate.

NGOs are Axworthy's instrument of choice for 'democratizing' foreign policy. Thus the minister enhances his profile as the number-one patron of NGO projects abroad, assuring himself the loyalty of the NGO community and their many 'consultants', as well as their assistance in an organizational context where the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) bureaucrats may not always like (and may even resist) the orientation chosen by its minister.⁹ It is far from clear that the co-optation of non-accountable (if righteous) NGOs amounts to 'democratizing' foreign policy. What is

quite evident, however, is that for all the commendable humanitarian work done by NGOs in Cuba, none of it should be misconstrued as a strategy for democratization. The main agency overseeing the work of Canadian NGOs in Cuba is the Cuba-Canada Interagency Project (CCIP), a coalition of 25 Cuban 'social organizations' and 20 Canadian NGOs, churches, and funding agencies, all striving to carry out grassroots projects without hurting the sensibility of Cuban officials while not completely losing their credibility as 'non-governmental' organizations. Founded in January 1995, CCIP is supported by the Canadian government and CIDA and led by Oxfam-Canada. Its main objective is the 'strengthening' of democratic participation 'at all levels of Cuban society' (Kirk and McKenna, 1997: 156).

The government of Cuba regards NGOs with a great deal of suspicion. After a few years of not knowing with what degree of hostility it should handle all these (mostly sympathetic) foreign NGOs willing to fill the void created by the end of the Soviet Union's subsidy, ideological purity and state control came back *en force*. In his 1996 report to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Raul Castro stated: 'our concept of civil society is not the same as the one they refer to in the United States. Rather, it is our own Cuban socialist civil society, encompassing our strong mass organizations' - that is, state organizations (Castro, 1996: 18). Castro deplors that the Cuban state 'did not react in time' to all these 'creators of stratagems to spy on us, to find recruitment possibilities and to announce ideological platforms favoring the transition to capitalism'. For Raul Castro, the state must respond with renewed firmness, for 'adopting a neutral or confused position, in order to avoid a confrontation or elude a thorny topic, is a show of unacceptable weakness before one's adversary; it is tantamount to admitting that the adversary's position is the correct one' (ibid., 35). Yet, Canadian NGOs working in Cuba are quite explicitly favourable in their attitudes to the Castro regime. (After the passage of the Helms-Burton Act, Oxfam led a coalition of 28 Canadian groups encouraging Canadian vacationers to boycott Florida and visit Cuba instead.) In fact, they are arguably the only NGOs in Latin America that are friendly to and, in fact, largely controlled by the Cuban government. Cuba is also Latin America's only remaining dictatorship, which speaks volumes about the general and dominant passions in the small world of NGOs.¹⁰ Too bad Castro did not make it to the World Trade Organization conference

in Seattle in 1999, for it would have clarified the political debate to see thousands of 'anarchist' and 'progressive' organizations prostrate themselves before the totalitarian dictator.

Ultimately, Canadian NGOs and the Canadian government are the victims of their overarching desire not to democratize the Cuban government but to do business with it, within the confines of existing Cuban 'laws and regulations'.

Macroeconomic co-operation would be helpful if the Cuban economy were truly experiencing a transition towards a market-based economy. It is not. Co-operation here means essentially (again) the shipping of informatics and statistics equipment to various government agencies, plus providing some 'technical training' for public officials. Over 150 work-stations have been delivered and installed, and officials from the Central Bank of Cuba have received technical training from the Bank of Canada. Through CIDA, Revenue Canada, and Statistics Canada, we have also 'co-operated' in the area of taxation, an instrument used by the Cuban government to suffocate the nascent private micro-enterprises in Cuba (Ritter, 1999: 13). Emerging as a popular strategy for survival in the early 1990s, when the government was no longer able to supply food for more than (roughly) 10 days a month, these very small businesses were tolerated until 1996, when they became increasingly 'asphyxiated by hostile public policies' (ibid.). According to Ritter, here is how the tax works:

First, the tax is levied on 90% of *gross* revenues [of private micro-enterprises], and not on *net* revenues after the deduction of legitimate input costs. Second, the state determines the minimum amount of total revenues for many activities, this serving then as the tax base. Third, the National Tax Office requires that the taxpayers pay any assessed tax shortfall if their monthly payments are less than the amount due, but does not compensate the taxpayer if an overpayment of taxes on the monthly instalments has occurred. Finally, the tax is regressive as it imposes a lump-sum tax at the beginning of each month. (Ibid., 15)

This 'asphyxiation' coincided roughly with our government's proposal to help the Cuban government fine-tune its taxation capability. CIDA is apparently enthusiastic about Canada's role in the rapid expansion of the new taxation system. New regional taxation offices are being opened, and Cubans use the Canadian system of 'volun-

tary declaration' (finally, some Canadian content) with a tremendous rate of success! Micro-enterprises amount to little as springboards for democratization and liberalization in the island. Yet, they are the beginning of enclaves for the quasi-autonomous organization of people under a totalitarian regime. Helping the government to crush them should not be an objective of Canadian foreign policy.

Human Rights or Co-operation?

