

Conversations with Fidel Castro

by Herb Dhaliwal, MP

It is a very unique experience at anytime to have a frank discussion with a world leader. It is even more unique is to be able to engage a man like Fidel Castro, reflecting on the significance of the revolution and the way ahead for his small country. That was the backdrop for a recent multi-party parliamentary delegation to Cuba. The trip was organized through the Canada-Cuba Parliamentary Friendship Group. Each delegate was responsible for his own airfare and expenses.



I remember thinking it incredible that I was only six years of age when the bearded man who was casually answering questions from our delegation rode into Havana as the heroic victor of the Cuban Revolution. How could I have guessed as a young boy from an immigrant family that one day as a Canadian Member of

Parliament, I would get the opportunity to meet with this historic figure. More incredibly, how could I have guessed that 34 years later, Fidel Castro would still be the president of Cuba!

Scanning some briefing material before I joined my seven other colleagues, I was mystified by the range of divergent opinions on Cuba's continuing economic viability. Depending on who you read, Cuba is described as everything from a threat to American free market values to an unsuccessful communist experiment teetering on the brink of economic disaster. Its leader is described as everything from a decaying despot to a charismatic demagogue.

On the particular day of our delegation's meeting with Fidel Castro, his mood was reflective and reminiscent, as if our visit had sparked a stream of memories about Cuba's history. For two hours, he spoke with characteristic eloquence. He reminded us of Canada's longtime friendship with Cuba and of our refusal to sever diplomatic ties with Cuba even at the height of the Cold War.

He regaled us with reflections on the revolution, human rights and economic alternatives. But what surprised me the most about Fidel Castro was not the substance of our discussion but the subtext. He demonstrated a sincere caring for individuals which I had not expected, a compassion toward human suffering everywhere that it exists in the world. He emphasized that the fundamental motivation for Cuba's foreign policy has always been to reduce human suffering and to

Herb Dhaliwal is the Member of Parliament for Vancouver South and was elected for the first time in 1993.

fight for social justice. As an example of this, Castro told us of how Cuba recently brought over 35,000 Russian children who were victims of the Chernobyl disaster to receive medical care in Cuban hospitals.

This example brought up an interesting question, about the relationship between Cuba and the former Soviet Union? Traditional thinking has always been that Cuba was a Russian satellite, receiving on average a million dollars a day before the Russian well dried up. Yet, when I raised this question directly, Castro took great pride in a foreign policy very independent of the USSR. According to him Cuba had, at time, been at odds with the Russian government of the day. He told us of times where Russia was genuinely worried about "what Cuba would do next."

Changing the tone from worries to accomplishments, Castro expressed the greatest pride in the accomplishments that Cuba has made improving the health and education of the Cuban populous. By South American standards, Cuba has achieved some outstanding results. Life expectancy at birth is 77 years, the highest in Latin America and the infant mortality rate in 1992 was 10.4 per 1,000, the lowest in Latin America. Cuba is the only Latin American country to have been included by Unicef in the category of countries with the lowest infant mortality rates in the world, on a par with the industrialized nations. As well, according to government figures, the illiteracy rate in 1990 was only 1.9%. This high level of education and training in the country is being used to attract foreign investment in science-based and high-technology industries.

He expressed profound concerns over the increasing formation of regional trading blocks. He believes that these blocks will work to the detriment of the developing countries by excluding them from preferential arrangements.

At the same time though, Castro is realistic about the economic and social challenges which Cuba faces in the wake of the collapse of the USSR. Up until the collapse of the East Block, the USSR pumped more than \$1,000,000.00 a day into the Cuban economy and served as Cuba's largest trading partner. By 1990 though, continuing aid and preferential trading arrangements became impossible for the USSR to maintain. Almost overnight, the well dried up for Cuba and the economy contracted by 50% in the following two years. The result

for Cuba has been the deepening of an economic crisis which they have been suffering through ever since.

I observed many of the results of that economic crisis while I was in Cuba. Apart from the tourist areas, food is scarce. Every commodity is being rationed at levels North Americans would find shocking. Black markets are beginning to develop for currency and goods. There are even those who say that Cuba's excellent education and health facilities are beginning to suffer.

Castro himself is most worried about the effect that this



crisis will have on the psyche of the Cuban youth, those who have no connection to a pre-Revolutionary Cuba. To them, talk of the revolution becomes rhetoric overwhelmed by the lure of consumer goods and political freedom. It will be this emerging

group, Castro believes, who will be

the catalyst for the greatest change.

Still, some change is evident. Incrementally, some measures are being introduced which are slowly bringing Cuba closer to a market economy. Cuban citizens are now allowed to hold hard currency. Small businesses are more encouraged. Foreign investment is being sought out and secured with many countries, mostly via joint ventures. For example, over 100 joint ventures were in place by the end of 1993, with another 100 "in the pipeline". In total there are 34 countries which have been attracted to joint ventures and production sharing agreements with Cuba, including Canada. The diversity of these projects includes tourism, fisheries, telecommunications, medical technology, mining, oil, construction and agricultural by-products. Thus, while it is true that Cuba is experiencing very difficult economic times, the seeds of change have been selectively planted.

Things are changing in Cuba and Fidel Castro seems to approve of that change. Economists are already predicting that Cuba has hit the bottom of their economic cycle and are beginning their recovery. More importantly though, it is clear that the Cuban leadership recognized the shortcomings of a state-run economy and the potential efficiencies to be gained through a change to a more market-driven economy.

One thing for sure; the economic changes that are occurring in Cuba are not being forced as a result of the US embargo and policy of political isolation. This policy has been a failure for 33 years and has served only to increase Castro's legitimacy as a world leader and to justify his heavy hand with the Cuban people. As Cuba emerges from the woods of economic disaster with the support for the Castro regime still intact, the continuation of the US embargo seems neither strategically nor

economically wise for the US. Strategically, this policy will not help Cuba in making their transition to a market driven economy. Nor will it help them to increase democratic freedoms. Economically, it will not help US companies to cash in on the many emerging business opportunities within Cuba. Nor will it help to open Cuba as a potential market for US goods and services. Within Cuba, this embargo is viewed as a serious but not crucial obstacle to the transition and growth of the Cuban economy. Internationally, the US position is seen as unreasonable and unjustifiable. In a recent vote by the United Nations, 102 countries voted against continuing the embargo on Cuba. Only two supported its continuation; the US and Israel, the latter of whom has already established informal trade relations with the Caribbean nation.

Thinking back to the assertion that time is running out for Cuba, made by some of the American journalists in my briefing material, I must say that I agree with their premise.

Time is running out, but not, as they believe, for Cuba's economic system. Instead, I believe, drawing from the experience of this visit, including not only meetings with Fidel Castro but almost every senior official within the

Cuban government, that time is running out for the US policy regarding Cuba.

The US has a unique opportunity, given the tremendous importance of their trading position, to help Cuba to find its place in the "New World Order". If they act quickly that place could very much resemble the kind of economy that the US has tried unsuccessfully to force Cuba toward for 34 years.

I remember my mother once telling me that "you get more bees with honey than you do with vinegar". If the US administration would make maternal wisdom the centre-piece of their foreign policy, they could not only help to relieve the poverty of thousands of Cubans but through an ironic twist, pacify one of the last remaining perceived challenges to US capitalism in the Northern Hemisphere.

Cuba will outlast the US embargo, of that I am certain. They will probably also go a long way over the next five years toward a more market-driven society. As for the question of political leadership, who knows. Given his ability to beat the odds, Castro himself may still be at the helm of the Cuban ship as they enter into the 21st century, making him one of, if not the, longest serving political leaders of this century.

