
SPECIAL SECTION - The Politics of Canada-Cuba Relations: Emerging Possibilities and Diverse Challenges

PARTIE SPÉCIALE - La politique des relations Canada-Cuba : Options émergents et défis

INTRODUCTION

SHIFTING GROUND: CONSIDERING THE NEW REALITIES IN THE CANADIAN-CUBAN RELATIONSHIP

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On January 1, 2009, the Cuban Revolution marked its fiftieth anniversary. The Revolution that many remarked would not last has endured. It has survived numerous challenges to its existence by holding firm to its foundation while also adjusting to new realities, both those imposed from abroad and homegrown within Cuba. Most significantly, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 created a severe economic depression that almost brought the country to its knees. Coining this struggle, the “Special Period in Time of Peace”, the Cuban government began a process of transformation that would include serious changes to Cuba’s social and economic structure.

Starting nearly three years before the Revolution marked its fiftieth milestone, the country was once again faced with a series of challenges, this time, beginning at home. In 2006, Fidel Castro fell ill and temporarily transferred power to his brother, Raúl Castro. After nearly five decades of his leadership, “Fidel Castro” and “Cuba” were almost synonymous, causing many to predict that revolutionary Cuba would not be able to survive without him at the helm. Once again, the Revolution withstood predictions of its demise by enduring this temporary leadership change and the subsequent permanent succession in 2008 when Fidel Castro resigned as president of Cuba.

Change did not come to a halt in 2008. As President of Cuba, Raúl Castro initiated political, economic, and social changes on the island. At the same time, the new American President, Barack Obama, put the American policy toward Cuba under review and implemented changes in the restrictions regarding family visits and remittances. In the midst of these developments, a combination of natural disasters and the worldwide economic recession produced the worst economic crisis to hit the island since the Special Period. All of these events have the potential to fundamentally alter the island country and the way Cuba conducts its foreign relations. This is an opportune time to reflect on the state of Canadian-Cuban relations.

The articles in this issue of *Canadian Foreign Policy* consider the current relationship as well as survey the history of Canada’s association with Cuba, touching on the highs and lows of the relationship and making suggestions about the future direction of Ottawa’s policy toward the island state.

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In selecting the articles that would appear in this issue, the editorial team at the journal and myself, as special editor for this issue, strove to ensure that the issue reflected a range of approaches and perspectives. The nine scholars who penned the following articles thus write from the perspective of six different disciplines: Geography, Political Science, History, Spanish and Latin American Studies, Business, and Economics. Even more interestingly, they tackle the relationship from both the Canadian and the Cuban perspectives, and bring fresh epistemological approaches to the study of the issues.

Peter McKenna, John Kirk, and Archibald Ritter are well-established Canadian scholars with careers that have been devoted to the relationship. Not only have each of them spent much time in Havana, but they have done so in many capacities, from being visiting scholars at the University of Havana to advising the Canadian government about the direction of policy. In this issue they give us important perspectives on how the history of Canada's approach toward Cuba is likely to shape the current direction of policy.

The various approaches taken by Heather Nicol, Calum McNeil, and Julia Sagebien and Paolo Spadoni both challenge established ways of making sense of the relationship and complement the perspectives taken in other articles of the issue. Each of these scholars has contributed much toward our knowledge of Cuba, and in this issue they make crucial observations about the various ways in which we have to come to understand the relationship. However, it was especially important that an issue devoted to furthering our understanding of the Canadian-Cuban relationship reflect on it from both the Canadian and Cuban perspectives. Luis René Fernández Tabío and Raúl Rodríguez help us appreciate the view from Cuba. The two articles by the Cuban contributors further demonstrate that what Canadians take as given facts about Cuba, or about Cuba's relationship with Canada, are not settled at all.

This introduction will briefly put the articles in this special issue in context by reviewing the developments in Cuba, the shifting ground of the United States-Cuban situation, and highlight the recent developments in the Canada-Cuba relationship.

Cuba: From Fidel to Raúl Castro

In 2008, the revolutionary government of Cuba successfully negotiated its first leadership transfer. For nearly 50 years, Fidel Castro had personally controlled the island state. When he fell ill, in 2006, he temporarily ceded power to his brother. It was not until it looked like he would never fully recover, in 2008, that he made this decision permanent. With his health stabilized, Fidel continues to exercise considerable sway over the direction of policy, even though power now lies with the younger Castro brother.

Fidel makes his opinions known via regular "Op-Eds" in which he has occasionally corrected statements issued by Raúl. For example, in April 2009 Raúl Castro announced that Cuban leaders would be willing to meet with Washington officials to discuss "everything, everything, everything," which most people, both within Washington and elsewhere, assumed included issues such as human rights, freedom of the press, and political prisoners. Fidel Castro then released a statement that said that American officials had "without a doubt misinterpreted Raúl's declarations" (Carroll, 2009). Fidel Castro's statement certainly raised questions about the meaning of his brother's announcement, yet the Cuban leadership did not issue any clarification, and thereby let Fidel's correction stand undisputed.

