

THE CUBAN REVOLUTION AT 50: WHAT NEXT?

Jeremy Kinsman



Fifty years after the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro remains its enduring symbol. When Castro first walked into Havana in 1959, Dwight Eisenhower was president of the United States. Half a century and 10 US presidents later, Barack Obama has declared a thaw in relations with its neighbour only 90 miles south of Florida. It is now three generations since Cuban expatriates first took up residence in the US, and for 50 years travel, trade and investment between the United States and Cuban have been at a standstill. Contributing Writer Jeremy Kinsman sends this Letter from Havana.

Un demi-siècle après la révolution cubaine, Fidel Castro en reste le symbole absolu. Lors de son entrée à La Havane en 1959, c'est Dwight Eisenhower qui était président des États-Unis. Et c'est son dixième successeur, Barack Obama, qui a finalement décrété un dégel des relations avec ce voisin situé à 150 km à peine au sud de la Floride. Il y a maintenant trois générations que les expatriés cubains se sont établis aux États-Unis, 50 années au cours desquelles les voyages, échanges commerciaux et investissements entre les deux pays ont été totalement interrompus. Jeremy Kinsman nous envoie cette lettre de La Havane.

Individual countries can always make waves by causing trouble for others. But a few countries have narratives that capture the world's imagination: perseverance against the odds, struggles to liberate homelands or fights for the rights of the underprivileged.

Episodically, the USSR in the 1920s, the revolutionary United States of America, Mandela's South Africa, Gandhi's India, Solidarity's Poland, Prague's spring and Ho's Vietnam broke moulds and changed paradigms, inspiring many while antagonizing others.

Such is Cuba. Having overturned a history of hundreds of years of domination by outsiders and consequent mediocrity of achievement within, Cuba became viewed by many, at least for a while, as a revolutionary beacon for social justice, and protagonist for change in the world order. Challenges to the legitimacy of these starring roles only added zest to Cuba's world brand.

The Cuban world brand is not rhetorical. Of course, Cubans are probably most admired simply for having stared down and survived determined efforts by the world's greatest power to end the regime, by invasion, attempted assassination, the largest CIA program of subversion in the world and a punitive economic embargo.

After promoting copycat armed insurrections in Africa and Latin America in the 1960s, whose futility was symbolized by the execution in 1967 of a defeated Che Guevara in the mountains of Bolivia, Cuba reined in idealistic excess. An expeditionary army that at one time numbered 55,000

did fight for years in Angola to support the leftist MPLA against South African proxies with costs so huge to the apartheid regime that South Africans today credit Cuba with having done more to bring down white minority rule than anyone else from the outside.

Today, Cuba exports doctors and nurses rather than soldiers, with medical assistance programs in 68 countries. Residents of poor barrios of Caracas have medical care because Cuban physicians are living among them via a medical program known as *Misión Barrio Adentro*. In this case, Cuba is rewarded by Venezuelan oil, but when Cuba was the first to send medical teams to Kashmir after a devastating earthquake, the humanitarian intervention was its own reward. The *Misión Milagro* has brought hundreds of thousands of poor Latin Americans to Cuba for eye surgery and sent teams of Cuban eye doctors abroad.

Cubans are proud of Cuba's achievements and reputation. But the Cuban revolution has felt the tooth of time. After all, 70 percent of Cubans were born after Fidel Castro's triumphal entry into Havana on January 8, 1959. They are less interested in what Cuban doctors are doing for Africans than in living conditions at home. Daniel Erikson recounts in *The Cuba Wars* how the island's top microbiologist operates on people during the day and, to make ends meet, tends to pigs at night. As an aging and semi-sidelined Fidel grousers possessively about "his" revolution's future, a whole country awaits change. A transition is occurring. Where is it going?

What will be the role of the United States, whose antagonism to the Castro regime has defined Cuban life and its defiant mystique for five decades, now that an inspiring and mould-breaking US president has promised to reach out?

Recent travel to Havana permitted me to speak to dozens of foreign observers there about their expectations, and to Cubans about their hopes and apprehensions.