The project of broadening and deepening Canada-Cuba co-operation in the area of human rights is officially the cornerstone of our 'constructive engagement' policy. The human rights issue is also at the centre of what is wrong with the Chrétien-Axworthy policy. The reason is plain and simple: our government wants co-operation with Cuba much more than it wants human rights in Cuba.

For a start, Cuba does not recognize that it has a human rights problem. For Fidel Castro, Cuba is a beacon of human rights and democracy, much more than Canada. At the past two Ibero-American summits, the Cuban delegation gladly signed the declaration upholding a 'commitment to democracy, the rule of law and political pluralism'. Thus we have one more area of 'co-operation' where Cuban officials agree to talk about human rights issues to Canadians who need this concession to legitimize their rapprochement with Cuba. In exchange, Canada agrees to lend its support and credibility to an exercise from which anything potentially embarrassing for Cuba has been methodically expurgated. Rather than having specific initiatives of co-operation that challenge the systematic repression of basic freedoms (speech, association, movement) and the absence of free elections and due process in Cuba, in the context of a dialogue involving one country that respects human rights (Canada) and another one that does not, we prefer to 'build confidence' by 'exchanging views' in CIDA-sponsored and closed-door seminars, to which only a handful of NGOs and academics are invited. Furthermore, these seminars (three have been held so far)¹¹ were not directly about issues of democracy and citizenship, but on 'children's rights' and 'women's rights', two important sets of issues, to be sure, but ones that could easily be handled in the abstract and without reference to the kind of political setting in which they appear. East European and Soviet government officials could lecture on these issues in their sleep. In fact, they used to lecture *us* on these topics, burying the thorny issue of democratic rights under canned condemnations of 'capitalism' and

'imperialism'-nowadays, neo-liberalism and globalization.¹² In April 2000, the Canada-Cuba seminar series was to continue in Canada. According to CIDA, this time the human rights topic would be pay equity.

In closing on this point, it is pertinent to recall that Ottawa claimed a small measure of progress in its Cuba policy when Ismael Sombra and 12 other political prisoners were released from jail and sent to Canada (Sombra in 1997, the others in 1998). Two comments need to be made in that respect. First, Sombra credits PEN Canada, not the Canadian government, for his release from jail. Second, according to Human Rights Watch, the other prisoners were, for the most part, reaching the end of their sentences (in fact, the Cuban government wanted to send more of its undesirable subjects to Canada, but Canadian officials had to refuse some candidates for security reasons). Forcing them into exile is a violation of their right to stay in their own country. While it is arguably better to be free here than in jail in Cuba, especially considering the conditions in Cuban jails, Castro's systematic policy of exiling opponents is ultimately part of the problem rather than of the solution. While it may be a good idea, for humanitarian reasons, to be at the receiving end of that dubious policy, we should not delude ourselves into thinking that we are facilitating a great human rights victory. The same comment applies to Canada's role in facilitating the emigration of Cuban Jews to Israel. While this was conceivably a welcome development for the Cubans involved, its significance is mixed at best for the situation of Jews in Cuba, and our Foreign Minister should have refrained from using the case as another opportunity to brag, this time about our constructive engagement with Cuba (Oziewicz, 1999).

CONCLUSION: OUR DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

There is no dividing line between domestic and foreign policy. (Axworthy, 1992-3: 14)

This discussion on Canada's foreign policy towards Cuba could now take us in two directions. First, it could naturally lead us to recommend policy alternatives to our government. Here my propositions would be: (1) to drop the 'constructive engagement' policy at once, replacing it with a basic and minimal relationship with the Cuban government; (2) to continue providing humanitarian aid while link-

ing any additional development aid or co-operation programs (not to mention official visits and other diplomatic niceties) to significant improvements in the area of democratic rights; and (3) to adopt a government-endorsed code of ethics for Canadian companies investing in Cuba—exactly what Foreign Minister Axworthy is now recommending for Canadian companies in Sudan.

My fourth recommendation necessitates a detour. Our policy towards Cuba points to a major flaw in the policy of 'human security' promoted by the current Foreign Minister. As late as April 1999, Axworthy was still admitting that 'greater clarity on the meaning of the term is needed' (DFAIT, 1999a). To know more we have had to follow the minister and decipher his every utterance. Still, the concept remains elusive. In a DFAIT document entirely devoted to spelling out the nature and scope of his new 'doctrine', Axworthy states that human security encompasses 'seven dimensions of security': 'economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political' (ibid.). That is, one dimension out of seven is politics, with democratic rights being arguably only a part of that political variable. Doubtlessly, totalitarian and authoritarian regimes would rather be 'engaged' in human security than directly in democracy and human rights. This is without mentioning that increased vigilance on humanitarian problems in the abstract is nothing but 'pulpit diplomacy' and wishful thinking if it is not matched with adequate resources and cost-benefit assessments (Hampson and Oliver, 1998). All of this is to argue that my fourth recommendation would be to clearly separate the issues of national security, humanitarian concerns, and democratic rights. Conflating them in the hopelessly vague concept of human security introduces nothing but confusion, in addition to shifting the attention of the public from the problems at hand to the public revelations of the minister.

