

Canada's Policy of Constructive Engagement with Cuba: Past, Present and Future

Cristina Warren

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In June 1994, the Liberal government of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien introduced its policy of constructive engagement with Cuba. The policy was designed to support movement in the direction of peaceful transition, with full respect for human rights, genuinely representative government institutions, an open economy, and eventual reintegration into the hemisphere.¹

Canada did not break political and economic relations with Cuba following the revolution that brought Fidel Castro to power in 1959. Building on a number of modest linkages in the areas of tourism, humanitarian aid and trade and investment, constructive engagement deepened the ties between Canada and Cuba far beyond under any previous government. No other government so deeply opposed by the United States has been so closely and warmly embraced by Ottawa. Nor has a country with such negligible economic importance to Canada attracted so much attention from Ottawa's foreign policy establishment.²

This paper reviews the Canadian foreign policy context of constructive engagement and identifies the key factors that led to its emergence and traces the evolution of the policy through its various phases. It looks at the current drivers underpinning constructive engagement and concludes with a number of recommendations for future Canadian policy toward Cuba.

RESUMEN

En junio de 1994, el gobierno liberal del Primer Ministro Jean Chrétien estableció su política de "acercamiento constructivo" hacia Cuba. Esta política fue diseñada con el propósito de contribuir al avance de Cuba hacia una transición pacífica, y el respeto pleno de los derechos humanos, instituciones de gobierno auténticamente representativas, una economía abierta y finalmente su reinserción en la comunidad hemisférica.

Canadá no rompió sus relaciones políticas ni económicas con Cuba tras la revolución que llevó a Fidel Castro al poder en 1959. A partir de modestos vínculos que ya existían en áreas como el turismo, asistencia humanitaria, y comercio e inversiones, la política de acercamiento constructivo fortaleció los vínculos entre Canadá y Cuba más allá que cualquier otro gobierno anterior. Ningún otro gobierno tan rechazado por los Estados Unidos ha sido acogido con tanto entusiasmo y tan estrechamente por Ottawa. Tampoco ningún otro país de importancia económica tan insignificante para Canadá ha atraído tanto la atención de la cúpula de gobierno a cargo de la política exterior canadiense.

El presente trabajo aborda el contexto de la política canadiense de acercamiento constructivo, señala aquellos factores clave que le dieron origen y hace un recuento de su evolución. Igualmente, se examinan las fuerzas que sustentan esta política en la actualidad y se ofrece un grupo de recomendaciones que el gobierno canadiense pudiera adoptar en sus relaciones con Cuba.

EVOLUTION OF CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT

In June 1994, the Liberal government of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien announced a number of adjustments to its policy toward Cuba. These included: increased senior-level contacts; reinstatement of Cuba's eligibility for official development assistance through the Canadian non-governmental sector; increased humanitarian aid; expansion of promotional and financial support to Canadian companies pursuing opportunities in Cuba; and repeated calls for Cuba's readmission into the Organization of American States and participation in the Summit of the Americas process. Human rights concerns were expressed through support for United Nations resolutions critical of conditions in Cuba, as well as through regular contacts with human rights activists and the religious community by officials of the Canadian Embassy in Havana.

The profile of Canada-Cuba relations increased significantly when Lloyd Axworthy became Foreign Minister in January 1996. Relations expanded considerably following the signing in January 1997 of the Joint Declaration of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Canada and Cuba (also known as "the 14 points"), during Axworthy's highly publicized first visit to Cuba.

This wide-ranging accord became the framework for the bilateral relationship, with the two countries agreeing to work together without any formal conditionality, opting instead for regular progress reviews and dialogue. In addition to expanding activities already underway, the Canadian government began to provide technical assistance aimed at reforming Cuban institutions. In the area of economic reform, the Canadian government began to work with the main economic ministries of the Cuban government. Activities related to human rights and governance included the provision of Canadian expertise to the justice and legal systems, the sharing of Canadian experience to strengthen Cuba's machinery to receive citizens' complaints,

the encouragement of parliamentary exchanges, and a structured high-level dialogue on human rights. These years saw highly publicized visits to Cuba by Foreign Minister Axworthy in January 1997 and January 1999, and by Prime Minister Chrétien in April 1998, in addition to regular contacts between senior government officials of both countries.

A review of relations, ordered by Prime Minister Chrétien in March 1999 to protest the jailing by Cuba of four prominent dissidents, ushered in a new phase of Canadian policy. Cabinet-level visits were suspended and Canadian efforts to facilitate Cuba's reintegration into the Western hemispheric community were made contingent on a clear display of will by Cuba to move ahead with political and economic reform. Although

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existing programs continued as planned, new or expanded initiatives were examined on a case-by-case basis to ensure that they supported priority areas such as economic policy reform, social and economic development and direct humanitarian assistance. Human rights programs with the Cuban government were terminated. A strategic decision was made to decrease the profile of Cuba in Canadian foreign policy and public diplomacy. The new policy allowed Canadian officials to publicly express their concern about the human rights

situation, in contrast to the previous approach of reserving comment to private discussions with the Cuban government and at multilateral meetings. As stated by a Canadian government official at an event organized by the Inter-American Dialogue in June 2002, "criticizing the U.S. economic embargo doesn't mean uncritical acceptance of the status quo in Cuba." In practice, however, public criticisms of human rights in Cuba were infrequent and muted when they did occur. Canadian Embassy officials, however, continued to maintain regular contacts with Cuba's dissident community and religious groups such as the Catholic Church.