I was also on a personal quest about the past: my American mother was taken there as a child in 1914. Subsequently orphaned, she left almost 20 years later for Europe and eventually Canada. But her Havana childhood had woven years ago through stories and kitchen Spanish into mine, and I was after something I wanted to capture from those years, some signs of her life.

I was also on a personal quest about the past: my American mother was taken there as a child in 1914. Subsequently orphaned, she left almost 20 years later for Europe and eventually Canada. But her Havana childhood had woven years ago through stories and kitchen Spanish into mine, and I was after something I wanted to capture from those years, some signs of her life.

I knew she welcomed themes of the Castro revolution to correct the appalling inequalities and abuses of Cuba in her day. Cubans today know they have never been as healthy, educated or more or less equal in their history. Their streets are the safest in the western hemisphere, and not just because the forces of order have the upper hand in all ways: Cubans are conditioned against crime, having thrown out a cruel dictatorial regime that invited gangsters to treat Havana as an ongoing trade fair.

But Cubans seem above all poor, worn down from a daily grind to feed a family, dispirited under a regime that has crushed any opposition while failing to deliver a standard of living anywhere near Cuba's potential. Theirs is a perplexing story of a nearby and compelling people whose next

chapters are avidly awaited, by them and by *nos altros*.

When ex-Soviet refusenik Natan Sharansky returned to post-Communist Moscow as an Israeli cabinet minister, he went to the Lefortovo Prison, where he had spent 16 months in solitary confinement before nine more years in the gulag. His Russian-ness rose as soon as he smelled the air. "It's Moscow," he exclaimed, breathing in the unique

cocktail of dust, bad engine fumes, worse plumbing, tobacco, good old human sweat and a universally used floor detergent potent enough to vanquish even Russian mud.

A lot will change in Cuba in the next 10 years. When you walk in Havana, you will smell the sea instead of a concoction that Sharansky might have mistaken for Moscow 30 years ago, but fortified by the smoky blue breath of cars from the 1950s with engines that run on improvisational mechanical genius and even transplants from Russian tractors.

Around the Parque Central, the boulevard air has a bluish tint from vintage Chevy Bel-Airs and Ford Fairlanes jockeying for room while trying to avoid heart-rending stray dogs wandering pathetically into traffic like madmen. Gorgeous robin's-egg blue and cream convertibles sparkling with chrome that suggest *Saturday Evening Post* ads in the 1950s shine among vastly more numerous unrestored and dented cousins held together with duct tape, a constant reminder of the US embargo (and also of a day when Detroit could make cars that fired the imagination).

It is a shock to see how degraded Havana is. The city's core, Habana

Vieja, is older than one expects, and run down, though grander historic buildings have been impressively restored. Along the city's signature boulevard, the Malecón, probably the world's greatest urban ocean drive, 1920s apartment blocks are crumbling, devastated by the combined force of the harsh arm of the sea and a half-century of neglect.

In my mother's day, Havana was in part a stage set for a no-holds-barred playground for Americans off the leash from a teetotal and puritanical homeland to which they sent risqué postcards. Today the sets are dilapidated and tired.

It is hard for a walker along the Malecón to imagine how the boulevard presented itself in the capital's heydays of glitter and high life. Those images are gone; men in white linen suits are gone. So are small businesses and much of what was a burgeoning middle class.

On the other hand, the handsome kids kicking a football on the Paseo del Prado are at home. Today, Havana is incontestably Cuban, apart from German, English, Spanish and Canadian tourists being bused around to kitschy tourist bars with watered-down mojitos and seemingly cloned trios playing "Guantanamera." A walker catches bursts of real Cuban music, *son*, rumbas, romantic *canciones*, from inside dark halls off alleys or in a taxi, like shots of espresso for the soul.

