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# **Explaining Canadian Foreign Policy Toward Cuba**

**Yvon Grenier**

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Explaining Canadian Foreign Policy  
Toward Cuba

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# Explaining Canadian Foreign Policy Toward Cuba

Yvon Grenier

## INTRODUCTION

Canada currently imposes sanctions and related measures against 21 countries in retribution for their gross violation of human rights and democratic (HRD) norms.<sup>1</sup> In the Americas, two of the three non-democratic countries are sanctioned on these grounds: Nicaragua and Venezuela. Yet, the most authoritarian of the three, Cuba, is not. In fact, Canada considers Cuba an “ally” (Dyer 2021a). How can this apparent inconsistency be explained?

To begin, some caveats are in order. Canada’s foreign policy of engagement with Cuba does not stand out among allies. United States (US) policy does. Even if Pierre and Justin Trudeau have manifested extraordinary affection for the Castro family and its regime, the parameters of Canadian foreign policy toward the island have been largely bipartisan since Prime Minister John Diefenbaker set the tone in 1959. And, finally, at the risk of stating the obvious, among democratic nations, the defence of human rights and democracy rarely trump other hard national interests, so some level of inconsistency in defending HRD abroad is pretty much the norm among democratic countries.

This paper suggests that to understand Canadian foreign policy toward Cuba (and conceivably other countries with similar foreign policies toward the island), one needs to examine the opportunities at both ends of the bilateral relationship. Specifically, this paper focuses on two explanatory variables: opportunities for democratization in Cuba and opportunities to prioritize HRD in Canadian foreign policy. The greater these opportunities, the greater the probability that a vigorous policy of democracy promotion will be adopted. Conversely, low opportunities make it unwise and untimely to invest in more than *pro forma* reprimand.<sup>2</sup>

The case is made that neither sets of opportunities are present in Canada–Cuba relations. The opposite is true in the cases of foreign policy toward countries such as Belarus, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, where Canada imposes sanctions and openly calls for democratization, even regime change.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, 13 August 2021.

<sup>2</sup> I use the same variables in an analysis of Canadian foreign policy toward Venezuela (Grenier 2021a–b).

<sup>3</sup> While most countries in the region are nominally democratic, and consequently would not be good fits for Canadian democracy promotion, human rights records in many of them leave much to be desired, including close trading partners and allies of Canada like Colombia and Mexico. However, the model presented here applies to opportunities to push for HRD, not just human rights.

Should opportunities for democratization present themselves in Cuba, along with opportunities to prioritize HRD, Canada (and possibly other countries) would be more inclined to promote HRD vigorously, by imposing targeted sanctions, recognizing the opposition, and basically calling for regime change.

## Hypothesis

Although the promotion of democratic values and human rights has been officially an important goal of Canadian foreign policy for about three decades, the reality is that, most of the time, it results in democracy assistance rather than democracy promotion and statements in diplomatic channels rather than high-profile public engagement. In the words of political adviser and scholar Thomas Axworthy (2019), it consists of “low-level brick-by-brick building of institutions, listening, mutual learning and a great many workshops and professional development exercise” (9). Rarely does it reach for economic sanctions, reference to the International Criminal Court, let alone the recognition of an opposition leader as the only legitimate president in the country, as has been the case of its policy toward Venezuela.

The hypothesis is that Canada is more likely to depart from a “brick-by-brick,” capacity-building HRD approach, and gear up to a more assertive (even adversarial) one, in the presence of a structure of opportunity at both ends of the bilateral relations. Specifically, two sets of opportunities are identified:

1. There needs to be an *opportunity for democratization* in the country, prompted by (a) a major, multi-dimensional and sudden *crisis* as well as (b) the presence of a *credible democratic opposition* ready to champion democratization. Indicators of crisis include (but are not limited to) economic collapse, humanitarian crisis, mass exodus of the population, increased repression, and authoritarian consolidation. What makes an opposition credible as a democratic force is a combination of organizational coherence, domestic support, international recognition, and a public commitment to democratic values, preferably rooted in an existing democratic tradition.
2. For policy-makers in Ottawa, there needs to be an *opportunity to prioritize HRD*, meaning that this path (a) does not appreciably threaten Canadian economic or security interests (trade, investment, and alliances), (b) presents an opportunity for broad-based multilateral action (always a plus for a middle power like Canada), and (c) does not meet significant opposition in Parliament or in public opinion. Arguably, (a) is particularly relevant for a middle power such as Canada; it is a preferred but not indispensable option for a superpower such as the US. Both (c) and (b) give policy-makers some latitude to formulate initiatives not strictly dictated by hard interests.

Opportunities are not enough: One needs to seize them. The explanation outlined here is incomplete because within-case variations are not systematically examined to explain why government officials see and seize opportunities at any given time. In addition to the realist perspective adopted here, one needs to look at the decision-making process, from individual actors to bureaucratic factors, to appreciate the variations within the parameters established more than 60 years ago. Nevertheless, the model provides a framework that illuminates under what conditions policy-makers in democratic

countries (and Canada, in particular) are more likely to press hard for HRD. This is particularly interesting as opportunities for democratization went from nil to significant in the wake of the extraordinary nation-wide protests of 11–12 July 2021. While Cuba is the oldest dictatorship in the Americas, opportunity for democratization and opportunity in Ottawa to push hard for HRD in that country appeared to be very slim until then and have been since.

This paper contains three parts: an overview of Canada–Cuba relations, an evaluation of the opportunity for democratization in Cuba, and an evaluation of the opportunity to prioritize HRD in Canadian foreign policy toward Cuba.

## CANADIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD CUBA: THE EXCEPTION THAT ISN'T ONE

Canada has had commercial relations with Cuba since colonial times. It had significant banking and insurance investments early in the twentieth century, and diplomatic relations with the island were established in 1945. Overall, a “hands-off” approach, paired with diplomatic and business relations with the regime in place, has undergirded relations ever since, including during the Batista and the Castro dictatorships.

Canada was one of only two countries (the other being Mexico) in the hemisphere to have never broken diplomatic relations with Cuba since the revolution. This policy was set by Conservative Prime Minister John Diefenbaker (1957–63), who saw no reason to change established trade and diplomatic practices. Canada did not impose an embargo on the Soviet Union, for instance (Beech 2015; McKercher 2015). Latin American countries other than Mexico broke relations with Cuba in the early in the 1960s but renewed them in the 1970s. Since then, and until the Obama administration, the US stood alone in not having diplomatic relations with Cuba.

Needless to say, the US and Cuba have had many grievances with each other for many decades, even after the end of the Cold War. Until 2015, which is the year that full diplomatic relations were reestablished with the US, Cuba was designated as a country that sponsors terrorism by the US State Department. Canada and Cuba, on the other hand, have only had a few rows over the years.<sup>4</sup> The expropriation of some Canadian assets in the early 1960s was not one of them because compensation was promptly granted to the satisfaction of all parties.

Since the 1959 revolution, Canada’s position has officially been to gently nudge Cuba in the direction of two complementary goals, although they are not spelled out as such: the liberalization of its economy and the democratization of its political system. Those are the two US foreign policy goals as well, though the policy tools used to achieve them have been quite different. The US experimented with violent options in the first few years of the Castro regime and imposed punishing economic

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, in 2000, Fidel Castro called Canada “enemy territory” after Cuban athletes defected to Canada during the Pan American Games in Winnipeg.

sanctions, along with some extraterritorial pressure on foreign companies that traded in confiscated US assets on the island. And yet, Cuba currently has commercial relations with 70 countries and counts the US as one of its main trading partners.

Canada has opted for what has been called “constructive engagement” or “principled pragmatism,” at least since the 1990s. Arguably, principled pragmatism means principled opposition to the US embargo and pragmatism for everything else. “Constructive” defines both the tone used by Ottawa and the ambition to maintain the lines of communication with Cuba. “Engagement” on HRD is mostly limited

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to ritualized and diplomatic (and rarely public) Canadian statements deploring illiberal policies and non-democratic political practices in the island. Canada has supported or co-sponsored United Nations (UN) resolutions critical of Cuba’s human rights performance, both in the Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly.<sup>5</sup> In its 2018 Universal Periodic Review (UPR), Canada recommended that Cuba “improve transparency and due process in the justice system,” adopt “legislation providing legal status to NGOs [non-governmental organizations] and independent journalists,” and “immediately eliminate harassment and intimidation of activists, including arbitrary short-term and pre-trial detentions and house arrest.” The UPR highlighted the similar recommendations of the previous

two UPR cycles, in 2009 and 2013, completed under the Harper administration. Again, Canada recommended lifting restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression and association, releasing political prisoners, and ratifying the two core Covenants on human rights (the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights).<sup>6</sup>

The Canadian embassy maintains contact with a variety of non-governmental groups, including human rights activists and the religious community, though it does not actively court the opposition, the way the Canadian embassy has done in Caracas. Through a program called the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI), the Canadian embassy sponsors local development projects mostly in local development, management, agriculture, vocational, and technical training. Thematic priorities for the CFLI under the current government are gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls,

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<sup>5</sup> In 2018, Canada voted against eight amendments proposed by the US to what is now an annual vote of condemnation of its embargo against Cuba. All the amendments concerned violations of human rights in Cuba. However, the Canadian government stated that if it broke “with the free world” and “joined Syria, Iran and North Korea,” as UN Watch pointed out, it was because it was not the right place to address human rights issues in Cuba. Still, siding with Canada, Norway was the other rare exception, while other democratic nations mostly abstained (see UN Watch 2018).

<sup>6</sup> The report salutes “positive steps” taken by the government to improve access to internet and to “increase freedom of religion and respect of LBGTQ identities, and to improve spaces for expression.” However, “Despite positive steps, Cuba remains a country with severe limits on civil society space and no political pluralism. Freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, and harassment and short-term detention of activists, journalists, and human rights defenders remain areas of concern. Citizens who are arrested are presumed guilty until proven innocent and can be detained until trial or held with no charges” (see Canada 2018).

inclusive governance, including diversity, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, environment and climate action focusing on adaptation and mitigation, as well as non-water management. Canada has also financed programs in partnership with various national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). As a rule, the goal is not directly or explicitly about fostering democracy, human rights, or the rule of law.<sup>7</sup>

Nobody in Ottawa seems to evaluate the constructive engagement or principled pragmatism policy in strictly consequentialist terms. Simply put, it does not need to produce specific results to be deemed successful, as long as the lines of communication remain open, trade and investment continue to flow, and some cooperation is achieved for Canada's development projects on the island. If Cuba is not prepared to help Canada in its Venezuela policy, as the Trudeau government curiously thought possible for a while, that is fine. When the "sonic attacks" (or Havana Syndrome) targeted our diplomatic personnel in Havana, Canada repatriated much of its diplomatic personnel home and opened an investigation, without blaming the Cuban government, as the US government did.<sup>8</sup>

Prime Minister Jean Chrétien's foreign minister Lloyd Axworthy, who had more than a passing interest in engagement with Cuban leaders, used the label to capture his policy of engagement with China and Indonesia as well, claiming that "in certain circumstances such an approach [principled pragmatism] gets results" (Axworthy 2005, 71–72). There is no evidence of this policy ever producing "results" in either of these three countries beyond the minimal but apparently sufficient achievement of maintaining the lines of communication and nurturing "engagement" itself.