In November 2002, cabinet-level visits were resumed, signalling a thaw in relations despite a lack of progress

in human rights or any improvement in the hardened political climate that had culminated in the March 1999 policy review. The deteriorating trend in Cuba continues, as demonstrated by the sentencing in April 2003 of 75 dissidents to prison terms between 6 and 28 years. Rather than representing a vigorous renewal of its political agenda toward Cuba, this most recent adjustment by Canada reflects a pragmatic approach to balance its political agenda with protecting its other interests, especially commercial ones. Canadian food exporters, in particular, have been losing market share over the course of the last year to U.S. exporters, who have taken advantage of the Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act approved by the U.S. Congress in 2001.

Despite cooler diplomatic relations over the past few years, according to statistics from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Canada has increased its level of official development assistance (ODA) to Cuba. ODA for the fiscal year 2001/02 was \$11.01 million, up from \$8.50 million in 2000/01 and from \$7.19 million for 1999/00, surpassing a previous peak of \$10.97 million for 1997/98. Trade, investment and tourism continue normally. According to statistics from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT), two-way trade in 2001 totalled \$753.0 million, an increase of \$12.1 million over the previous year but less than the total of \$814.7 million recorded in 1998.³ In 2001 Cuba received 400,000 Canadian tourist visits, up from 144,000 in 1995.

THE GENESIS OF CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT: THE CANADIAN FOREIGN POLICY CONTEXT

Canada's Relationship with the United States

The October 1993 federal election brought Jean Chrétien's Liberal government to power in a landslide victory. Chrétien, campaigning against Prime Minister Kim Campbell, Brian Mulroney's successor, promised to pursue a relationship with the United States that was described as more balanced than that of Mulroney who was widely seen as having taken an overly friendly pro-U.S. stance. Although the outcome of the election was due to a number of domestic issues, Chrétien did

successfully tap into voter discontent as a result of Mulroney's relationship with the U.S.

The evolution of U.S. policy toward Cuba in the 1990s provided the Chrétien government with an opportunity to highlight that balance at work. Building on the Canadian tradition of using the relationship with Cuba to symbolize Canada's independence from the United States, the move to deepen its relations with Cuba occurred at the same time that the U.S. Congress, in particular, was hardening its approach through the introduction of the Cuban Democracy Act (the Torricelli Act).

Canada's Hemispheric Strategy

Constructive engagement can also be set within the context of broader international trends that have brought Canada closer to the Americas since the late 1980s. As a foreign policy strategy, Canada has traditionally turned to multilateral institutions and its ties with Europe to counterbalance the dominant position of the United States. Largely as a result of Europe's increasingly regional focus, however, Canada has more recently been looking toward other regions for opportunities to develop instruments of leverage. The Western Hemisphere has historically been viewed by Canada as a region overly dominated by the U.S., and therefore incapable of serving as an effective counterweight. However, a number of changes in the late 1980s and after have led Canada to view the region with new interest. In particular, since the end of the Cold War the region

has largely embraced representative democracy and economic liberalization while a more constructive relationship has developed between Latin America and the United States, replacing a regional pattern of relations often dominated by conflict.

Unlike former Prime Minister Mulroney, who viewed Canada's connection to Latin America as a logical extension of Canada's growing ties with the United States, for Chrétien, a multilateral connection to the hemisphere was viewed as the main regional arena, within a global approach, where it could potentially wield the influence it seeks in order to counterbalance Canada's ever-growing integration with the United States.⁴ Thus, building on important steps taken by Brian Mulroney, such as his decision to have Canada

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join the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1990, and to negotiate a North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Chrétien has made a concerted effort to deepen Canada's commercial and diplomatic relations with the region. Canada has become an active player in the hemisphere, particularly in multilateral affairs, including within the OAS and in the Summit of the Americas process, where it has focused on issues of governance and democratic consolidation and hemispheric trade liberalization. The most visible manifestation of this activism toward the region was the Canadian government's unprecedented hosting of six major hemispheric events between 1999 and 2001.

The government, under Chrétien, was aware that Canada's presence, as a second, rich, industrial and technologically advanced country in the hemisphere, could act as a counterweight to the overwhelming U.S. presence. It recognized that highlighting Canada's independence from the U.S. would play well in Latin America, and therefore be useful in its strategy toward the region. Canada's policy of engagement with Cuba, as distinguished from the embargo policy of the U.S., was highly convenient in this regard. Accordingly, the greatest diplomatic coup would be to preside over the re-entry of Cuba into the hemispheric fold. As acknowledged by Lloyd Axworthy, Canada's Foreign Minister from 1996 to 2000, in an interview published in *Canadian Foreign Policy* in the Winter of 1997, in which he discusses the difference between Canadian and U.S. policies toward Cuba: "... We're being polite, but we're certainly being different. And that does not go unnoticed in the hemisphere. Canada's independent approach to Cuba carries a lot of interesting vibrations within Latin America."