Their beloved music gets Cubans through days spent trying to make ends meet in a heavily bureaucratized runaround. Long-time Associated Press bureau chief Anita Snow wrote in 2007 that while "no one on this communist-run island dies of starvation," her own experiment of living for a month on Cuban rations (and an average Cuban salary of \$17.00) was tough. She lost nine pounds and found it easy to understand how Cubans are constantly "obsessing about food."

Non-convertible peso currency stores that Cubans without access to for-

eigners' tips or remittances — about half the population — have to use, recall Moscow's darkest days in the mid-1980s when it all fell apart: hardly anything to buy to eat, much less to enjoy.

So a curious inversion has occurred: Jon Lee Anderson wrote in *Che* of Havana in 1960, when the first Russians arrived, "newcomers [who] looked and acted like peasants, rough-hewn and poorly dressed...They stared in wonder at the modern city, with its shiny American consumer products still in shop windows; television sets, refrigerators, air conditioners...The huge American cars, luxuriant, with chrome and fins, had them goggle-eyed."

That was then; now, Communist Havana is like Moscow at its scantest, while capitalist Muscovites enjoy Ikea and flat-screen TVs.

Why? Cuban economic management is clunky and cries out for intelligent reform. But the economy has been severely throttled for almost 50 years by the US economic embargo.

The Spaniards ruled Cuba with a heavy boot for centuries until the US kicked them out in 1898 in what is called the Spanish-American War (except in Cuba, where it is referred to as the Guerra de l'Independencia.) After US occupation, Cuba's independence was conceded in 1902, but the United States made sure it would call the key shots.

Cubans' resentment of the United States role in their history is part of their DNA. Americans haven't heard of the 1902 Platt Amendment — which US authorities had inserted into Cuban's new constitution, giving the US the right to intervene in Cuba until 1934 — but every Cuban has. And a few years later, the US Marines were back, returning also in 1912 and 1917.

The standard caricature of Cuba from the 1920s through the 1950s depicts the countryside as the virtual property of the United Fruit Company

and Havana as a lucrative playpen run by Meyer Lansky and other mobsters and fronted by George Raft for mindless sex-and-gambling American tourists. It ignores the lively merits of Havana's reputation as a world city — as a cub reporter for the *Havana Post*, "a fixture on the breakfast tables of the American colony" (Alfredo Jose Estrada), my mother came to the new Hotel Nacional to interview Sergei Rachmaninov, as well as Al Capone.

But Cuba couldn't sustain a viable democracy in those decades, lurching into successive dictatorships. A sadder fact is that the US government supported the venal and cruel regime of Fulgencio Batista until its closing hours.

Fidel Castro's overthrow of Batista

Cuban's resentment of the United States role in their history is part of their DNA. Americans haven't heard of the 1902 Platt Amendment — which US authorities had inserted into Cuban's new constitution, giving the US the right to intervene in Cuba until 1934 — but every Cuban has. And a few years later, the US Marines were back, returning also in 1912 and 1917.

after a punishing mountain-based guerrilla campaign, in which the rebels under Comandantes Guevara, Raul Castro and Camilo Cienfuegos prevailed because of peasant support and their own disciplined persistence, was seen as romantic justice, even — at first — in the US.

The 100,000 refugees in the inaugural wave of flight to Miami were mostly embittered by what they had lost to the new regime. Many were on the wrong side, aligned with Batista. But the flow continued and not all were escaping retribution for pro-Batista activities. Professionals and small-businessmen didn't want to bring up children in what was becoming a militant ideological monolith, once Fidel Castro dropped initial

attempts to showcase an inclusive social-democratic coalition of wide variety of opponents to Batista.

As part of a process of "draining the swamp," several hundred executions took place at Havana's La Cabana fortress, after summary trials. But as Anderson writes, "There was little public opposition to the wave of revolutionary justice at the time. On the contrary: Batista's thugs had committed some sickening crimes, the Cuban public was in a lynching mood...and in between exposés of Batista-era graft and corruption, Cuban papers were full of morbid revelations and gruesome photographs of the horrors that had been committed by Batista's *esbirros*, or henchmen."