I have a fifth recommendation for our government, as well as for many of my fellow citizens who use Cuba as an outlet for identity problems: grow up! If we need to prize a Caribbean dictator to shore up our sense of identity as Canadians, we are in trouble. This is more than a recommendation, however: it is the other direction in which this analysis of Canada's foreign policy towards Cuba can take us. As a matter of fact, our infantile Cuba policy points to a broader issue for Canadians: our democratic deficit here at home. Nothing else can ultimately explain why Castro's Cuba has been for so long the fetish of choice among a great many well-informed Canadians, why so

many academics who make a living out of criticizing governments and policies gladly condone the absence of such liberty for their Cuban colleagues, why Canadian unions wax eloquent about a regime that bans independent unions and freedom of association, why government officials, bureaucrats, and NGOs with fine educational backgrounds and experience in world affairs can put together irresponsible policies such as the one included in the Joint Declaration of January 1997, and why so many Canadian universities (more than 15 now) are rushing to develop exchange programs with (and send their students to) Cuban universities where freedom of thought and association are systematically repressed, as though Cuba was not dictatorial, just interestingly different. These are the kinds of questions we must seriously ask ourselves as Canadians, for they will be relevant long after Fidel Castro and his regime are gone.

NOTES

1. Official document of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, available on the Web. The other country we tried to 'fix' is South Africa. For Adam and Moodley, 'in reality Canada's intervention has made little difference to South African developments', but 'it has contributed to Canadian self-definition and international credibility' (Adam and Moodley, 1992: 1).
2. For an overview of the legal parameters of these enclaves, see DFAIT (1999b). Incidentally, this is also an interesting guide for Canadian biases towards Cuba. Independent Cuban 'journalists' (the Guide's quotation marks) are referred to as 'sometimes interesting, in spite of a strong anti-government bias', whereas the Cuban government's news agency (Prensa Latina) is plainly recommended without comment. It also presents CubaWeb as 'an American site with the same name as the official Cuban government service', one that is oriented to a 'post Castro Cuba' but that 'nonetheless' includes a reasonably balanced collection of business news.
3. See some of his comments and the *Globe and Mail's* editorial (1998) on the subject.
4. To give only one recent example with a Canadian resonance: a Cuban academic and member of the Communist Party (i.e., not a vocal critic of the government, let alone a dissident) lost his position at the University of Havana after he expressed pessimistic views about the Cuban economy in a public lecture. This economist, incidentally, was hired by the government-funded International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada, which funds exchange programs with Cuban universities and which normally does not worry overly about disregard for academic freedom in Cuba. This time, however, the IDRC president, Maureen O'Neil, had to protest, for as she pointed out, 'We have a responsibility to go in and defend *our* researchers if they fall into trouble' (in Knox, 1999; my emphasis). Presumably, this responsibility could remain dormant

- before and cheerful co-operation could continue unabated when only ordinary Cubans fell into trouble.
5. Here we have three factors and a riddle: (1) Cuban-Americans flew countless times in the same area and for years before the Cuban air force was ordered to intervene; (2) the infamous Helms-Burton Act, which instantly pitted the US against the rest of the world, was not likely to be adopted by Congress until that tragedy took place; (3) Fidel Castro understands very well the dynamic of US politics. The riddle is: Was the timing of President Castro's bold decision a pure coincidence?
 6. According to a Web document of the US State Department: "The fundamental goal of United States policy toward Cuba is to promote a peaceful transition to a stable, democratic form of government and respect for human rights. Our policy has two fundamental components: maintaining pressure on the Cuban Government for change through the embargo and the Libertad Act while providing humanitarian assistance to the Cuban people, and working to aid the development of civil society in the country." See http://www.state.gov/www/regions/wha/cuba/country_info.html
 7. Letter from Professor Toope, 19 Oct. 1999, quoted with permission. His report to CIDA is considered confidential.
 8. He also likened the Cuban one-party state to Frank McKenna's government in New Brunswick (the Liberal leader won all 58 seats of the legislature in 1987), and mocked Cuba's 'so-called political prisoners'.
 9. Michael Pearson, a former senior policy adviser to Foreign Minister Andre Ouellet (1993-6) and Lloyd Axworthy (1996-7), points out in a recent article that when Ouellet proposed a rapprochement with Cuba, 'senior management in the department was not enthusiastic' (Pearson, 1999: 10).
 10. It is not an accident that, among the many ingredients that entered into the making of the 'constructive engagement' policy towards Cuba, John Kirk and Peter McKenna mention (first!) 'appeasing the NGO community' (Kirk and McKenna, 1997: 175).
 11. A seminar on children's rights was held in May 1997 in Havana, followed by another on the same subject in December 1998 at the University of Victoria. A seminar on women's rights was held in June 1997 in Ottawa, headed by MP Jean Augustine. The second seminar on women's rights, scheduled for late spring 1999 in Havana, was put on hold.
 12. A top official from CIDA assured me that before the May 1997 seminar on children's rights held in Cuba that the Canadian delegation was informed that, indeed, they were going there to learn from the Cuban model.

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