The government was also well aware that, in addition to undermining Canada's immediate economic interests, particularly in the Commonwealth Caribbean, a chaotic transition in Cuba would hurt Canada's regional strategy. Instability could possibly certainly attract U.S. intervention in a form that would create serious political rifts in a hemisphere always nervous about the exercise of U.S. military power.

Post-Cold War Cuba

A more complete understanding, however, of the dramatic shift in Canadian policy toward Cuba that took place under Prime Minister Chrétien, requires

a closer examination of the changing situation within Cuba in the early 1990s, the Canadian government's interpretation of these events, and how these developments were affecting actors and interests in Canada.

In response to the severe economic crisis that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba's leadership began a process of economic restructuring that included a number of policies designed to attract the trade and investment it desperately needed to survive in its new international environment. Between 1993 and 1996, Cuba implemented a variety of economic reforms, including legalizing the use of the U.S. dollar, allowing certain types of family businesses, permitting the opening of private farmers' markets, and relaxed foreign investment legislation.

On the political front, the pace of reform was much more limited but there were a number of small signs of positive change. These included some modifications in electing members of the National Assembly, allowing some elements of a direct election system, and permitting a small degree of competition between candidates at the municipal level. Christians and other religious individuals were allowed to obtain membership to the Communist Party. As well, the Cuban government began to allow the formation of a small number of organizations that were more independent of the government and the Communist Party, provoking an increased public debate regarding Cuba's new circumstances.

The hesitant approach to economic reform in Cuba was seen by Canadian government observers as a reflection of the policy debate within the Cuban leadership of how far to take the reforms. Despite the tentative nature of the reforms, it was believed that economic liberalization had developed a momentum that would be difficult to turn back. According to this view, the reforms represented the beginning of a sustained process of economic change and the seeds for potential future political change. Moreover, the Canadian government also shared the concern expressed by the Cuban leadership that Cuba's reform process had to be deliberate to avoid the demise of Cuba's social infrastructure and possible chaos that could accompany uncontrolled change.

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The linkages established between Cuba's newly authorized non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Canadian civil society also had an impact on bilateral relations. As financial support from Moscow declined, the Cuban government, out of financial necessity, sought alternative resources. Recognizing the international attraction for NGOs, the government re-named as NGOs mass organizations and think tanks formerly associated with the Central Committee bureaucracy. Several ministries also established parallel NGOs. A number of new NGOs, authorized by the government, also emerged. The government showcased Cuba's new NGOs to the international donor community by hosting several conferences in 1992-1993 bringing together foreign representatives and Cuban NGOs to discuss a variety of cooperation projects. Many of these projects were designed to build support for Cuban government priorities and induce further foreign investment in Cuba's social sector.

An articulate and well-organized academic and NGO community in Canada met these overtures by the Cuban side with enthusiasm.

A number of these groups and individuals already had established linkages with Cuba.⁵ Many, deeply interested in Canada's Cuba policy, began pressing the Canadian government for a closer relationship with Cuba, in particular for an opening up of development assistance.⁶ The views of many of these groups and individuals were clearly articulated during the foreign policy review process, involving a number of public consultations and joint parliamentary committee briefings, undertaken by the new government over the course of 1994 and 1995.

Canadian commercial firms were also showing an interest in exploring business possibilities in Cuba as a result of the economic reforms introduced on the island. A number of provincial governments undertook high-level exchanges with Cuba to discuss business opportunities. A small number of firms already present in Cuba, the most important of which was Sherritt International with its active involvement since 1991 in the Cuban nickel industry and in the oil and gas sector,⁷ were interested in Canadian policies that would maintain warm relations with the Cuban government.

Lloyd Axworthy

Most critical to understanding the shift in Canadian policy vis-à-vis Cuba is the influence exerted by

Lloyd Axworthy. When Chrétien came to power in 1993, Lloyd Axworthy was not named Foreign Minister, as had been widely predicted. Axworthy was considered the leading candidate for the post as he had been foreign affairs critic since 1990 and had been the architect of the party's foreign policy platform. Axworthy, however, was named Foreign Minister in 1996.

Canada's policy toward Cuba, as it evolved after 1993, reflected Axworthy's policy blueprint, articulated while he was opposition foreign affairs critic, calling for a foreign policy independent from the U.S. (a rejection of the "camp follower approach to the United States"). Inspired by Pierre Trudeau's Third Option policy of the 1970s, this approach, and the ideology behind it, were at the heart of the Chrétien government's strategy toward the Western Hemisphere.

