

A broker's role for Canada

Critics of U.S. policy in Cuba say Ottawa could help new administration moderate its stance

February 20, 2008

Tim Harper

WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON—Leading critics of U.S. policy on Cuba say they see a role for Ottawa in helping bridge the gap between Washington and Havana and seizing a historic opportunity for a new relationship in the wake of Fidel Castro's retirement.

More than 100 American legislators, including nine Republicans, wrote to U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice yesterday, saying the current policy has left Washington without influence in Cuba and calling for a "tough-minded" review.

The three remaining potential presidential candidates, with an eye on the Cuban exile community in the crucial electoral state of Florida, were cautious, with Democrats Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton hinting at détente if there are signs of a transition to democracy.

John McCain, the presumptive Republican nominee, mimicked existing Bush administration policy, saying there could be no move to lift trade or travel restrictions unless all political prisoners were released and free elections were held in Cuba.

One of the leading critics of the Bush policy in the U.S. Congress, Massachusetts Democrat Jim McGovern, said Ottawa must speak out about Washington's counterproductive policy.

"Friends can also be critics," McGovern said. "Friends who can see our policy has been a failure should renew that view publicly. That would be most welcome.

"There are those views not just in Congress, but even in the Bush administration, where there are people, who, although they do not say so publicly, know that our policy is a miserable failure."

Peter Kornbluh, a senior analyst at George Washington University's National Security Archive, said Castro's formal resignation as head of state will allow the next U.S. president to adopt a totally new approach toward dialogue and civil relations with a post-Fidel Cuba.

He said there is room for "friends of Washington," including Ottawa, to try not only to nudge the administration to moderate its stance, but also help facilitate a change for a new president and help communicate a change in Washington's stance to Havana.

Patrick Doherty, the director of the Washington-based U.S.-Cuba 21st Century Policy Initiative, said any such effort by Ottawa and like-minded allies could be "catalytic" for any change coming with a new president.

The Bush administration made it clear it would be making no changes in its policy. For five decades, the U.S. has restricted trade, travel and commerce with Cuba. Family visits and cash remittances from Americans to the island's residents are severely restricted.

Since 2000, though, trade has opened up, after the U.S. Congress approved a measure to allow agricultural sales to the island nation.

U.S. President George W. Bush, during a visit to Rwanda yesterday, said the world should be asking what this change means for Cuban citizens. "They're the ones who suffered under Fidel Castro," he said. "They're the ones who were put in prison because of their beliefs. They're the ones who have been denied their right to live in a free society.

"So I view this as a period of transition ... it should be the beginning of the democratic transition for the people in Cuba."

But Carlo Dade of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas said Canadians should be wary of the Bush reference to "stability" in his statement yesterday because it conjures up "another Iraq."

"We (Canada) should be continuing to push for change in Cuba, and yes, we want to see a transition to democracy but not, as the Americans imply, change at any cost.

"We want to see transition, but not at the price of chaos."

Julia Sweig, a Cuba expert at the non-partisan Council on Foreign Relations, said yesterday's announcement was "an extraordinarily important turning point" because Castro has been able to retire and manage his own succession, peacefully. She predicted the move will foreshadow a package of economic reforms in Cuba and an opportunity for the next generation of Cuban leadership to move to the fore.

In the past, Obama has sought to liberalize travel between the U.S. and Cuba and said earlier in this campaign that he would engage American adversaries in direct talks. Yesterday, he put the onus on the Cuban leadership. "If the Cuban leadership begins opening Cuba to meaningful democratic change, the United States must be prepared to begin taking steps to normalize relations and to ease the embargo of the last five decades," he said.

Clinton has also voted to ease travel restrictions, but she echoed Obama, saying to the new Cuban leader, "the American people are ready to meet you if you move forward toward the path of democracy."

<http://www.thestar.com/World/Columnist/article/305141>