A quick comparison between official statements on Cuba and Venezuela is instructive. The language used in Canada's statements to blame Nicolás Maduro and his regime could hardly be more categorical. When host country Peru did not invite Maduro to the Summit of the Americas in February 2018, Chrystia Freeland, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's second foreign minister (from 10 January 2017 to 20 November 2019) and the Member of Parliament for University-Rosedale, approvingly added that it "would have been farcical" to have him present ("Canada Backs Peru" 2018). Maduro's regime is "despicable," she also said.

Cuba, on the other hand, is our "ally," a country Canada is proud to have as a diplomatic and commercial partner, as evidenced by our independence vis-à-vis the US (Dyer 2021a). Prime Minister Trudeau got into trouble for what many observers considered an odd tribute to Fidel Castro in 2016, saying that "While a controversial figure, both Mr. Castro's supporters *and detractors* recognized his

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<sup>7</sup> A possible exception would be the project "Strengthening the Role of Parliaments in Democratic Governance and Sustainability" (Project No. CA-3-A034280001), in partnership with the Parliamentary Centre, an NGO based in Ottawa, which concerned the "national legislatures of the 35 states of the Americas, including Cuba" (i.e., it was not designed for Cuba specifically).

<sup>8</sup> According to columnist Doug Saunders (2018), "It is the view of several of the diplomats that Ottawa is avoiding public statements and investigations into the brain injuries because Canada, in contrast to the United States, considers it strategically important to maintain a comparatively close relationship with Cuba's Communist regime, for trade and political reasons. 'They are afraid of upsetting Cuba because of Canada's bid for a UN Security Council seat,' one diplomat said. Canada is in the midst of an intensive lobbying campaign to win a rotating seat on the United Nations Security Council in 2021-22. Cuba is considered vital to such UN votes as it holds influence over many African and Latin American UN member states."

tremendous dedication and love for the Cuban people who had a deep and lasting affection for ‘el Comandante [italics added].’” It is hard to believe that staff at Global Affairs Canada (GAC) had a chance to go over this speech before it was delivered. This statement came only days after Trudeau delivered a gushing speech at the University of Havana while on an official visit to the island during the dying days of Fidel Castro. In a response to a student’s question, he said, astonishingly, that amicable relations with communist Cuba was “one of the ways we reassure ourselves that we are our own country.” No sitting prime minister has ever gone that far in tying our “independent” (i.e., from the US) policy toward Cuba to Canada’s existential angst as a nation. The same Latin American tour then took Trudeau to Argentina and Peru, where he publicly said that he had to “admit that it was very important that my first official visit to anywhere would be right here to visit my friend Raúl and friends in Cuba.” Still, when a Canadian journalist asked Trudeau point blank if the regime built by Fidel Castro was a dictatorship, he responded (after a pregnant pause) “yes.”

## Partisanship and Personalities

The importance of personal idiosyncrasies on bilateral relations is important, arguably more so as a laboratory of Canadians’ perceptions of Cuba and the US. It should not overshadow the policy-related factors that shape more than six decades of reasonably stable relations.

*The Liberals, who have been in power two-thirds of the time since the Cuban revolution, were generally very friendly under Pierre and Justin Trudeau, whereas Conservatives were mostly business-like (Diefenbaker, Brian Mulroney), and occasionally adversarial (Stephen Harper).*

The parameters of constructive engagement toward Cuba have broadly been bipartisan, though with some notable variations in style, shall we say, from “warm” (and, at times, gushing) to cold (and occasionally adversarial). The Liberals, who have been in power two-thirds of the time since the Cuban revolution, were generally very friendly under Pierre and Justin Trudeau, whereas Conservatives were mostly business-like (Diefenbaker, Brian Mulroney), and occasionally adversarial (Stephen Harper). Pierre Trudeau promptly reverted to a more business-like tone (in fact, he just seemed to lose interest) after returning from an enchanting state visit to Fidel’s island in 1976. Back from an unsuccessful visit to Havana, Prime Minister Chrétien poured some “northern ice” on the bilateral relationship. Brian Mulroney campaigned as a tough Cold Warrior, but it was noted by shrewd observers of Canadian foreign policy that, “in the case of Cuba, the Conservative government was considerably more strident in its opposition to American policy than the previous Liberal government had been.” Mulroney enacted the Foreign Extraterritorial Measures Act in 1985, “an unprecedented piece of legislation that made it illegal for

firms operating in Canada to comply with US attempts to destabilize the Cuban government of Fidel



Castro” (Nossal, Roussel, and Paquin 2015, 191). Mulroney’s relations with Fidel Castro were cordial enough, even with some evidence of mutual respect.<sup>9</sup>

The Harper government, the first of the new Conservative Party (resulting from the merger of the Progressive Conservative Party and the Canadian Alliance in 2003), is generally considered to be more “ideological” and right-wing in orientation than Mulroney’s or any previous “progressive” conservative administration. Harper’s “Americas strategy” emphasized “economic diplomacy” and free trade (during his tenure, Canada reached trade agreements with 39 countries) more explicitly than other governments, although this objective has been part of Canadian foreign policy for quite some time. Instances of adversarial tone toward Cuba were few, though his government was generally more willing to publicly condemn poor HRD in Cuba.<sup>10</sup> Overall, as journalist Peter McKenna allowed, “Prime Minister Harper maintained, albeit at a higher degree of coolness than past Canadian governments, constructive relations with revolutionary Cuba” (McKenna 2018, 24).