Although cognizant that good trade and diplomatic relations with the U.S. were fundamental to Canada's interests, to Axworthy this did not necessarily imply a conflict-free relationship. At the heart of Axworthy's views was the belief that the international system was going through a structural change in the post-Cold War period that allowed Canada to play a more significant role in world affairs, one that Canada should consciously and actively pursue. According to this view, this era of complex interdependence brought with it opportunities for middle powers

like Canada to assume leadership on a number of issues, not through the use of force but through the power of diplomacy, persuasion, coalition-building and international public opinion. Among a number of Canadian priorities, one of the "niches" he championed for Canadian activism was Cuba, where he could apply a distinctively Canadian approach. He considered that Canadian foreign policy interests would be served by promoting confidence-building measures between the U.S. and Cuba and through Cuba's re-integration into the international system. As Cuba and the U.S. adjusted to the post-Cold War era, "the possibility for conflict should not be dismissed". Such conflict would strain both multilateral and bilateral relations in the hemisphere, thus working against Canadian interests. He believed that Canada had a special role and real opportunity, given its 50 years of continuous bilateral relations with Cuba, to play a stabilizing role.⁸

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Helms-Burton

After Axworthy became Foreign Minister in January 1996, he began to devote a significant amount of time to the Cuba file. This was due both to his personal interest and to the sudden intensification of the Cuban-U.S. conflict immediately after he assumed his new position. Between February 15 and 24, 1996, the Cuban government cracked down on the activities of Concilio Cubano, an unprecedented association of 130 opposition and human rights groups who had requested official permission to hold a national conference between February 24 to 29. On February 24, Cuba shot down two unarmed Cessnas flown by four Cuban-Americans, making Cuba an issue in the 1996 U.S. presidential campaign, and leading to the signing into law on March 12 of the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (LIBERTAD) Act (Helms-Burton Act), which tightened the U.S. embargo toward Cuba. On March 23, during the 5th Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Raúl Castro gave a hard-line speech in which he launched an attack on anything that might undermine socialism, thus signalling a genuine crackdown.

The passage of the Helms-Burton legislation had an important impact on Canadian domestic politics and foreign policy, overshadowing the other events. The Canadian government strongly objected to what it interpreted as the extraterritorial application of U.S. laws, and introduced a number of measures in response. Canadian opposition was shared across the entire political spectrum. Public opposition to Helms-Burton, which included a number of protests led by the Anglican Church of Canada and Oxfam Canada, was encouraged and legitimized by the Canadian government. Government, business, academics, NGOs and analysts attacked U.S. unilateralism and the embargo against Cuba. Most importantly, the Helms-Burton legislation opened the door to Axworthy's more active involvement in Cuba by Canada. At Axworthy's insistence, the Canadian foreign affairs bureaucracy was required to support his increased initiatives toward Cuba.⁹ These initiatives were facilitated in large part by his shrewd cooperation with the Canadian NGO community and other members of civil society that had an interest in expanding Canada's relations with the island.

Axworthy's interest in the role of NGOs and their role in policy formulation was developed early, along with his belief that they could break down encrusted bureaucratic approaches. He was active in the civil rights movement in the 1960s and a member of the United Church who supported its promotion of social activism. As foreign affairs critic, he worked closely with academic specialists, human rights organizations, ethnic groups and NGOs to develop Liberal foreign policy. As a result, when Axworthy became Foreign Minister in 1996, his range of contacts and earlier experience led to the closer involvement of NGOs in doing some of the "heavy-lifting" on his issues.¹⁰ Using the resources at his command, he set out to finance and cultivate his own networks. Axworthy greatly increased the number of political staff, centralized control of communications on key policy initiatives, appointed a ministerial advisory group of selected academics, met frequently with the representatives of

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international NGOs, and co-opted and reprofiled the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development to nurture links with universities and international affairs interest groups across the country. This parallel structure was run directly from the Minister's office.¹¹ He secured widespread support among Canada's NGO community for his policy initiatives, often by tying NGOs into the policy system through "partnership" arrangements. It was no

coincidence that among the key organizers of the 1996 protests against the U.S. Helms-Burton legislation were Oxfam Canada and the Anglican Church of Canada, both recipients of "partnership" funds made available through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).¹²

The Canadian Public

The implementation of the Liberal government's policy was facilitated by the dominant political discourse in Canada sympathetic to Cuba and its system and a public highly enthusiastic of the government's new approach. Furthermore, the move to intensify relations with Cuba faced virtually no opposition. Important in this regard is the fact that, as the Cuban exile community in Canada is miniscule, Canadian governments are not subjected to political pressure from this group (according to statistics from Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the number of permanent

residents to Canada admitted from Cuba between January 1980 to December 2001 was approximately 7,175. Over 4,900 of these individuals were admitted since 1994).

The government's policy initiatives were well received in Canada.¹³ For example, in April 1996, 71% of Canadians polled supported trade with Cuba. In fact, even prior to this shift in foreign policy Canadians favoured the island as a tourist destination.¹⁴ Although thousands of Canadians have been to Cuba, and most have some inkling of how bleak its situation is, this generally translates into blaming the U.S. trade embargo rather than concern about political repression. As the following comment by Marcus Gee of the *Globe and Mail* in an article that appeared on March 10, 1998, reveals: "It's a sure-fire rule. When human rights are trampled in China or Indonesia or Iran, concerned Canadians bombard me with faxes and e-mails denouncing the government involved. When human rights are trampled in Cuba, concerned Canadians bombard me with faxes and e-mails condemning the government of the U.S. Fervent supporters can be found in mainstream Canadian unions such as the Auto Workers, in congregations such as those of the United Church, and in the upper reaches of the Liberal Party of Canada. The ravings of an isolated fringe? Unfortunately not. All sorts of intelligent and influential Canadians seem to believe that Mr. Castro and his dictatorship are simply misunderstood."

