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Cuba: A Work In Progress

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Since Fidel Castro came to power, Cuba has never been far off the hemispheric radar screen. While some have seen the Cuban revolution as the solution to the hemisphere's problems of inequality and poverty, it is anathema to others. Passion is never far from the surface when analyzing the Cuban reality indeed, The Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) has found this to be the topic that mostly generates hot commentary from analysts on all sides of the issue.

Throughout FOCAL's history, our mission on Cuba has been clear: to provide a space where representatives of all sides of the Cuban equation can come together and discuss differing points of view openly and respectfully, and have access to the widest array of sources of information available.

This is not to say that we do not take sides. FOCAL is committed to representative democracy. Yet we are well aware of the attraction of other forms of political expression, especially among people whose needs are not being met and who are frustrated by the slowness of representative democracy in addressing their needs. We are committed to individual freedoms and human rights, as defined by the Canadian Charter of Rights, the United Nations and OAS Human Rights Conventions, and other international treaties and agreements. This is a vision that sees civil and social rights as an indivisible whole, and we expect all governments to respect fully international conventions on human rights and democratic development, regardless of their own political orientation.

This will not change, despite siren songs to the contrary. Cuba has made significant gains in areas where most countries of the hemisphere lag behind. The country has achieved high levels of quality in education and research, especially in the medical field. Free and good health care is available to all on the island, and the country exports medical knowledge and practitioners to other countries in exchange for much needed hard currency, and the products and services it buys.

Although Cuba's efforts in health and education are laudable, they have come at a price the cost to the individual has been the elimination of basic individual human rights that Canadians cherish. The Cuban economy has not proven capable of meeting its own needs for growth. Only vast amounts of foreign assistance from the Soviet bloc helped Cuba meet basic economic requirements in the past. More recently, agreements with China and Venezuela are giving the Cuban economy a new lease.

The inability of Cuba to meet its own economic needs stands out as a major failing of the revolution to date. To be sure, Cubans have strong entrepreneurial skills as demonstrated by their ability to survive all of the special economic circumstances that have plagued the island. As well, the Cuban diaspora has done very well wherever they have settled, and

their remittances constitute an important source of hard currency for the Cuban economy and of sustenance for individual Cubans and their families.

Nevertheless, a system that officially quashes the entrepreneurial spirit cannot generate the wealth needed to ensure survival over the longer term. While it is easy to blame a 43-year-old embargo, one must remember that Cuba has been free to trade with and attract investment from the rest of the world. Indeed, Canadians flock to Cuba in the hundreds of thousands each year, and Canadian companies have a major stake in mining and energy exploration on the island.

Throughout this period, the government has had every opportunity to make changes to the system and make it more efficient, as recommended by the international community. Hence the excuse of the embargo is just that an excuse for a system that hasn't found a way to deliver prosperity to its people while respecting basic human and political rights.

However, one must accept the fact that, to date, the embargo has been counterproductive. It has led to entrenchment rather than change, and to half a century of bilateral stagnation and confrontation at significant cost for both sides. A wasted experience indeed, compounded by yet one more attempt announced by the United States recently to increase antagonisms by appointing a new senior agent tasked with fomenting immediate and radical change in Cuba.

From our vantage point, change imposed from the outside will not work. Cuba remains a work in progress, and like all human endeavours, it will continue changing long after we have shuffled off this mortal coil. FOCAL seeks to co-operate with all parties to the ongoing dialogue on Cuba -- both inside and outside Cuba -- to ensure its evolution is peaceful and, most importantly, respectful of the freely expressed wishes of the Cuban people themselves. To this end we invite Cubans from the island to write for our publications, participate in our activities, and seek ways to ensure that ongoing change in Cuba is always peaceful and always managed by the Cubans themselves. This will continue to be our leitmotif.

FOCAL's intention over the next few years is to continue bringing together Cubans and non-Cubans interested in the future of the island into a dialogue that explores the myriad options available, and to contribute to an ongoing but peaceful evolution. Part of this process is to bring Cuban experts together with other hemispheric experts to explore ways we can all work together to ensure positive social development in the hemisphere.

Change in Cuba must continue to come from within Cuba. Cubans must choose their destiny and their future, the system that will govern them, and their own social and economic models. These choices must be made freely, and to this end we will work to create a hemispheric space within which ideas can be debated and different options explored.

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