Anderson adds, "Whatever the 'necessity' of the revolutionary tribunals, they did much to polarize the political climate between Havana and Washington." The gap widened as Fidel's anti-Washington rhetoric escalated and his plans to nationalize American assets in Cuba clarified. Che Guevara upped the ante by urging violent revolution throughout the hemisphere, which Anderson terms "a siren call to the hemisphere's would-be revolutionaries and an implicit declaration of war against the interests of the United States."

So began a half-century of mutual enmity. The 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba by CIA-financed and supported Cuban exiles was, as Richard Reeves put it recently, "a total disaster, one of the great embarrassments in American history." Its failure put an end to American efforts to displace Castro by force. The US broke relations and instituted its policy of economic sanctions.

There was not a foreign diplomat whom I met in Cuba who believes US policy over the last 48 years has been anything but counterproductive. Attempts to isolate Cuba by cutting off aid to countries that dealt with the regime flopped as Cuba became increasingly an international star.



The Gazette, Montreal

Fidel Castro at Pierre Trudeau's funeral in Montreal in October 2000. The Cuban leader has endured from the middle of one century to the first decade of the next. And now, in a great thaw, President Obama is moving to normalize relations with Cuba.

Doctrinaire positions such as support for the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 (Vaclav Havel never forgave him) and for the delusional US policies pushed Cuba into the orbit of the USSR, leading Fidel to declare, ominously for the Cuban economy, he would be "a Marxist-Leninist until I die." It led Fidel to support the 1991 hard-liners' putsch attempt against Gorbachev.

But Cuba's attempts to export revolution had wound down in the 1970s. Fidel acknowledges in his "spo-

ken autobiography," 600 pages of interviews with Ignacio Ramonet, that revolution (like democracy) is impossible to export.

Unfortunately, consequent efforts under President Jimmy Carter to normalize relations by increasing people-to-people contact were reversed by anti-Communist Ronald Reagan policies that sadly held the revolutionary struggle against white minority rule in South Africa and the related proxy war

involving Cuba in Angola to be Cold War threats to US interests.

Bill Clinton's post-Cold War hopes to end the embargo on travel were dashed by the increasingly disproportionate power of Florida's anti-Castro lobbies to rally support in Congress, where Clinton suffered reverses in 1994 elections. Before long, the exiles' frenzy over the downing of two unarmed exile-piloted overflights ("Brothers to the Rescue") by Cuban MiGs led to even more draconian sanctions under the *Helms-Burton Act* of 1996.

For Cuba, the end of the USSR severed life-sustaining Soviet sugar subsidies. When the US tightened the screws, drastically worsening economic conditions caused more to flee the island. Collateral damage was the preposterous Elian Gonzalez affair in 2000, which outraged Cubans. All of this enabled Castro to ratchet up once again patriotic fervour against the US, obscuring Cuban discontent with poor economic delivery.

Though Castro had supported the US after 9/11, hard-liners including exiles in prominent positions in the George W. Bush administration launched an in-your-face war of words in Havana, where a firebrand head of the US Interests Section aggressively attacked the regime's legitimacy in meetings with opposition groups in Havana. Castro took advantage of media preoccupation with the drama building up over the Iraq invasion to respond. On March 18, 2003, as bombs rained down on Baghdad, he began to arrest dissidents and human rights defenders from among these groups; 75 received harsh sentences for "high treason" when Castro alleged they had acted not from conscience but on behalf of the US. It was an assertion as perverse as any coming from Washington.

After the melodrama of South Florida in balloting awarded Bush the presidency in 2000, Florida opinion loomed large in the 2004 election year. The White House promised "to bring an expeditious end of the Castro dictatorship," through recommendations of the Powell Commission, which was the low point of Colin Powell's public service. In the spirit of prior bogus claims about Iraq, his report even accused Cuba of ambitions to have weapons of mass destruction. Recycling the abandoned past, it labelled Cuba a "state sponsor of terrorism," and thereby a security threat to the US.