The benefits of a distinctively Canadian foreign policy approach toward Cuba that would play well among the people of the province of Quebec, who comprise a large portion of Canadian tourists to the island, was surely not lost on the Federal government, especially given the precarious state of Canadian unity at the time of the foreign policy shift. The linkages between Quebec and Castro's Cuba date from the early days of the Cuban revolution. The left-of-centre orientation of Quebec governments since the 1960s, and their demands for more autonomy, struck a chord with the Castro government, who sent scores of young agriculture engineers to train on Quebec farms. Four members of the radical separatist group, Front de liberation du Québec (FLQ), were granted asylum in

Cuba in the 1970s. When Havana first opened a trade mission in Canada in 1976, it was located in Montreal, the port that Cuba uses as an important link to world trade.¹⁵ Although not likely a primary motivation for a new foreign policy approach toward Cuba, the implications of this approach for the Liberal government's Canadian unity agenda would not have been overlooked.

FACTORS LEADING TO CHILLED RELATIONS

Increased Tensions with the U.S.

The Canadian government's high-profile approach increasingly raised expectations to demonstrate the rewards for the policy of engagement. Important in this regard was the war of words between Lloyd Axworthy and U.S. Republican Senator Jesse Helms, then

Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which was widely covered by Canadian newspapers. The rhetorical battle with the U.S. over Cuba, and Canadian statements criticizing the U.S. embargo and defending Canada's approach, increased the pressure to show that Canadian actions were succeeding in moving Cuba toward a democratic system with genuine respect for human rights.

The Canadian government's public statements tended to put a positive spin on the success of Canadian actions in stimulating positive change within Cuba, especially in the area of human rights, blurring the negative trend that was actually taking place.

For example, during a visit by Axworthy to Washington, D.C. in March 1998, he praised the progress he claimed had been made by Mr. Castro's regime: "Cuba is going through an interesting transition. They are into a dollar economy, for example. They are now accepting forms of private enterprise. They are now changing their tax laws and their legal laws. [Cuba is] becoming more committed to democratization, more committed to...human rights developments."¹⁶

Stalled Transition

In reality, following a period of uneven progress toward economic and political reform, the political atmosphere in Cuba had clearly hardened. A number of speeches by Fidel Castro and his brother Raúl, as well as the

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Communist Party's draft policy document released prior to the October 1997 5th Congress of the Communist Party, signalled a return to a more militant, inward-turning nationalism and hard-line political policies reflecting the leadership's preoccupation with maintaining control. Although post-Cold War Cuba is not the totalitarian monolith often portrayed by its opponents, accommodating some internal debate as long as it does not get too organized or too critical of the government, nor advocate rapprochement with the U.S., the general domestic trend has been negative. This deteriorating context has occurred in spite of the fact that more countries have been dealing with the island and as engagement policies have become the standard for most Western countries involved in Cuba. In addition to the ideological tightening and lack of progress in basic civil and political rights, this period witnessed increased use of short-term detention and harassment as well as forced exile of political activists. For example, in July 1997 the four leaders of the Internal Dissidence Working Group (also known as the "Group of Four") were arrested and accused of disseminating "enemy propaganda" for their response to one of the documents released to the public in preparation for the 5th Congress of the Communist Party, in which they criticized Cuba's Communist Party for not adequately addressing the island's economic problems. Progress was stalled toward a large-scale religious opening following the visit of Pope John Paul II in January 1998. The slow, and in some cases backwards, implementation of economic reform frustrated foreign businesses and stifled Cuba's nascent private sector.

Growing Debate in Canada

Canada's high-profile approach toward Cuba continued notwithstanding this stalled transition, leading a small number of academics to question the sincerity of Canada's commitment to human rights and the effectiveness of Canadian policy.¹⁷ Concern was expressed that Canada's official development assistance was being used to reinforce Cuba's clientelist system and that some projects, potentially of great value, were actually being used to maintain regime control, for example use of the tax system to stifle the nascent self-employment sector. There was also concern that the high number of defections of Cubans involved in some cooperation activities was undermining the impact of Canada's assistance. Many of the activities in the area of governance, such as the exchanges between the Canadian Parliament and

Cuba's National Assembly and the technical assistance provided to set up a citizens' complaints commission, were viewed as inappropriate and even counterproductive given Cuba's authoritarian political and economic system. It was argued that Canada's policy had enabled the Cuban regime to enhance its own international legitimacy and credibility and to make advances in its public relations battle against the U.S. without making any progress in the area of human rights and democratic development.

