

**“CUBA-CARICOM RELATIONS:  
THE DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE DIMENSIONS”**  
(Notes Prepared for Oral Presentation)

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There has been for years a CARICOM-Mexico Joint Commission which has already had four meetings. Mexico also, of course, is a major contributor to the oil-on-concessionary terms of the San Jose Accord. Mexico has designated the Universidad de Quintana Roo as its “Caribbean” university and holds significant Mexico-Caribbean conferences every year. Despite all this and the very active Mexican embassies in the region, I have yet to meet anyone in my frequent trips to the region who knows much about Mexico generally, much less about these particular initiatives.

Neither does one often hear much about U.S. initiatives other than immigration-related policies, especially regarding the deportation of CARICOM citizens. This is so despite the fact that migration continues to head North and the majority of tourists come from the North. These trends have been going on for so long that they appear to be taken for granted.

The commentary in the region today is about the new relations with Cuba. There is much to discuss, including medical care, medical scholarships, contributions to public health, animal husbandry, sports, education and even “energy saving” (i.e. the changing of light bulbs down to 15 watt bulbs) and, by extension, to Petro-Caribe, a Venezuelan initiative enjoying strong Cuban support. Even Caribbean political leaders are now going to Cuba for their medical check-ups. The wonders of so many recovering their sight through Cuba’s “Operación Milagro” is constantly commented on in the local press.

[More on this in A.P. Maingot, “”Bridging the Ideological Divide: Cuban Doctors for Caribbean Recognition,” *FocalPoint*, May 2006.]

To all this, one should add a little-noticed fact: the new involvements of mainland China as an informal partner in these Cuban initiatives through the building of new hospitals, staffed by Cubans, and over the longer term,

Chinese building of two biotechnology labs in Cuba. One can conclude that China (competing with Taiwan for Caribbean votes), acts as a “multiplier” to the Cuban initiatives.

All this is taking place at the highest levels of state-to-state relations. On March 10, 2006, the Cuban Ambassador to CARICOM presented his credentials to the Secretary General of CARICOM. The Secretary General made several assertions in his welcoming speech:

[1] This event furthered the “long-standing” relations between Cuba and the CARICOM nations.

[2] Cuba now has diplomatic missions in all the CARICOM states.

[3] These relations have “served to enhance” the standard of living of citizens of both CARICOM and Cuba

[4] CARICOM and Cuba “enjoy a shared Caribbean identity” and “common regional interests.”

Most revealing, however, was the admission that Cuba actively participates in the work of the Caribbean Regional Negotiating Machinery (CRNM) and collaborates closely with CARICOM at the WTO ... of which Cuba is not a member. Indeed, one month earlier the *Jamaica Gleaner* (February 10, 2006) reported that Prime Minister, P.J. Patterson, had noted that “there was ... a need for current bilateral agreements with Cuba by CARICOM to be converted into a collective agreement...” This certainly seems to follow the line of explicit suggestions of President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela for a new regional bloc. This is, however, beyond the topic engaged here.

The point is that all these state and non-state exchanges and expressions of solidarity deserve closer scrutiny and analysis than what our allotted time allows. We limit ourselves to addressing three questions:

[1] Are there hidden agendas inherent in such relations with authoritarian Cuba which might represent a danger to the democratic governance and practice of social justice in these Caribbean states?

[2] Are there possibilities that the examples of these democratic Caribbean states might influence the state of governance and practice of social justice in Cuba?

[3] Can we find answers to either of these two questions from a review of the history of Cuba-CARICOM relations?

For the sake of brevity, let me anticipate my position by saying that my answer to questions [1] and [2] is “no” but “yes” to question [3].

[If time allowed, I would illustrate by making a comparison with the recent inability of CARICOM to have even the most minimal influence on events in fellow-member Haiti.]