Dumb got dumber. Indeed, Laurence Wilkerson, once chief of

staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell, said US action constituted "the dumbest policy on the face of the earth." Not grasping that Fidel Castro, who thrived on confrontation, turned every crisis with the US to his advantage, the administration hardened sanctions on Cuban Americans, reducing annual family visits to once every three years, the cash that could be spent under Treasury regulations to \$50 a day from over \$150, and limiting remittances from US exiles and residents to a much more narrowly defined circle of relatives. The exclusion of family in the Communist Party of Cuba would leave out most teachers, doctors, researchers or anyone in the ubiquitous state civil machinery. The US piled hundreds of millions of dollars into exile activity and crude anti-Castro propaganda broadcasts from the US. Some US initiatives were embarrassingly asinine, such as a program to bribe poorly paid Cuban doctors in service abroad to defect to the US — which was successful between 1 and 2 percent of the time.

But the big news is that now, change is in the air. A bipartisan group of US Senators has introduced a bill supported by US human rights and

Change is in the air. A bipartisan group of US senators has introduced a bill supported by US human rights and business groups to end the ban on Americans traveling to Cuba. A delegation from the congressional black caucus visited Havana in April and report that both Raul and Fidel Castro sounded open to improved relations, though Raul shied at the notion of any preconditions.

business groups to end the ban on Americans travelling to Cuba. A delegation from the congressional black caucus visited Havana in April and reported that both Raul and Fidel Castro sounded open to improved relations, though Raul shied at the notion of any pre-conditions.

Just before the Summit of the Americas in Trinidad April 17-18, President Barack Obama announced abandonment of the restrictions on family reunions and remittances.

Obama's humanitarian and political gesture of reconciliation was very welcome to despondent Cubans. As Alfredo Jose Estrada puts it, "Havana remains veiled." But there is an air of melancholy. By most accounts, Cubans seem exhausted from the struggle to make ends meet. Political opposition is marginalized. Free elections are way down the list of Cubans' preoccupations. They are focused on the priority of winning improved living conditions, though it has been possible to mobilize nearly 100,000 signatures on a petition protesting the dual-currency system that so disfavours ordinary citizens.

In the Parque Central groups of men gather at night under the plane trees to argue passionately. Hoping against realism that this was the spontaneous emergence of a Hyde Park Corner-type political debate, I stopped to listen. It was all about *beisbol*.

There is no public political debate, really. Heroic figures such as Oswaldo Paya, who organized the Varela Project to collect signatures arguing for democratic political pluralism (which Fidel sourly labels a "counter-revolutionary, pro-Yankee project"), have been side-lined, and

high-profile supporters jailed, released for exile abroad or revealed to be fake infiltrators from the police.

But there is an independent library movement with 135 chapters, though its founder had to flee to the US in 2001. There are fledgling examples of independent if non-confrontational media. Civil society activity is forming around ecology issues, women's solidarity, and tentatively and partly independent trade unions. On the last Thursday of the month, an

intellectual magazine, *TEMAS*, holds public debates on key social issues — racism, juvenile alienation, homophobia and corruption are recent themes — in a spirit of robust give-and-take.

The Catholic Church is present, though in an officially secular country of 11 million whose regime blamed the church for siding with dictators, it is reduced to about 300 priests, only

In a country where many are the descendants of slaves, the election of Barack Obama therefore resonates vastly. Their expectations of his ability to deliver change are palpable and possibly inherently unrealistic, but they hope the embargo's end could position Cubans closer to the international mainstream and improve their options.

half of whom are Cuban. I met with the enormously impressive Cardinal Jaime Ortega Alamino, whose wisdom about ways to help the people through the tough economic times was consoling. In a non-political way, church parishes are organizing older people's discussion groups and services, building facilities and helping single mothers with daycare and counselling. He doesn't pretend that Cubans are flocking to mass, but he thinks the church is doing some good, and that a foundation of civil society healthily independent of state control can emerge.