Of greater significance in terms of policy impact, the Canadian media (print media, in particular) was scrutinizing increased Canadian activities in Cuba and calling for the Canadian government to justify its policy and demonstrate the concrete results of its confidence-building measures and quiet persuasion. A March 11, 1998 editorial in the Toronto *Globe and Mail* went as far as to ask Lloyd Axworthy to publicly clarify the government's position on Cuba. An analysis of the press by DFAIT in 1998 suggested that most journalists in Canada seemed to agree that poverty and systematic disregard for human rights in Cuba needed to be addressed. Opinion varied, however, as to how to promote change on the island. While some articles favoured the Canadian approach of constructive engagement, the editorial positions of the major national papers disagreed. They argued that it was morally reprehensible to support one of the world's more repressive regimes with development assistance and investment.¹⁸

Chrétien's Trip to Cuba and the 'Group of Four'

Prime Minister Jean Chrétien's visit to Cuba from April 27-28, 1998, was used to discuss human rights privately with Castro, among a wide range of issues including trade and investment, international terrorism and drug smuggling. Chrétien presented Castro with the names of four political prisoners, the leaders of the Internal Dissidence Working Group, whom he wanted released. Castro accepted the list of names but gave no indication as to what he would do about the request. The Prime Minister made headway on a foreign investment protection treaty with Cuba and on an agreement that would have Cuba pay \$12 million in compensation to Confederation Life Insurance Company, whose assets had been expropriated after the 1959 revolution. The Prime Minister, however, came away with no appreciable progress on human rights, fuelling increased criticism by the Canadian media of Canadian policy.

Ten months later, Castro gave the Canadian government his answer regarding the four dissidents. On March 1, 1999, they were subjected to a closed trial on charges of sedition. Two weeks before the trial, the Cuban government enacted the “Law for the Protection of National Independence and the Cuban Economy”, which further restricted freedom of expression in Cuba. The four were found guilty and sentenced to jail terms ranging from three-and-a-half to five years. To express its displeasure and to apply diplomatic pressure, Chrétien announced two weeks later that Canada would be reviewing the range of its bilateral activities.

Verbal Attacks from Cuba

The policy review ordered by Prime Minister Chrétien, and the shift in Canada’s approach, led to increased verbal attacks from Castro who spoke negatively about Canada and frequently cited Canada as an example of dissolute Western economic practices and social values. On July 26, 1999, Canada was cited in Castro’s four-hour Revolution Day nation-wide address, normally reserved to attacking the U.S.

Castro accused both countries of manoeuvres aimed at harming Cuba during the Pan-American Games in Canada, and referred to Canada as “enemy territory”.

Cuba’s verbal attacks on Canada significantly increased around the time of the third Summit of the Americas held in Quebec City that took place April 20-22, 2001. The rhetoric was heightened in part by the

characteristically blunt style of John Manley, who became Foreign Minister in October 2000. The Summit highlighted in a high-profile way Canada’s shift on Cuba’s reintegration into the Western Hemisphere. This change was explained by John Manley, who, in an April 10 article in the *National Post*, stated that Cuba’s absence from the Summit was not a question of Cuba being consciously and deliberately excluded but reflected Cuba’s inability to sign on to the Summit’s various declarations on safeguarding representative democracy, a key Canadian priority at the Summit. “I think the Prime Minister expressed the view, I guess probably after Santiago, that it would be desirable if Cuba was there...but we haven’t seen progress in Cuba. We have seen continuing failure to respect human rights, freedom of expression and democratic norms, and so it is not surprising there should be no particular movement to include Cuba in this process.”

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In response, referring to the confrontations in Quebec City between police and protesters, the Cuban Embassy in Ottawa issued a statement criticizing the “brutal manner with which the authorities of Canada are repressing the peaceful demonstrations of those that protest against the crimes attempted to be committed against the political and economic rights of the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean in Quebec...Governments that deceive the world by calling themselves defenders of human rights treat their own people in such a way.” The Cuban government also attacked Manley: “With his meddling and anti-Cuban language, [he] confirms his growing subordination to, and alignment with, the U.S. empire’s foreign policy.”¹⁹

Immediately following the Summit, Castro devoted more than an hour on Cuban television to lashing out at Canada and Prime Minister Chrétien. Castro called Chrétien a “fanatic believer in capitalism” and accused him of acting as a tool of U.S. foreign policy. Referring to Axworthy’s March 1999 letter of protest to Cuba’s

Foreign Minister, suggesting that if Cuba wanted to become an open and transparent society it should allow monitors from human-rights groups like Amnesty International into the country,²⁰ Castro stated that the letter was “arrogant, interfering and vengeful”. He also criticized Canada for having backed out of a joint effort to provide medical assistance to Haiti.²¹

The attacks on Canada continued into May. Caricature-puppets ridiculing Chrétien, among other hemispheric leaders, were featured during Cuba’s May Day parade. A long article also appeared in the May 21, 2001 edition of the Spanish version of *Granma International*, criticizing Canada’s treatment of its aboriginal peoples and attacking as hypocritical Canada’s position on Cuba’s human rights record.

CURRENT DRIVERS OF CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT

In the aftermath of these bilateral tensions, relations have settled into a highly reticent pattern. The driving force behind constructive engagement was Lloyd Axworthy, chief architect and promoter of the policy. Since his departure, constructive engagement has continued in large measure through bureaucratic momentum, in accordance with the residue of the

framework inherited from the Axworthy era and in response to key Canadian interests on the island.