Based on the methodological assumption that the best predictors of longer-term relations are **deep, structural** (not just conjunctural) relations and that these are best understood historically, let me turn to five major watersheds in the history of Cuba-CARICOM relations. We should preface our historical analysis by recalling that between Cuban independence in 1903 and the Revolution in 1959, all the independent countries of the Greater (Latin) Caribbean had diplomatic relations with Cuba, while the rest of the area was populated by colonies of Britain, France, The Netherlands and the USA.

### **Major Watersheds in Cuba-CARICOM Relations**

Watershed No. 1: 1959 – Cuba’s concern is with Panamá, the Dominican Republic and Haiti. While Cuba is allied with the anti-dictatorship, democratic movements in the region, big transformations in the still colonial Caribbean were being planned by the Anglo-American Organization (later called the Caribbean Commission) to do the following:

- [a] Great Britain: decolonization into the West Indies Federation
- [b] France: extending French rights to the D.O.M.s
- [c] The USA: creation of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico
- [d] The Netherlands: Unit membership in the Kingdom of the Netherlands

None of this had anything to do with Cuba.

Watershed No. 2: 1961 – Bay of Pigs and Cuba’s involvements in Panamá, Guatemala, Nicaragua and increasing hostility to the exiled community in South Florida. In 1962, both Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago become independent. While the concern with communism was strong (influence of British Guiana evident), communism in Cuba was not a major worry. Notice the invitation of Cuba to Trinidad’s independence celebrations despite strong objections from the US.

Note some key events in both islands:

[a] In Jamaica, the party which led the island into independence was the vehemently anti-communist Jamaican Labour Party of Alexander Bustamante. The leader of the opposition Peoples National Party, the social democrat Norman Manley, prepares for the next elections by bringing his charismatic son, Michael, back from England to “clean house”, i.e. expelling the Marxist wing (the so-called “4-H’s”) from the PNP.

[b] In Trinidad, Prime Minister Eric Williams and the ruling Peoples National Movement expel the world-famous Marxist CLR James.

Convinced that he has the masses with him, CLR decides to contest the 1966 elections with a socialist party, the Workers and Farmers Party. Williams picked up an anti-Cuban theme. Noting that several members of the WFP had been to the Tricontinental Congress in Havana, Williams begins to attack Fidel Castro on the stump. In a 1966 privately recorded speech (never published) Williams stated:

To hell with Castro ... We don't interfere with Castro's affairs, and Castro has no business setting up any revolutionary organization to interfere with and disrupt the normal development of Trinidad and Tobago. (Source: Selwyn Ryan, *Eric Williams: The Myth and The Man*, Unpublished ms., Trinidad, p. 475).

Williams knew his people. CLR James received 274 votes (0.1%) and, along with all the other candidates of the WFP, lost his deposit. In Trinidad, people voted **race** and had a virtually allergic reaction to anything the dominant Roman Catholic and Hindu leadership labeled "communist."

Throughout the English-speaking Caribbean, the traditional divide between the social democrats (Fabians) and the Marxist-Leninists was profound.

[Further on this in A.P. Maingot, "The Difficult Path to Socialism in the English-Speaking Caribbean," in Richard R. Fagen (ed.), *Capitalism and the State in US-Latin American Relations*. Stanford U. Press, 1979, 254-301.]

Watershed No. 3: Decade of the 1970s – In 1970 there was a mutiny in the Trinidad Army which coincided with a Black Power mobilization at the University of the West Indies (UWI) campus. Although two of the military leaders had been in Cuba, it was U.S. influences, not Cuban, which were the inspiration for the movement. Again, **race**, not ideology, was the mobilizing factor. Cuba has never been revealed to have had a significant hand in that movement nor in the subsequent (and ultimately fatal) *foco* established by 25 university students (the National Union of Freedom Fighters). They read Fanon along with Ché Guevara and their proclamations were written by a Professor of History at the university.