Finally, it may not be superfluous to mention that, if Cuba occupies a place of importance in Canadian foreign policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean, one that is in fact disproportionate to its objective importance for Canadian national interest, it has never been a major and constant source of interest or concern for policy-makers in Ottawa. In fact, the entire region has never been a major and constant source of interest or concern for policy-makers in Ottawa (Daudelin 2007). Havana is only a three-hour flight from Ottawa. And yet, only three (Liberal) prime ministers have made official visits to the island since the revolution, and none of the three Cuban leaders have made officials visit to Canada. The two Trudeaus made a bigger display of friendship during their visits, but beyond a few programs being announced (and in the case of Pierre Trudeau, soon cancelled), their warmth toward the Castro

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<sup>9</sup> Former diplomat and “Canada’s man” in Havana, James Bartleman wrote, “Castro [. . .] seemed to have some regard for Mulroney, mentioning to me several times in the course of my talks with him in 1996 and 1998 how much he appreciated receiving a kind note from him during the Earth summit in Rio in 1992” (Bartleman 2005, 276–77). In his memoirs, Mulroney talked about the letter of appreciation Fidel Castro wrote him after Mulroney’s speech at the Earth Summit in 1992. Why didn’t he visit Cuba, as his two predecessors did? “I never did visit Cuba as prime minister. My reasoning was simple. Relations between Canada and Cuba functioned very well, and our trade was growing. With Reagan and Bush in the Oval Office for most of my tenure, I felt it would be a needless provocation on Canada’s part if I were to take a page out of Trudeau’s book and travel to Havana just to poke the Americans in the eye – although I had many times publicly disagreed with U.S. policy toward Cuba and the embargo, describing it as ‘self-destructive’” (Mulroney 2011, 910).

<sup>10</sup> For instance, Foreign Minister Maxime Bernier issued a statement on 21 May 2008 (GAC 2008) in recognition of 21 May as A Day of Solidarity With the Cuban People, as proclaimed by US President George W. Bush. Another Harper government foreign minister, Lawrence Cannon, offered “heartfelt condolences” to family and friends of political prisoner Orlando Zapata Tamayo, who died in jail after a hunger strike to protest against his jail conditions, in 2010. Cannon added: “Canada remains concerned that Cuba continues to curtail civil and political rights, including freedom of expression and association. We call on the Cuban government to release all political prisoners and to show greater tolerance for Cubans who express opposing views.” Minister of State for the Americas Peter Kent also made a declaration to a local journalist in his riding about Cuba being a “dictatorship,” which caused his trip to Havana to be delayed for several months. His successor, Diane Ablonczy, was rather vocal in the other direction, saying things such as, “We see a very significant process of economic reform and liberalization in Cuba”; and “Canada, as an investor in Cuba, with lots of people-to-people contact, wants to play as positive and constructive role as possible” (Canadian Press 2012).

clan did not alter the parameters of the bilateral relations between the two countries and certainly did not take much of their time and energy.

## Canadian Response to 11–12 July 2021 Protests in Cuba

While the nation-wide popular protests of 11–12 July 2021 in Cuba prompted governments around the world to take clear stands on this unprecedented event, the Trudeau government was clumsy and hesitant at first. It then started moving in the direction of a more explicitly critical position on the way Cubans are ruled. Trudeau did not follow President Joseph R. Biden, Jr., in imposing or supporting sanctions against the Cuban regime and, conceivably, won't in the future. Canada did not sign the US petition condemning repression and calling for the release of political prisoners (nor did countries like France or the United Kingdom). Still, the crisis in Cuba may well have marked a turning point in the way Canadian foreign policy is managed moving forward.

As of 19 July, Trudeau had made two short comments and only when pressed by journalists to speak about Havana's repression of those protests.

On 13 July, Justin Trudeau gave a neutral statement a dry run: "Canada has always stood in friendship with the Cuban people," adding "We have always called for greater freedoms and more defense of human rights in Cuba. We will continue to be there to support Cubans in their desire for greater peace, greater stability and greater voice in how things are going" (Dyer, 2021a). Yet, couldn't that comment be applied to almost any country, even democratic and stable ones?

On the same day, according to the CBC, a GAC spokesperson said that they were "closely monitoring the situation in Cuba" and dusted off some boilerplate statements on how "all parties" should "exercise restraint" and "engage in peaceful and inclusive dialogue" ("Canada calls for 'inclusive dialogue'" 2021). Those statements normally apply to violent conflicts with two or more armed groups, not to violent government crackdown of peaceful protests. GAC reiterated that "Canada supports the right of freedom of expression and assembly." But again, absurdly, it called "on all parties to uphold this fundamental right" ("Canada calls for 'inclusive dialogue'" 2021). During that week, GAC made public statements on Foreign Affairs Minister Marc Garneau's meetings with both the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, both of whom had already made clear and forceful statements on the situation in Cuba. GAC mentions discussions on many countries: Haiti, Afghanistan, Belarus, Venezuela, Nicaragua, among others. But not Cuba, even though it was most probably discussed ("Canada calls for 'inclusive dialogue'" 2021).