This helps explain the Canadian government's response to the sentencing of 75 dissidents, advocating for political change through non-violent means, to prison terms between 6 and 28 years in April 2003. Foreign Affairs Minister Graham summoned the Cuban Ambassador to his office to express "extreme concern" over the crackdown. He presented the Ambassador with a letter to Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque stating that "the Canadian government is extremely concerned about this potential curtailment of human rights and freedom of expression in Cuba, and is deeply disturbed by the severity of the sentences."²² While Canada was among the first countries to protest to the Cuban government, and Canada supported a resolution criticizing Cuba at the recent UN Human Rights Commission meeting in Geneva, the response has been timid when compared to the Canadian government's reaction to the jailing of four prominent dissidents in March 1999.

The government's experience with Cuba has generated a great deal of ambivalence among many Canadian officials about the effectiveness of constructive engagement. Some have concluded that it does not work; others paraphrase Winston Churchill and suggest that it is the worst policy except for all the rest.²³ The current reticent articulation of constructive engagement, however, can be expected to continue, if only to avoid rupturing the continuum of Canada-Cuba relations.

The interests of Canadian business, tourists, academics and NGOs, all of which favour the continuance of established Canadian policy, dominate Canada's relations with Cuba. Moreover, the Canadian public continues to support current public policy, encouraged in part by an official rhetoric that affirms the existing policy while downplays the unsavoury aspects the Cuban system. There is no powerful lobby calling for an end to engagement. Although the media has been highly critical of Canada's approach in the past, news coverage of Cuba has decreased significantly since the government began to implement its lower profile-approach. Nor has U.S. pressure been a significant factor in shaping Canadian policy, in part

due to the growing ambivalence in that country with regards to its own policy.

Canadian academic and NGO interests, ranging from political solidarity groups to apolitical groups and individuals, are committed to continued involvement in the island and the maintenance of development assistance to Cuba. The focus of these groups has been mainly on humanitarian and development concerns. Moreover, many among these groups believe that the Cuban revolution has been a positive development for the island and work to give it legitimacy through their cooperation activities. Although a number of NGOs based in Canada that focus on civil and political rights concern themselves with human rights issues related to Cuba, the island is one among a large number of countries on their agenda and, consequently, they have a minimal impact in shaping public discourse on Cuba within Canada.

The Canadian private sector, a highly optimistic group at the outset of constructive engagement, is unwilling to increase its exposure in Cuba's high-risk business environment. Consequently, one company, Sherritt International, has become responsible for an overwhelming proportion of direct Canadian business activity in Cuba. While bilateral trade is not at a level substantial enough to warrant a large political lobby, both the nickel and tourism industries have an interest in the continuation of current policy.

The government's experience with Cuba has generated a great deal of ambivalence among many Canadian officials about the effectiveness of constructive engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CANADIAN POLICY

The case of Cuba is a hemispheric problem, and will continue to become more rather than less complicated as Cuba's economy continues to deteriorate, political repression grows and tensions with the United States increase. Canada's foreign policy interests continue to lie in working toward laying the groundwork for an eventual peaceful political transition in Cuba and avoiding a sharp system break. A key challenge for Canada and the international community is to identify new approaches to support this goal. A key question for Canadian policymakers is whether this goal is enhanced or restricted by the parameters of Canadian domestic politics and by Canada's current policy framework.

πIn working toward the goals of constructive engagement Canada should:

Renew leadership on Cuba

It would be in Canada's foreign policy interests to re-invigorate its policy and demonstrate hemispheric leadership by working as a front-line regional player on Cuba. In playing such a role, Canada could draw upon a number of important foreign policy assets at its disposal, such as its credibility as a democratic and prosperous society that strives for the universal realization of human rights, its historic independent foreign policy stance toward Cuba compared to the United States, and its role as an architect of constructive engagement. These are important strengths that could help to bring international attention to the problems of Cuba as well as to help build a consensus regarding strategies to pursue.

Develop a concerted approach with key members of the international community

Canada should use Cuba's recent crackdown on its dissident community, and the international outrage over this event, as an impetus to bring together other concerned like-minded countries from Europe and

Latin America and the Caribbean to explore new approaches toward dealing with the island and ways in which these could be made more effective through a coordinated approach.

Make stronger public statements and back these up with concrete actions

Canada must clearly express publicly its concerns over human rights in Cuba. This should begin by clearly conveying the message to the Cuban government that its recent actions against Cuba's dissident community are unacceptable and will have concrete negative repercussions on relations. Furthermore, Canada's support for civil society in Cuba should be enhanced by making explicit through public statements that it views as legitimate the peaceful protest demonstrated by the island's dissident community.

Raise public awareness in Canada

Increased Canadian attention toward Cuba should be supported by stimulating a more informed dialogue within the Canadian policy community, as well as among the Canadian public, about Cuban domestic and related international issues as well as Canadian policies toward Cuba.