Despite his brother's Op-Eds, Raúl Castro has been able to put his own stamp on the country. Most significantly, he has reformed aspects of Cuba's economic and political structures, including reducing the size of the state bureaucracy and lessening the restrictions on economic activity. Reforms, such as removing the limits on wages, and allowing the reorganization of the agricultural sector, are major changes. Other changes, including allowing all Cubans to purchase cell phones and electronic equipment such as computers and DVD players, will have less of an impact on most people, although they are important as these types of changes indicate a new way of thinking about certain freedoms.

Raúl Castro has also made a number of high-level personnel changes. He removed Carlos Lage from his post as vice-president of the Cuban Council of State. In the realm of foreign policy he dismissed Felipe Pérez Roque as foreign minister and signed two major international human rights declarations. These changes seem to indicate that Raúl Castro will be more pragmatic in his approach to foreign affairs. This greater flexibility in Cuba's relationship with the international community has the potential to make rapprochement with the United States more likely. Indeed, he has indicated that he would like to begin a new era of United States-Cuban relations.

Obama and Cuban-American Relations

When Barack Obama was elected on a platform of change, many people hoped he would work quickly to overturn the embargo. Certainly, his early rhetoric indicated support for normalization, declaring in 2004 "it is time for us to end the embargo" (Obama, 2004). Obama has made progress toward this goal, but it has developed slowly. In the spring of 2009, he relaxed the restrictions on family visits and remittances, allowing Cuban Americans to send as much money as they would like to their relatives on the island and to visit them freely. The Obama administration also reopened bilateral talks over migration and discussed the resumption of direct mail service. More recently, the two countries have conducted talks about the BP oil spill and cooperated over their responses to the Haitian earthquake. The United States offered to provide supplies to Cuban medical teams working in Haiti, and Cuba opened its airspace to American planes involved in the relief effort.

Furthermore, the United States has recently encouraged greater people-to-people contacts. In the last year alone, American musicians, athletes, and other cultural and civil society groups have been given permission to visit Cuba, and some prominent Cubans have been authorized to visit the United States. For instance, in December 2009 the internationally renowned Cuban musician, Carlos Varela visited the United States to record an album with Jackson Browne and to speak to American government officials. In contrast, in 2004 Varela's request for a visa was denied by the Bush administration, despite having pre-sold nearly 2000 tickets for a concert in Miami.

Other attempts to reduce the tension between Washington and Havana include ratcheting down the inflammatory rhetoric by turning off the electronic billboard on the side of the American Interest Section in Havana. This five foot high scrolling billboard had streamed continuous messages critical of the Cuban government since it was erected in 2006. Its existence and the retaliatory measures taken by the Cuban government, including building a

monument with towering flags that obscured the billboard, had continued to aggravate the hostility in the relationship.

However, the Obama administration has been criticized by many for not acting decisively enough over Cuba, and for sending messages about its policy toward Cuba that sound, in many ways, much like those sent by the Bush administration. Although the administration seems to be in favour of greater dialogue between the two governments, it has declared that normalization of relations depends on change within Cuba. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton explained, “We’re continuing to explore ways to further democracy in Cuba and provide the Cuban people with more opportunities...” (Charles, 2009). On numerous occasions, President Obama has remarked that the next major move is up to the Cubans. He said, “having taken the first step I think it’s very much in our interests to see whether Cuba is also ready to change” (Meckler & Luhnnow, 2010). In response, the Cuban government is downplaying Washington’s recent policy changes. In the first couple of months of 2010, tension escalated over the arrest of an American contractor in Havana, accused of illegally distributing communications technology. Furthermore, Havana criticized President Obama’s actions at the Copenhagen Climate Summit, calling him an “imperial chief” (Lacey, 2009). Havana has also criticized the American decision to obtain access for the US military to Colombian bases in December 2009. After this deal became public, Fidel Castro wrote, “the real intentions of the empire are obvious, this time hidden beneath the friendly smile and African-American face of Barack Obama” (Darlington, 2009).

Harper and Canadian-Cuban Relations

Canadian policy has not stood still either. Although Ottawa has maintained unbroken diplomatic ties with the Cuban government, the Canadian-Cuban relationship has experienced periods of tension. The last few years have been one of these periods.

Since 1959, Ottawa has endeavoured to maintain a relatively normal relationship with the revolutionary government, meaning that the Canadian government has maintained regular diplomatic and trade relations, and encouraged connections between Canadian and Cuban civil societies, much like it would with any other country. Depending on the government of the day, normal relations ranged from the closeness displayed in Trudeau’s early relations with Fidel Castro to benign neglect under Brian Mulroney.