Then, on 15 July, as the crackdown by the special forces of the ministry of interior (the *Boinas Negras* or Black Berets) could not be denied, came Trudeau's second statement—again prompted by a pesky journalist: "We're deeply concerned by the violent crackdown on protests by the Cuban regime. We condemn the arrests and repression by authorities of peaceful demonstration." He added, "We stand, as we always will, with the people of Cuba who want and deserve democracy, freedom and respect" (Dyer 2021b).

A similar but somewhat more official statement was finally made public on 23 July by GAC, following a meeting between Marc Garneau, minister of foreign affairs, and Bruno Rodríguez Parilla, Cuba's minister of foreign affairs:

Minister Garneau expressed Canada's deep concern over the violent crackdown on protests in Cuba, particularly the repressive measures against peaceful protesters, journalists and activists, and arbitrary detention. The people of Cuba deserve their full rights to freedom of speech and assembly, as well as democracy. Minister Garneau reiterated Canada's commitment to promote and protect human rights globally and called for the rights of the Cuban people to be respected and upheld. As part of their frank exchange, Ministers Garneau and Rodríguez discussed the strong cultural and economic ties between the two countries, the challenging economic situation Cuba is facing and the impacts of the pandemic on the Cuban people. Both expressed the need for continued engagement while committing to work together for the benefit of Cubans and Canadians alike. (GAC 2021)

Months later, after it became publicly known that up to 1,000 protesters (including some adolescents) had been arrested, and hundreds were still detained and often sentenced to up to 20 years in prison, GAC (2022) tweeted, on 17 February 2022, that "Canada condemns Cuba's harsh sentencing following the July 2021 protests. Canada strongly advocates for freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly free from intimidation. We stand with the people Cuba in their aspiration for democracy." To my knowledge, Justin Trudeau had never explicitly criticized Cuba's HRD record before, and certainly not during his visit to Havana, unlike Prime Minister Chrétien or indeed, unlike President Barack Obama. Furthermore, Trudeau did not shift the blame to the US embargo, as the New Democratic Party (NDP) and other voices from the left did, in chorus with countries like Iran and Russia. (The NDP statement also reiterates the party's "support for the fundamental rights of freedom of expression and assembly.")

In sum, Canada reluctantly tried to recognize the moment without changing its overall policy too much.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEMOCRATIZATION

Before 1959, Cuba has had about as many revolutions as it has free and fair elections. Until the Castro regime, Cuba was a land of periodical upheavals, political instability, and often political violence, though the country also managed to attain a fair amount of democratic development for almost 20 years, between the revolution of 1933 and the coup of 1952. One can conclude that the democratic tradition and culture is weak, though it is not inexistent.

During the 1957–58 revolution, every manifesto of the Cuban revolution called for a return to democracy. Some mentioned the need to restore the 1940 Constitution, which was democratic and even progressive for the time. While the revolution also promoted a progressive and reformist agenda (chiefly land reform), no suggestion was made that the country could veer sharply to a communist-run economy and a one-party system. Thus, the revolution's democratic promise evaporated almost immediately with the ascent of Fidel Castro as its undisputed leader.

In sum, a new form of dictatorship was built in months, one that has been remarkably stable for more than six decades. In a country with tight social control, the July 2021 protests indicated both a breakdown of state control and surveillance, since they seem to have caught the regime by surprise, as well as a qualitative change in civil society about possibilities of contestation under this post-totalitarian regime. The regime did not make that same mistake twice, however: The publicly announced protests planned for November were systematically nipped in the bud by the regime.

## Crisis

The first indicator of an opportunity for democratization is a major, multidimensional, and sudden crisis, one that destabilizes the country and the region. Difficulties and challenges in institutionalizing a regime and in implementing policies are common but do not necessarily amount to, or lead to, a crisis. Crisis implies a turning point, a decisive moment that opens up avenues of radical change in different directions. State crises produce failed states, collapsed states, and rogue states. A bad situation that goes on for years, even decades, is not necessarily a crisis by this definition. Crises are like transitions: They cannot be permanent.

A first observation is that, until very recently, and for most of the time since the revolution, Cuba was not in crisis. According to the US think tank Fund for Peace, which produces the Fragile States Index (formerly the Failed States Index), in 2019, Cuba was considered “stable,” a bit better than the middle of the pack, with a rank of 118 (out of 179). For a comparison, Venezuela was ranked as the 28th most fragile state in the world. It is in the category “Alert,” two steps down from Very High Alert and High Alert, second only to Haiti (13th) in the hemisphere and quite far ahead of a host of Latin American countries under the category “Elevated Warning,” such as Guatemala (57th). Venezuela was also first in the category “most worsened countries in 2019.” No doubt the updated 2021 version of this index will tell a different story. Nevertheless, one should factor in that “order” was reestablished in less than two days. This is not an indicator of a failed state.

Altogether, one can identify three short crises with potential for democratization since Fulgencio Batista’s regime was overthrown in December 1958.

The first was the revolution itself. After a relatively short period of multiple sovereignty (1957–58), the weak military dictatorship led by Batista (1952–58) was quickly replaced by a much stronger one, led by Fidel Castro (1959–). Though the legal underpinnings of the new regime took many years to be fully institutionalized, Castro’s absolute power was not in doubt by the end of 1959. The regime likes to present itself as *La Revolución*, but, actually, the revolution was over, at the latest, in 1961 (Grenier, 2020; Grenier et al., 2019).