NOTES:

- 1 Lloyd Axworthy, "Why Canada is involved so closely with Cuba", *Globe and Mail*, March 19, 1998.
- 2 Kim Richard Nossal, "The Evolution of Canadian Policy toward Cuba since 1993", Paper presented at ITAM-University of Havana conference entitled The Relationship of North America and Cuba in the Post-NAFTA Period, Mexico City, December 11-12, 2000, p. 1.
- 3 Canada's main exports to Cuba are computers, agri-food products (cereals, meat, dairy products and legumes), motor vehicles and parts, electronic equipment and sulphur. Cuba's main exports to Canada are ores, sugar, tobacco, seafood and copper.
- 4 Maureen Appel Molot, "Canadá y América Latina: ¿amigos por siempre?", *Foreign Affairs en Español*, Volume 1, Number 3, Fall-Winter 2001, p. 132.
- 5 According to DFAIT's October 1994 description of Canada's relations with Cuba, these groups included: the United Church of Canada, the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, Oxfam Canada, Ottawa-Cuba Connection, CUSO, the Jesuit Centre for Social Faith and Justice and Carleton University.
- 6 The most active was Professor John Kirk, of Dalhousie University in Halifax. See, for example, "In Search of a Canadian Policy Towards Cuba", *Canadian Foreign Policy*, Volume 2, Number 2, Fall 1994 and "Back in Business – Canada-Cuba Relations after 50 Years", Ottawa, *FOCAL Papers*, 1995.
- 7 According to DFAIT's October 1994 description of Canada's relations with Cuba, in 1993 there were at least 19 joint venture investments in Cuba involving Cuban enterprises and Canadian companies, mainly in the minerals sector; exports to Cuba were CDN\$133.75 million and were composed mainly of food products, machinery and parts; Canadian imports were CDN\$171.5 million and were mostly nickel, sugar and fish. By 1993, Canadian imports of Cuban nickel through Sherritt International accounted for over 60% of Canada's total imports from Cuba. Government of Canada, "Notes for an Address by the Honourable Christine Stewart, Secretary of State Latin America and Africa, to the Economist Conferences Second Round Table with the Government of Cuba", *Statement*, 94/32, June 20, 1994, p. 3.
- 8 Brian Stevenson, "Too Close to the Americans, Too Far from the Americas: A Liberal Policy Towards the Hemisphere", in Maureen Appel Molot and Fen Osler Hampson (eds.), *Canada Among Nations: Vanishing Borders*, Don Mills, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 240-241.
- 9 In his article, Michael Pearson, a former senior policy advisor to Foreign Minister André Ouellet (1993-96) and Lloyd Axworthy (1996-97) states that the senior management of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade was not enthusiastic about the Liberal government's proposed rapprochement with Cuba. "Reflections on Implementing Canadian Foreign Policy", *Canadian Foreign Policy*, Winter 1999, Volume 6, Number 2, p. 10.
- 10 John English, "In the Liberal Tradition: Lloyd Axworthy and Canadian Foreign Policy", in Fen Osler Hampson and Maureen Appel Molot (eds.), *Canada Among Nations: The Axworthy Legacy*, Don Mills, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 105.

- 11 Daryl Copeland, "The Axworthy Years : Canadian Foreign Policy in the Era of Dminished Capacity", in Fen Osler Hampson and Maureen Appel Molot (eds.), *Canada Among Nations: The Axworthy Legacy*, Don Mills, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 154-155.
- 12 Kim Richard Nossal, "The Evolution of Canadian Policy toward Cuba since 1993", Paper presented at ITAM-University of Havana conference entitled The Relationship of North America and Cuba in the Post-NAFTA Period, Mexico City, December 11-12, 2000, p. 12.
- 13 *Globe and Mail*, April 3, 1996.
- 14 According to the October 1994 DFAIT description of Canada's relations with Cuba, approximately 120,000 Canadians visited Cuba each year, representing over one third of all foreign visitors to the island.
- 15 Nomi Morris, "A Latin love-in", *Maclean's*, January 15, 1996.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 See papers presented at a FOCAL round-table in Ottawa on March 6, 1998, (ed.), *Cuba Today: The Events Taking Place in Cuba and Issues for Canadian Policy*, Ottawa, The Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL), 1999.
- 18 Michael Bell, Eugene Rothman, Marvin Schiff, Christopher Walker, "Back to the Future? Canada's Experience with Constructive Engagement in Cuba", *Institute for Cuban & Cuban-American Studies Occasional Paper Series*, September 2002, p. 16.
- 19 Andrew Cawthorne, "Excluded Cuba slams "brutal" Canada as U.S. pawn", *Reuters*, April 21, 2001.
- 20 Jeff Sallot, "Canada gets tough on Cuba", *Globe and Mail*, June 29, 1999.
- 21 Paul Adams, "Castro rails against Canada, Chrétien", *Globe and Mail*, April 27, 2001.
- 22 *Globe and Mail*, April 8, 2003.
- 23 Michael Bell, Eugene Rothman, Marvin Schiff, Christopher Walker, "Back to the Future? Canada's Experience with Constructive Engagement in Cuba", *Institute for Cuban & Cuban-American Studies Occasional Paper Series*, September 2002, p. 15.

Cristina Warren directs FOCAL's Research Forum on Cuba. This paper is based in part on a paper entitled, "La Política de Canadá hacia Cuba: Evolución del Compromiso Constructivo", that will appear in a special edition dedicated to Cuba of *Foro Internacional*, the journal of the Colegio de Mexico's Centro de Estudios Internacionales.

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Fondation canadienne pour les Amériques
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1 Nicholas Street, Suite 720
Ottawa, Ontario,
K1N 7B7 Canada
Telephone: (613) 562-0005
Fax: (613) 562-2525
E-mail: focal@focal.ca
Web Site: www.focal.ca

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