Prime Minister Jean Chrétien altered the edges of normal with the decision to constructively engage with Cuba. As Calum McNeil explains in this issue, the distinction reflected the Canadian government’s growing emphasis on fostering human rights and democracy abroad (see also Wright, 2009). While engagement implies regular relations (trade, investment, diplomatic exchanges), constructive engagement hopes to engage in these ways in order to achieve change within Cuba’s domestic sphere. The goal of constructive engagement is to use the access that comes from regular relations to influence the development of a western style economic and political model on the island. According to the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT, 2009), constructive engagement aspires to do this through fostering connections with Cubans and quietly encouraging the hoped-for changes. In this model, which was followed by the Chrétien and



Martin governments, most controversial issues were still discussed privately in an effort to maintain a relationship characterized by dialogue.¹

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Canada's tradition of quiet diplomacy with Cuba has, in large part, been discarded in favour of more vocal criticisms of human rights and democracy in Cuba. For example, Maxime Bernier, Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs in May 2008, followed the Bush administration's lead on Cuba when he congratulated Cuba on their "independence day". That date is not recognized in present day Cuba, but is celebrated by those who do not consider the 1959 Revolution legitimate. In this press release, Bernier also referred to the "plight of political prisoners," and encouraged "the Cuban people to pursue a process of political and economic reform" (Blanchfield, 2008).

More recently, Minister of State for the Americas in 2009, Peter Kent made provocative statements prior to his planned visit to Cuba. In January he said Cuba was a "dictatorship, any way you package it" (Blanchfield, 2009a). Just a month before he was scheduled to leave for Havana, Kent announced that he would "stress again our encouragement of the release of political prisoners and the opening of institutions to democratic practices" (Blanchfield, 2009b). In response, the Cuban state abruptly postponed Kent's visit and, in retaliation, Ottawa delayed issuing a visa for Cuba's Minister for Trade and Investment.

The Issue Ahead

It is in this context that the articles in this special issue were penned. Raúl Rodríguez takes us back to the early days of the Revolution through a close examination of the dispatches from the Canadian embassy in Havana and the Cuban embassy in Ottawa. He demonstrates that the assumptions the two governments made in the period from 1959 to 1962 set the stage for the next fifty years. Peter McKenna and John Kirk also take us back a few years with a look at Prime Minister Chrétien's Cuba policy. While both articles position current policy in the light of history, McKenna and Kirk explicitly examine the relationship under the leadership of Prime Minister Chrétien to see if there are any lessons for the Harper government.

In this issue, the economic relationship between Canada and Cuba is examined by two contributors; one Canadian and one Cuban. Archibald Ritter highlights the mutually advantageous economic relationship that has developed between the two countries over the past twenty years, and examines the likely impact of United States-Cuba rapprochement on Canada's trade and investment with Cuba. Luis René Fernández Tabío looks at the relationship from the Cuban side. He positions the economic relationship in human terms, pointing out that economic relations are also social relations. He argues that the Canadian-Cuban friendship could serve as a model for north-south relations in the hemisphere. However, he notes, this would require some change to Canada's approach and an emphasis on the more positive aspects of the relationship that, he argues, are based on mutual respect.

The articles by Heather Nicol, Calum McNeil, and Julia Sagebien and Paolo Spadoni draw our attention to new ways of understanding the relationship. Heather Nicol goes beyond the diplomatic corridors of Ottawa and Havana by examining the coverage of Cuba in Canadian newspapers. She puts forth hypotheses to account for the less favourable portrayals of the island that have appeared more recently in the Canadian press. Calum McNeil alerts us to the

¹ Chrétien's 1998 visit to Havana is the most well-known exception here. ■

role of emotion in the Canadian and American relationships with Cuba. As he says in his article, anyone with any connection to the island recognizes that the Cuba-United States relationship is fraught with emotion, as is the Cuba-Canada relationship, but this fact is rarely recognized in the literature. McNeil gives us a window into the role this factor may play in policy and, in doing so, shows us that both American and Canadian policies toward Cuba are based on false presumptions concerning how humans think and act. Julia Sagebien and Paolo Spadoni bring our attention to the cognitive dissonance in Canada's policy toward Cuba. Canadians are quick to see that the American view of Cuba is fraught with contradictions. Sagebien and Spadoni turn that lens on ourselves, showing that Canadians are not endowed with objectivity, and that we also bring our own biases when we try to make sense of Cuba and our relationship with the island.

Many of the articles in this issue also recognize that Cuba is at a critical juncture. This introduction has briefly highlighted the recent challenges faced by Cuba. Some of the latest realities in Cuba include a new president, made all the more significant given that the transition from Fidel to Raúl Castro was the first political succession in half a century; a severe economic crisis; and at least the potential of a friendlier attitude in Washington.

Havana has also had to deal with new realities in Ottawa. More so than ever before, Canadian rhetoric toward Cuba has attempted to publicly push the Cuban government on human rights and democracy issues. Yet we just need to look to history to see that this is an inappropriate approach to adopt. Revolutionary Cuba has long demonstrated that it is relatively immune from overt pressure. For five decades, the Cuban state has kept tight control over the island, regardless of international events. Fidel Castro's Cuba survived being the only Warsaw Pact country in the Western Hemisphere. It survived the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, and it survived five decades of embargo. It seems safe to say that Cuba is resistant to foreign pressures imposed in order to change its political or economic model. Rather than adopting rhetoric characteristic of previous administrations in Washington, Canada should build on its positive interactions with Cuba, by providing Cuba with support as it struggles with internal reorganization and considers a new relationship with the United States. This will serve both Cuban and Canadian interests in the pivotal years ahead.

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