Cubans are conflicted about "the North," where many now have family. They like Americans but have grown up fearing America. Young people less reverential about the revolution would love US lifestyle benefits. In a central park there is a statue of Abraham Lincoln, and Fidel has his bust on his desk. In a country where many are the descendants of slaves, the election of Barack Obama therefore resonates vastly. Their expectations of his ability to deliver change are palpable and possibly inherently unrealistic, but they hope the embargo's end could position Cubans closer to the international mainstream and improve their options.

However, for now, the potential of real change is primarily still in the hands of the Castros.

What more can be said about the remarkable historic figure who has dominated Cuban life and starred on the global stage for half a century? South Florida exile *jefe* and US congressman Lincoln Diaz-Balart, son of a Batista minister and nephew of Fidel's first and very bourgeoisie wife, has called it the "Fidel Castro regime," pure and simple. Castro has shaped Cuban

life to the point of details. Even today, in fairly austere semi-retirement, he saw fit to write to the manager of the Cuban national baseball team to tell him how to handle Japanese pitching in the recent world baseball championship. Inexhaustibly self-confident, vain, he brooks dissent badly, often reacting vindictively. In his interviews with Ramonet, his remarks on prisoners of conscience reveal a despotic mind, and a petty one as he refused even to recognize dissident Raul Rivero's merits as a poet. After Obama reached out but reiterated concern over Cuban political prisoners, Castro described the 54 remaining from the 75 jailed in 2003 as like "Bay of Pigs mercenaries serving a foreign power threatening Cuba."

Does he still call the shots in Cuba? He no longer runs the government but probably retains the ability to put the brakes on any tentative moves toward liberalization and reform. While he showed in the past a pragmatic capacity to adapt to changing circumstances, such as in "the special period" after the calamitous loss of Soviet subsidies when the regime introduced a few elements of a market economy, his core beliefs seem obsessively rigid. In one of the articles of "reflections" that are his essential visible activity these days, he described himself as a "utopian socialist," adding that "one must be consistent until the end."

The bottom line is that there will be no meaningful change in Cuba until he dies. His health is improved — in February, his neighbourhood was shut down for several hours so he could enjoy a two-to-three-kilometre walk.

Most estimate his personal support among Cubans remains higher than most in South Florida would acknowledge because he has turned US pressure into a patriotism issue every time. When he does pass, Cubans will be conflicted: bereft, despite unhappiness with their very scant material situation, because he has given Cubans pride in their country, and access for all to basic human needs — except, sadly, basic political freedoms.

Everyone agrees a transition is occurring, though there is a difference of view as to how much "reform" is involved. President since 2007, Raul Castro, five years Fidel's junior at 77, is described by those who know him as being of a different cast. He is a life-long self-described Communist, and was a hard man as a young military *comandante* with a mass execution to his name from those live-or-die days.

But he has become less generally militant than Fidel, more down-to-earth, more modest, able to withstand give-and-take. He has cordial relations with the Cardinal, from whom he accepts a certain amount of speaking truth to power. Volume on the propaganda side of life has been dialled down, though there is little published alternative to the party line. Observers call the regime authoritarian but not totalitarian — "Cuba is not the German Democratic Republic." While it is very efficient in its political controls, it doesn't try to control everything, or snoop into private lives.

There have recently been tentative isolated economic reforms, such as making 4,000 land plots available for individual farming operations. Raul is said to favour encouraging small busi-

ness. In a move interpreted as a brake on the ambitions of the next generation of officials, he has replaced some of Fidel's most visible younger chiefs with older men from his own circle, usually military, for Raul has spent his life at the top of the society-within-a-society that is the Cuban army. It is the component of Cuban society that works more or less efficiently for its

Observers believe there will be no sudden toppling of the Castro regime, the magic "poof" moment hard-liners in the US hope for. This is not Gdansk or Prague, where the regimes were seen as surrogates for foreign oppressors; to the contrary. So it is plausible to assume that when reform comes, it will be from within the regime, over time.

members, having separate food, transport and energy infrastructure — precisely Cuba's weak points. He has shown his frustration over the enduring weaknesses in Cuban delivery of social services with vividly critical public remarks that did not blame only the US embargo or a spate of hurricanes (which have cost Cuba mightily).