Very little of the political and institutional improvisation that typically follows the ousting of a dictator happened in 1959. Castro had seen first-hand the “Bogotazo” of 1948,<sup>11</sup> and he took steps to avoid

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<sup>11</sup> The riots in Bogota, Colombia, that followed the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a liberal presidential candidate. Castro allegedly participated in the riots as a student attending a conference in the city.

chaos in January 1959. Taking control of the country, dismantling armed groups not directly under his command, buying time and relative stability by putting a parallel government in place (his, the real one, and a fake one for the gallery), establishing new international connections with the Eastern Bloc, and eliminating, one by one, any real or potential sources of counter-power in unions, the media, universities, anywhere. Revolutionaries who thought they were fighting to restore democracy in Cuba either adapted to the authoritarian turn, or “exited” (i.e., they ended up in jail or in exile). In sum, there was a moment of crisis, and presumably some opportunity for democratization, but the suppression of any pluralist options, either in the selection of a new ruling elite or indeed in the policy agenda, closed that window very quickly. When the US and other members of the international community started to be openly concerned by Castro’s authoritarian tendencies, it was arguably too late.

The Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 never reached a level of a crisis (as defined in this article), let alone an opportunity for democratization. Its failure gave Castro an opportunity to crank up repression, deepen the ties with the Soviet Union, and overall, strengthen the totalitarian architecture of his regime. From this failure on, a tacit agreement emerged in the community of states that the liberalization and democratization of Cuba could be no more than an aspirational goal, supported by sanctions and diplomatic pressures but not military intervention (Carbonell 2020). If anything, the fiasco of this invasion solidified the perception, even in the US, that for the first time in Cuban history, the country had a robust and stable political system in place. What is more, there are reasons to believe that US presidents, from Dwight Eisenhower on, would have been prepared to make peace with a “national communist” regime that did not mingle in other countries’ affairs; in other words, a stable regime that does not destabilize the region (Carbonell 2020).

The often-overlooked presence of a civil war in the first five or six years of Castro rule deserves a mention. Dismissed as “counter-revolutionaries” and “bandits” by the regime, the thousands of insurgents were individuals and groups who often fought against Batista but were anti-Communist (and anti-Fidel) rather than counter-revolutionaries. If it was a real crisis to manage for the new regime, it deployed up to 250,000 troops to suppress the rebellion. “When the fighting concluded,” to quote historian Jonathan Brown (2017), “the total number of deaths in the bandido counterrevolution equaled that of the guerrilla war against Batista [. . .] Thereafter, little internal or external armed aggression threatened the Cuban Revolution” (163).

Since the end of that civil war, there have been no private armed groups in the country and apparently no circulation of illegal arms either. The country does not seem to have a significant crime problem either. In short, the state seems to be firmly in control of the population within the national territory (except Guantanamo Bay, but that is another story).

For about 30 years, Cuba benefitted from a large subsidy from the Soviet Union, to the tune of US\$4 or \$5 billion dollars a year. This safety net allowed the island’s economy to sail along, in spite of an early collapse of economic productivity and the exodus of many professionals. The collapse of European communism and the following contraction of the Cuban economy was arguably the second crisis that could be seen as contributing to an opportunity for democratization, three decades after the revolution.

While Fidel Castro can be remembered as a leader who understood US politics very well, particularly its policy toward Cuba, his antennas were numb when it came to changes in the Soviet Bloc. He failed to understand what was coming his way, especially economically. Faced with the reality of losing its main economic benefactor, Fidel Castro launched what he called the “Special period in time of peace,” which he officially announced in *Granma* on 29 August 1989. The following years were a period of great hardship and scarcity for most Cubans and the potential for political instability. A generally insightful and well-informed observer like Andrés Oppenheimer could publish a book whose title he has probably come to regret: *Castro’s Final Hour* (1993). It took a long and painful decade for the island to find a new economic benefactor (Hugo Chávez’s Venezuela), but even with billions of dollars’ worth of subsidies coming from that South American nation, the Cuban economy never fully recovered from the “Special period,” not even to this day. All in all, what the economy has accomplished over the past three decades is to sustain itself at a mediocre but above crisis-level economy, until the third crisis that started with COVID-19 pandemic more than a year ago.

This third crisis moment is ongoing, and its climax was, of course, the unprecedented (since the revolution) 11–12 July protests. The causal links are as far as the eye can see: The worst economic recession since the 1990s (itself fuelled by a combination of stalled economic reforms); the devastating impact of the pandemic on the tourist industry (“the locomotive of the Cuban economy,” as President Miguel Díaz-Canel said); declining oil shipment from collapsing Venezuela; inflation of up to 500 per cent caused by a botched currency unification earlier in the year; long-brewing dissatisfaction with the lack of opportunities and the immobilism of an ossified authoritarian model; reappearances of power outages during a hot summer; and finally, a surge in COVID cases following the entry of the Delta variant to the island, probably from Russian tourists who came to Cuba in greater numbers in 2021 than in 2020. In 2021, Cuba had the lowest rate of vaccination in the hemisphere (only 16 per cent fully vaccinated) because the government refused to pay for vaccines, while spending untold amounts to develop its own vaccines (and to build new hotels). President Donald J. Trump’s sanctions made everything worse for ordinary Cubans with relatives in the US.<sup>12</sup> President Biden is apparently in no rush to reverse them. Observers who are favourable to the regime have reacted to the protests saying this was all caused by the US embargo (or “blockade”), but Cubans in the street did not seem to blame the US for their situation.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the spectacular ineptitude of President Díaz-Canel made it all the more probable that this era of uncertainty is not closed.

