
A Speaker's Diary: Parliamentary Visit to Cuba

by Hon. David Warner, MPP

In August and September 1992 the Speaker and seven other Members of the Ontario Legislature visited Cuba in an effort to strengthen the relationship between Ontario and Cuba. The visit was developed and coordinated by Dr. Jim Henderson, MPP. Speaker David Warner recorded some of his observations in diary form. Speaker Warner represents Scarborough-Ellesmere in the Ontario Legislature.

Sunday, August 30: As we prepare to land in Cuba many images come to mind and also many questions? The Americans consider Fidel Castro, the leader of the 1959 Revolution, as a dictator. Is this true? How poor is Cuba? Have the winds of change blown across the island? A learning experience is about to begin.

Monday, August 31: The waterfront view from the Hotel Riviera in Havana is beautiful and appreciated, but even more so the air-conditioning to offset the heat and humidity. Our first official visit quite appropriately was to I.C.A.P. (Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos). The staff at the friendship centre explain how the Cuban government encourages joint ventures as a good way to strengthen the local economy while at the same time being a good business deal for the investing country or company. The principal difficulty is the American blockade, the U.S. refusal to trade with Cuba and the pressure exerted by the U.S. on other countries not to do business with Cuba. On the brighter side there are brigades of young people who come to this Caribbean island every year from throughout the world to assist in building projects.

In the afternoon we visit a local hospital which serves an area population of about 500,000. The completion of current renovations will mean a total of about 1,200 beds and no waiting. The ratio of doctor to population is about 1 to 320 (Ontario's is about 1 to 600). Universal health care was started right after the revolution. There is a desperate shortage of electricity throughout Cuba, hence the hospital corridors are poorly lit.

The return drive to the hotel through the streets of Havana is an interesting opportunity to observe the mixture of lush tropical growth, wide avenues, magnificent statues and the once splendid Spanish style buildings, most of which are in need of major repair. The local buses are overcrowded. There are thousands of bicycles and quite a few cars, 1950's vintage.

A leisurely dinner at our hotel and a late evening stroll along the sidewalk adjacent to the ocean breakwall where there is always a gentle breeze is a good way for our group to compare notes and appreciate this tropical island.

Tuesday, September 1: Our first stop is the Cuban Chamber of Commerce. Joint ventures, with a foreign investment maximum of 49% are being encouraged. Exceptions to the 49% rule are possible. Several countries, including Spain and Canada, have negotiated arrangements in mining, oil exploration, hotels etc. Once again the severe problem of an energy shortage is explained. The collapse of the Soviet Union meant a huge drop in the supply of petroleum. Hard currency is required in order to purchase oil from Venezuela. Cuba does not have enough hard currency and is prevented by the U.S. from borrowing money from the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund. With the help of the Soviets the Cubans had started building a nuclear power plant. The plant is not yet completed and progress is slow. One hope is to discover a plentiful supply of oil off-shore so exploration continues.



Childcare Centre at
Agricultural Village

An historical tour of old Havana proves to be quite interesting. Among other things we visited the former home of the Spanish Governor, a palatial estate with its classical inner courtyard, iron "lacework" and spacious rooms. There is a certain old world charm about Havana. Hemmingway lived here, for about ten years. We also visited a very impressive, 100 million dollar bio-technology centre. With international support this centre accomplishes world acclaimed research in agriculture and medicine. All of the high tech equipment had to be purchased from Europe or Asia because of the U.S. refusal to sell anything to Cuba. The work done here has assisted in creating better agricultural crops and methods and effective attacks on disease.

After such a busy day, an evening reception at the Friendship Centre is most welcome. The combination of traditional Cuban music, played and sung by a local duo, Cuban rum and a pleasant, warm tropical evening provides a delightful atmosphere in which to get to know our hosts better.

Wednesday, September 2: We leave Havana for a visit to an agricultural research area an hour's drive through the countryside of gently rolling hills, blanketed with lush tropical growth. I discovered as I have on other trips that our Canadian cows certainly get around! Holsteins from Canada are being bred with Cuban cows to produce cattle which survive well on tropical vegetation yet still produce a large quantity of milk. The village is self-contained, including schools and a child-care centre. We visited a child-care centre where children from age 6 months to 5 years are cared for. All of the child-care workers are highly trained and the ratio is 5 children to 1 adult. Close by is an elementary school with grades one to six. The average class size is 15 to 20 students. Both places were very impressive. It is obvious that a great

emphasis has been placed on education. The literacy rate is very high, a good indicator of potential for a successful society.

The afternoon was an opportunity for me to wander about a portion of Havana on my own. Faltering Spanish, augmented with lots of warm smiles, meant I could enjoy a coffee with a couple of strangers at a café. I enjoyed the palm tree-lined streets, local parks, ice cream stands and the crowds of people going about their daily tasks or coming from work. The exercise sharpened my appetite for dinner.