Raul is comfortable with Russians and especially their military, with which he has been pals for 50 years. He is uncomfortable with salon leftists, and blowhards, reportedly including egomaniac Hugo Chavez.

Europeans he has met with say he is candid, acknowledging that he knows Cuban "Communism" is unsustainable beyond five or six years. He would welcome help from more socially conscious Europeans when Cuba undertakes internal reforms toward a market-based economy, to enable the society to preserve the principles of social justice at the revolution's core. Like many Cubans, he fears the country's immersion in an identity-crushing "Americanization" once the island is open to all.

Raul Castro said to one European that he has to position the party to be able to win elections when inevitably they arrive. (This is a strategy that has failed in other transitions. As perestroika godfather Alexandr Yakovlev told a heedless

Gorbachev: "The Party is dead. Talk about renewal is senseless.") One wonders if he knows that Cubans feel as betrayed by ideologues who care more about doctrine than about welfare, as they do by those in Florida who urged Bush to tighten the embargo when people were feeling the greatest pain. As Cuban exile Arturo Lopez-Levy put it, "Those people in

both places put their interests before the pragmatic necessities of solving the problems of the country."

Observers believe there will be no sudden toppling of the Castro regime, the magic "poof" moment hard-liners in the US hope for. This is not Gdansk or Prague, where the regimes were seen as surrogates for foreign oppressors; to the contrary. So it is plausible to assume that when reform comes, it will be from within the regime, over time. But how far will Raul personally go in that direction? Most argue he will not, or cannot, make really significant changes as long as Fidel is alive.

But the more positive US policy line improves prospects of positive change.

Cuban Americans expect soon to be able to travel to see family, and send financial help, which will make a difference to many Cubans. Restrictions on travel by all Americans will be lessened, permitting people-to-people exchanges of the kind known in the 1970s when Cuban and American scholars, performers, artists and students and others in civil society could mingle, with undoubted benefits for Cubans' awareness of the potential for a more congenial reality.

But US overall economic sanctions are rooted in the constraints of the *Helms-Burton Act's* explicit (and extra-

territorial) pre-conditions for their removal: free elections in Cuba, the release of all political prisoners and the disappearance from power of both Castros. As Lopez-Levy has observed, US policy "wants to start at the end."

If we have learned anything since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, it is that elections themselves do not signify democracy, which is built only over time. As the relevant adaptations required are more of behaviour than of process, historical experience helps. When Pope John Paul II was being briefed prior to his historic visit to Cuba in 1998, he asked his aides how great had been Cuba's experience with democracy prior to 1959. On being told the disconsoling fact there was virtually none, he held his head in his hands in despair.

There are benchmarks to measure transition from one sort of society to another. Boris Yeltsin, for example, believed in three simple freedoms — freedom of expression, freedom to own property and freedom to vote a change in government. That Putin's Russia backslid on these only validates the thesis that rooting such freedoms in the rule of law doesn't come easily after generations of suppression.

But democracy will come to Cuba over time — in a Cuban way, not Florida's.

As to a more market-based economy, it will also arrive but probably not in a rush, for there is real fear among welfare-dependent and egalitarian Cubans of "shock therapy," and of the consequences on the island of an invasion by Miami capitalists. When challenged on the chaotically uncontrolled privatization of state assets in Russia in the mid-1990s, privatization "czar" Anatoly Chubais famously asked, "How do you de-control in a controlled way?" The Cuban government, sooner or later, will have its turn to try to find the answer. The recent failures of Western capitalism ought to mean that Cuban efforts to find its "third way," along with others in

Latin America, receive attentive respect and some generous support.