Despite all this, so confident were Jamaica, Trinidad/Tobago and Guyana of their own internal security that in 1972 they established diplomatic relations with Cuba. They were aware that "playing the Cuban Card" had geopolitical advantages in terms of a series of geopolitical contestations: Guyana vs. Venezuela, Trinidad vs. Venezuela, Belize vs.

Guatemala. There was also significant support for Cuba's military actions against the despised *apartheid* regime in South Africa.

Watershed No. 4: 1979-1983 – The rise and fall of the socialist “revolution” in Grenada; briefly outlined as follows:

[a] The group which had met originally in 1970 on Rat Island off St. Lucia to plan the “revolution” in the Eastern Caribbean had no known Cuban involvements. They were interested in marrying Marxism to Black Power: Maurice Bishop – English ties; Bernard Coard – U.S. Communist Party through Angela Davis and Brandeis University; and Kenny Anthony – British Socialism.

[b] In similar fashion, Desi Bouterse of Suriname had Dutch radical ties as did the leaders of the movement in Curaçao which led the rioting in 1969.

[c] Michael Manley, himself a social democrat, pushed the PNP to a pro-Cuban left for reasons yet to be fully clarified.

Cuba's involvement was vital, however, to the development of the Grenada “revolution”, a revolution which committed suicide in 1983 with Cuba being unable to stop the self-immolation. Cuba paid a heavy price in money and blood for its involvements in Grenada, in Suriname and in Jamaica and in the rest of the CARICOM Caribbean. Relations were severed and would not be reestablished until 1990 (Jamaica) and 1999 (Grenada). This watershed saw the end of Marxist parties in the CARICOM states.

Given this dramatic history, it is all the more astonishing that Cuba has managed to recalibrate its foreign policy towards the CARICOM states to the point of becoming a major actor in the present watershed.

Watershed No. 5: 1990s to Present

If the decade of the 1980s represented an *annum's horribilus* for Cuba, that country made a phenomenal turn around in the 1990s with policies whose full development we are witnessing today. Two fundamental parallel processes related to globalization in the broadest sense of that term can be said to have impelled these changes:

[a] Cuba is cut off from all subsidies from the USSR and the socialist bloc and has to broaden its alliances.

[b] The CARICOM States, recognizing that the privileges and preferences received from the European Union under four Lômé agreements were coming to an end, have to engage in the same globalizing actions.

Based on these realities and (we have to assume) the horrible experiences of the 1980s, Cuba launched a major initiative which has dramatically changed the policy/ideational center of gravity in the region–

from ideologically-based geopolitics to geo-economics and the skillful use of “soft power.” Breaking its isolation by securing votes was--and is--Cuba’s goal.

The exchanges began after the 11<sup>th</sup> meeting of the CARICOM Heads of Government in 1990 to explore trade with Cuba. In 1991 a technical mission from CARICOM signed agreements for exchanges in four areas:

[1] Tourism Development

[2] Sugar Cane Technology

[3] Combating the Drug Trade

[4] Cooperative Programs in Biotechnology – specifically with Genetic Engineering and Biotechnological Center and 14 other centers. Much of it related to screening and controlling the HIV/Aids epidemic in the region.

One can readily dismiss the first three areas as essentially non-starters. To limit one’s focus to these specific items, however, is to miss the broader implications of the exchange. Note the following dimensions of these exchanges:

[a] There is no evidence of Cuban meddling in the internal affairs of these states, a fact evident in the absence of any complaints by opposition parties, always ready to “play the communist card.” Caribbean states correspond by being silent on internal Cuban affairs. Pragmatism reigns.

[b] Cuban diplomats are no longer the typical colonels of the DGI who filled the embassies in the 1980s. Today they are skilled and discrete operators who associate with everyone, especially, it appears, business people who might invest in Cuba.