The "Tropicana" is the outdoor nightclub where Desi Arnaz, Carmen Miranda, Nat King Cole and no doubt countless others got their start in show business. Seemingly from openings high up in the trees come a multitude of dancers and singers. Lavish costumes, energetic dance numbers, infectious lively music and dancing coloured lights combine to create a spectacular two hour show. A warm tropical evening, with its ever present gentle breezes and the ever generous supply of Cuban rum meant that we sat back, relaxed and enjoyed a delightful time.

Thursday, September 3: Our meeting in the morning is with the Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs. Cuba continues to make overtures to the U.S. to resume trade relations. Sugar, tobacco (particularly their world famous cigars), coffee, rum, minerals and seafood are some of the items available for trading. The Cubans are quite naturally curious about what effect the North American Free Trade Agreement involving Canada, U.S. and Mexico might have on Canada's trade with Cuba and indeed the rest of the Caribbean. It was a good question, to which none of us had an answer. Our meeting was a candid exchange of information, observations and opinions: a stimulating morning!

In the afternoon we meet with the Vice-President of the Provincial Assembly of Havana. We receive a detailed explanation of the municipal government structure, local responsibilities and powers as well as information about electoral changes taking place. The goal now is to have non-party individuals running for local election. The atmosphere is one of active change. An explanation of "revolutionary" was most helpful. In Cuban terms a "revolutionary" is someone who is still trying to accomplish the goals of their society. Among the many goals there is the eradication of disease, zero infant mortality, 100% literacy and so on. Language is an interesting thing. Change the context and misunderstanding can occur.

Another delightful evening was in store with the President of the Assembly of Havana Province. Lively conversation, to say nothing of a scrumptious meal meant a memorable time.

Friday, September 4: Not often do I get a chance to visit a shipyard. A grand tour of the dockyard is a prelude to an interesting meeting with a person in charge of the fishing fleet. Fishing problems and challenges seem to be a world-wide phenomenon.

Our afternoon meeting is definitely a highlight of the entire week. We have a three-hour meeting with the President of the National Assembly, a man rumoured to be the successor to Fidel Castro. His lucid account of Cuban history is a good backdrop to a candid discussion about economic developments, current plans and a vision for the future. The first American invasion was in 1898. Subsequently a Treaty with Spain was signed, a Treaty which involved Spain and the U.S., but no Cuban involvement. In 1902 an American citizen was installed as President of Cuba and naval bases were established. The Constitution of Cuba allowed U.S. military intervention in Cuba affairs. During the succeeding 50 years Americans introduced gambling, drugs and prostitution to the island, all under the control of organized crime, but seemingly with the support of the government.

We were told that as a direct result of the Revolution in 1959 the Cubans were able to improve the health and education of their own people. Infant mortality dropped from 60 per 1,000 births to 10 per 1,000 births. Life expectancy improved over the past 40 years from an average 55 years to today's 75 years. The World Health Organization reports that Cuba has already achieved the United Nations health objectives targeted for the year 2,000. In education there was a pre-revolution literacy rate of about 30%. Within a couple of years the literacy rate became 100%. Today most Cubans are highly educated.

The President acknowledged mistakes of the past. He talked of the "geniuses" who went to Moscow during the 1960s only to return with the opinion that the Cuban government was doing everything wrong and the Moscow approach to economics should be adopted. Those "geniuses" are no longer around and a totally different economic approach is the order of the day. Again, what came through loud and clear was the difficulties created by the American blockade.

Saturday, September 5: Pure white, silky sand stretches off to the horizon. A calm, azure blue ocean, shallow for at least 100 metres off shore, gently caresses the shoreline. This gorgeous, seemingly endless beach, the most beautiful I have ever seen, is the world famous Veradero Beach. The two hour drive from Havana had its own scenic rewards of palm trees, mountains in the distance, the occasional town and tropical plantations.

This was a day to relax, walk the beach, swim in the ocean, read, enjoy a cold Cuban beer and enjoy the beautiful tropical scenery. What a fabulous conclusion to a superb week!

Observations and Conclusions: The winds of change have blown and are continuing to blow over this island. Cuba, through circumstances, had to link itself economically to the Soviet Union. The collapse of the Soviet Union has forced a dramatic re-thinking with respect to Cuba's economic structure. While the one party system will likely remain in place, there is an effort to democratize the electoral process. Cuba is reaching out to the rest of the world.

It still is a poor country, yet it has achieved a great deal. As far as I could tell there are no homeless people, something I can not say about my own city. There is a high standard of medical care and an excellent level of education; both marks of an accomplished society. There are a number of natural resources. There is a tremendously strong will to succeed as a nation, to provide the best possible standard of living for everyone. The Cubans believe that the United States is trying to simply starve Cuba to death by the blockade, the pressure on others to not do business with Cuba and by controlling borrowing from international sources. The Cubans are determined to survive. They are equally determined to control their own destiny. They enjoy a good relationship with most of the world. In fact the U.S. is the only country in the world who does not have normal diplomatic and trading relations with Cuba. The Cubans wait patiently for the United States to offer its friendship. **✚**