A recent study by the Brookings Institute argues that the US should not expect or wait for reciprocity before liberalizing its policies toward Cuba. More open exchanges will have their liberalizing reward. But there is one standout obligation of Raul Castro if the Obama administration is to argue for an end to sanctions: freeing the 200 or so political prisoners still in Cuban jails. From a mixture of obtuseness, defiance and negotiating instincts, Fidel Castro never accepted the equation of better relations with the US in exchange for greater human rights in Cuba. Raul has said publicly he would do so, if the US releases five Cubans sentenced to extremely harsh prison sentences in the US for “espionage.” Given the vagaries of the US court system, it is very hard for Obama to call his bluff by doing so.

But it is unlikely Raul Castro would free the prisoners for anybody but the US. So, as a potential comprehensive bargaining process forms, both sanctions and prisoners are being retained as bargaining chips.

It should go without saying that the open wound of Guantanamo should be healed, not just by closing the notorious and toxically damaging prison for suspected jihadists, but by returning to Cuba the land on which the base is built. When the US took it as a prize of the Spanish-American War, Guantanamo was a strategic watch-post for the eastern Caribbean. Today, it is militarily worthless.

A more open Cuba could be an even more eminent participant in Central and South American geopolitics once the energies and intelligence of the educated population of Cubans are freed up. But a revived Cuba can play a contributing role in the North American family as well.

Canadians ought to know. Not only have they been flocking to Cuba

as winter tourists for decades, but Fidel Castro has been a friend. The Cubans didn’t have to accept the FLQ kidnapers of James Cross to help resolve our existential crisis in 1970, and Pierre Trudeau was forever grateful. He built a relationship with Castro, who has called him in his interviews “an extraordinary figure,” “a noble man,” a view Trudeau reciprocated.

Prime Jean Minister Chrétien always chided the US for its senseless embargo. He had tried to get Cuba admitted to the first Summit of the Americas in 1994, but Clinton refused. When Jean Chrétien visited Havana en route from the Santiago Summit in 1998, he was ready to welcome Cuba’s medical teams to ravaged Haiti, but

There is one standout obligation of Raul Castro if the Obama administration is to argue for an end to sanctions: freeing the 200 or so political prisoners still in Cuban jails. From a mixture of obtuseness, defiance and negotiating instincts, Fidel Castro never accepted the equation of better relations with the US in exchange for greater human rights in Cuba.

again the US, another principal player in the operation there, said no.

Countries build up influence only over time but can lose it quickly. In recent years, the relationship to Cuba has been downscaled by the Harper government, for seemingly ideological reasons that came out in comments in a February interview with the *Wall Street Journal* about our “opponents and enemies” in Latin America.

As Vincent Marissal wrote in *La Presse* after the Cuba issue had dominated discussion at the Trinidad Summit, to Harper’s displeasure, “Canada is a small actor on the international stage and its influence is minimal. But there’s one place in the world where Canada could and should play the role of a leader, Cuba, a country

with which we have had a privileged relationship for nearly 50 years.”

We can sustain influence with the regime and also contribute to the welfare of civil society and argue for the rights of individuals. Cuban human rights defenders can be beneficiaries of Canada having the regime’s ear.

I didn’t sense my younger mother in Havana. It is all too changed for that. But I imagine that the Havana boys playing stickball in what had been her street in Vedado were pretty much the same as those my uncle John remembered playing ball with in the twenties — only with a fairer shot today at a better life.

Once the mutually reinforcing Castro and sanctions strangleholds loosen their interlocking grip on the island’s fate, what happens in Cuba will be up to the Cubans. If things go well, Cuba’s example could again be one that inspires. It won’t be via Fidel’s “utopian socialism,” but Cuba’s investments in human capital over his five decades as leader have positioned the country for takeoff, if fuelled by a dosage of reforms consistent with Cuban interests.

After Wall Street’s humbling crash there is less hubris these days about simplistic market formulas for development as people grope for the right balances between market forces and social equity. Perhaps Cuba can, in getting it right enough for Cubans, show the way for others in Latin America, and add real value to the North American family as well.

Contributing Writer Jeremy Kinsman is a former Canadian ambassador to Moscow and high commissioner to London and has recently been diplomat in-residence at Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, where he directed a democracy support project for the Community of Democracies.