The available evidence suggests that the protests were popular and spontaneous, erupting in dozens of poor towns and municipalities in all provinces. The protests were not “led” by any centralized or recognizable leadership, other than perhaps local and probably improvised ones, in the neighbourhoods and communities. Activists such as the independent journalists and artists who protested in front of the Ministry of Culture in November 2020 certainly seemed eager to participate,

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<sup>12</sup> To use Jorge I. Domínguez’s (2021) summary: The application, for the first time, of Title III of the embargo law; the restriction to US flights to Cuba; the imposition of a top to remittances and the prohibition on Western Union from sending such remittances to the Cuban agency run by the military; and finally, the tightening of sanctions on international banks that do transactions with Cuba.

<sup>13</sup> On the nefarious impact of the US embargo, Farber (2021), who referred to it as the “criminal blockade,” pointed out that “it is the Cuban government and its ‘left’ allies in the Global North, not the Cuban people, who continue, as they have for decades, to blame only the blockade.”

but they were not leading the charge. According to the *Observatorio Cubano de Derechos Humanos* (Cuban Human Rights Observatory), the special forces of the ministry of interior went door to door to arrest suspects.

Though young people continue to be the most disenchanting and inclined to express dissident views, in Cuba as in any dictatorial countries, videos of the July protests show a broad sample of demographic groups and perhaps a dominant participation of the most economically impoverished citizens in peripheral towns and in poor (and black) suburbs of the main cities. Finally, if one follows the arrests that have taken place in the wake of the protests, the lower level of the Catholic Church seems to be contributing to an ever more apparent manifestation of opposition to the status quo on the island. This speaks to a pattern of horizontal and grassroots mobilization that is quite unprecedented in contemporary Cuba.

It is hard to predict where the country is currently heading. It can become more miserable and repressive, for any number of months or years. As of 1 August, more than 1,000 political prisoners were still incommunicado, including some minors. The Cuban state does not seem to have the means to get itself out of a nasty corner, with no prospect for economic improvement, a COVID-19 pandemic that is out of control, and the Biden administration taking its time to reverse some of Trump's sanctions or accept more refugees. The economy shrunk by more than 10 per cent in 2020, and it is on its way to another year of contraction in 2021. Venezuela continues to help Cuba, amazingly, but it is hardly a reliable or sustainable source of support, as its own economy has been contracting for nine consecutive years.

The two questions for Cuba right now are, first, how much economic contraction can the regime afford politically, before the lid blows off again. Exiling opponents is not as easy as it used to be, so the pressure cooker stays on. Second, at what point will the regime crack rather than bend? It had a hard time dealing with less than two days of protest; imagine how it would react if there were many more of those days, maybe weeks, as happened in Chile and Colombia. How much repression can one expect from "communists" and "revolutionaries" sent to the "street" by their president to fight a "civil war" against "mercenaries" and "counter-revolutionaries"? If lessons from history serve (in fact, they don't as often as one would like to think), there were many revolutions in Cuban history because the regimes they toppled proved to be much weaker than they appeared to be. The Soviet Union collapsed like a "house of cards," as Malia (1993) put it, because that was exactly what it turned out to be. One should not rule out the same possibility for what is essentially a military regime presided over by a drab and inept party cadre born after the revolution.

## Democratic Opposition

What makes an opposition credible as a democratic force is a combination of organizational coherence, domestic support, international recognition, and a public commitment to democratic values, preferably rooted in an existing democratic tradition.

The 11–12 July protests changed this paper’s initial assessment, which was that there is simply no organized single democratic opposition on the island.

Two points are being discussed here: What have been the prospects, historically and in light of recent events, for a democratic opposition in Cuba?

It is well established that Fidel Castro’s real or potential opposition was thoroughly and quickly extirpated from the body politic in 1959. The “crisis” was short, and the window for democratization closed rapidly, as mentioned earlier. The reasons for this are complex and include the exile or incarceration of real or potential competitors to Fidel Castro, the death of some potential rivals who were anti-communist (José Antonio Echeverría, Frank País, Camilo Cienfuegos), as well as the collapse of the democratic ethos. The fact that Cuba is an island made it easier to keep the Cuban exiles at bay. The numerous and quite successful Cuban exiles could then prop up the Cuban economy with remittances, essentially acting as ministers of social welfare, as Abel Sierra Madero (2021) suggested on Twitter in reference to him sending the equivalent of a state pension (almost non-existent in Cuba) to his parents on the island.

Cuba does not have a democratic constitution or any basic architecture for democratic governance that could be relied upon to mobilize, as Venezuela did, for instance. The 1976 Constitution in Cuba, amended three times, is still a communist constitution, modelled after the 1936 Soviet constitution (Josef Stalin’s), meaning that only one party is allowed in the country, that this party is above the law, and that opposition is criminalized. Unauthorized public gatherings are illegal.

The social control and surveillance model inherited from the Soviet Bloc is extensive and generally efficient. The Cuban state has secured compliance most effectively with neighbourhood spy networks, the exclusion of public goods, public shaming (the infamous “acts of repudiation”), arbitrary arrest, incarceration, and sometimes physical brutality but not massive torture and execution, as was common under right-wing dictatorships in Latin America. This toolkit was on full display last year in July and November.