The Caribbean, by waiving their conventional demands for democratic governance and respect for human rights in their dealings with Cuba, had made a significant exception which did not go unnoticed in Europe and the U.S. When CARICOM sponsored Cuba for admission to the ACP group in the CONOTOU Agreement which replaced Lômé, the EU refused to drop their **conditionalities** regarding democracy and human rights, finding Cuba lacking on both counts. Of course, all EU countries have diplomatic relations with Cuba.

[This brings to mind Puerto Rico’s Governor Muñoz Marín’s rejection of Eric Williams’ attempt to include Cuba in Puerto Rico’s economic initiatives towards the Caribbean in the mid-1960s. Munoz, a close friend of Williams, would not compromise on the issues of democracy and human rights.]

As noted, none of this went unnoticed in the U.S. News of these Cuba-CARICOM initiatives elicited an “outraged” response from the chairman of the sub-committee on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the U.S. House of Representative, Robert G. Torricelli and three of his Cuban-American colleagues on the sub-committee. (See letter from sub-committee, 26 July, 1993). Even as they correctly noted the exceptions CARICOM had made and chastised and threatened the West Indians with dire consequences, the congressmen had to admit that they were aware that the West Indies represented “the best in human rights in our hemisphere.”

The West Indian response was not long in coming and, not surprisingly, they rejected the threats from the congressmen, underscoring their independence through a reassertion of the symbolic capital represented by their democratic political practices and respect for human rights:

The decision of the [CARICOM] Community was taken, very conscious of the deep-seated commitment of all CARICOM countries to democratic processes and to human rights ... these matters speak for themselves and it has been noted that you yourself have acknowledged this .... The Caribbean Community has an extremely strong interest in the peaceful resolution of issues in the Region, including Cuba. (Letter of response from CARICOM Secretariat, 19 August, 1993).

One month after this exchange, four of the CARICOM prime ministers met with President Bill Clinton. The issue of relations with Cuba was not raised in public. President Clinton used the occasion to describe in the most effusive terms just how strong the democracies of these nations were.

If nothing else, the meeting signaled that the Cold War was over and with it the threat from a formerly aggressive Cuba.

## **CONCLUSION**

Aside from wishing to avoid associating with a U.S. policy towards Cuba, universally rejected in the Caribbean, CARICOM is clearly taking advantage of the benefits associated with relations with Cuba. It is a purely pragmatic approach with little if anything to do with ideology. As CARICOM, along with virtually all others in the Caribbean, continues to strengthen relations with Cuba, the asymmetry of these relations is becoming

more and more evident. In return for votes for Cuban (and indirectly Venezuelan) international initiatives, Cuba is investing considerable manpower and capital. For instance, just the investment in the small island of Dominica is calculated at US \$16 million in the past 5 years. While Cuba is increasingly leaning on Venezuela to cover many of the expenses, it is evident that CARICOM (including Haiti) are the clear beneficiaries. These appear to be reasons enough for these states to be silent about the situation of democratic and human rights in Cuba. What surprises, however, is CARICOM's silence regarding Cuban race relations which, as we have noted, is a crucial part of Caribbean identity and their international relations. There has been little if anything said about the situation of blacks in Cuba. I have met with only doubt and skepticism when I relate to my Caribbean friends the conditions I witnessed in the *Cayo Hueso* ghetto in Havana or that the vast majority of common criminals in Cuban jails are black. To hear such terms as "picolo" or references to "el tercio incluido" is to understand that old stereotypes have not died. While this is, among many other aspects of life in Cuba, a major challenge to social justice in that island, today and surely also in the future, turning a blind eye to it seems to be a price the CARICOM States are willing to pay in return for the benefits they are receiving from the new Cuban emphasis on "soft power."

In the final analysis, there is one potential benefit from this *apertura*: bereft of the half-century geopolitical enmity which has clouded our perspectives, we have the opportunity to assess whether the benefits of these exchanges are mutual and more than just symbolic. This, however, will require less diplomatic finesse and more of a political will to call things as we really see them.