The type of freedom that is most repressed under communism, perhaps even more than freedom of expression, is freedom of association (see the 1987 Penal Code, Articles 103 and 208). If a common *mot d’ordre* of the far left is “organize,” the other side of that medal is that communist regimes find it essential to *prevent* opposition to organize in any fashion. The Cuban regime has done that successfully for more than six decades. Thus, communist countries typically have “dissidents” rather than an opposition. The European Parliament awards the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought annually, and it presented the award to Cuban dissidents Oswaldo Payá in 2002, the Ladies in White in 2005, and Guillermo Fariñas in 2010. In contrast, in 2017, the Sakharov Prize was awarded to Venezuela’s “Democratic Opposition.”

Second, Cuba does not have a democratic opposition like Venezuela’s, but it has had plenty of small dissident or dissonant groups over the years, from the better-known *Damas en Blanco* (Ladies in White), *Partido Arco Progresista* (Progressive Arc Party), *Estado de Sats* (State of Sats), and the Patriotic Union of Cuba (UNPACU), to the more recent San Isidro Movement (MSI-2018) and the movement of the 27 November (N27). In June 2021, the Council for Democratic Transition in Cuba (CTDC) was created in Havana. Presided over by the leader of UNPACU, José Daniel Ferrer García, who is currently detained



and incommunicado, the Council integrates 30 organizations, among them the UNACU, MSI and the Christian Democratic Party of Cuba. It is not conceived as a government in waiting, just as a tool to coordinate opposition activities.

There are, of course, numerous opposition organizations outside the island. Some have a presence on the island as well, such as Cuba Decide. But there are no groups or leaders that could lead, de Gaulle-style, a liberation movement from abroad.

One more point, the success of the hip-hop song “Patria y Vida” (“Homeland and Life”), which has become the soundtrack of the opposition movement, shows that leadership of a sort can come from unusual quarters—and with collaboration between the island and the exile. The song is the product of a collaboration between Cuban musicians on the island (Maykel Osbore and Eliécer Márquez) and in exile (Alexander Delgado and Randy Malcom of Gente de Zona, Yotuel Romero of the group Orishas, and singer-songwriter Descemer Bueno). Cuban rappers and *reguetoneros* (Reggaeton artists) are usually black and from poor neighbourhoods, the kind of demographics that the regime could ill afford have bloom into a potent opposition force. The song-video, released earlier this year, has been seen more than six million times.

In my book on art and politics in Cuba, I make the case that most artists and writers try to work within more or less explicit “parameters” (Grenier 2017). I am talking about recognized artists and writers, who often are relatively privileged compared to the rest of the population. I say in the introduction that I do not look at the case of rappers, in part, because it was beyond my expertise, and also because I wanted to analyze those who are at times “dissonant” but want to work within the system. Not long before the protests, writers Antón Arrufat and Leonardo Padura were proud to receive the Orden Félix Varela and the Orden Alejo Carpentier (respectively) from the hands of President Díaz-Canel, on the 60th anniversary of Fidel Castro’s famous June 1961 speech “Palabras a los intelectuales” (Words to Intellectuals) (Ponte 2021), which established the base of censorship in Cuban culture and art for more than six decades. Padura is a critical writer, and a very good one, but his name never appeared in support of the protests last fall and summer. All of which is to say that the protests come from sectors that the government is not successful coopting and controlling.

Every opposition group is persecuted; many are infiltrated and routinely harassed, usually in a low intensity and preventive mode of repression. That could change because the regime’s readiness to “go all the way” has never been tested, not even on 11–12 July. Díaz-Canel certainly suggested that the regime would do whatever it takes to save “the revolution” (i.e., his government).

### *E pluribus unum?*

Cubans generally toe the line and know which line not to cross. But the “little police” in each and every Cuban, as they often call this mechanism of self-control, has increasingly been disrupted by other voices, due to the availability of the internet and social media (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube) since December 2018. The November 2020 protest was far more localized and limited in its political scope than the protests of July 2021, but in many ways, it was a harbinger of things to come. It

appeared as a mostly reformist movement, calling for something akin to a Cuban Glasnost, but there were also more radical calls or allusions to a change of regime beyond the specific demands of young artists.

It has been suggested that the Biden administration should officially recognize the “democratic opposition” in Cuba.<sup>14</sup> This recognition would help if there were other countries other than the US doing the same. It would create a new set of incentives to organize under a single roof in Cuba and to include this opposition on the list of stakeholders that foreign officials need to engage with when dealing with Cuba. Conservative Foreign Minister John Baird (2011–15) and Junior Foreign Minister for the Americas Peter Kent did that when they visited the island.

Foreign countries eager to support human rights and democracy like to have a legitimate democratic opposition to support, with a leadership they can communicate with. Recognizing its presence before it actually materializes defies the imagination, but it may incentivize behaviour in the right direction.

## Opportunities to Prioritize HRD

The opportunities to prioritize HRD in its policy toward Cuba appear to be negligible, though the events of July are muddying the water, introducing an element of uncertainty that was not present before. Except for the US, there is apparently little appetite in the hemisphere or beyond to put real pressure on the Cuban regime to change course. Finally, there is no pressure in Parliament or public opinion in Canada to depart from a time-honoured policy of “engagement” with the Cuban regime. That said, given the limited “hard” interests to maintain cordial relations with the regime, one can imagine scenarios where, all of a sudden, it would make sense to adopt a more forceful HRD policy: For instance, if a democratic opposition gains some momentum in Cuba, and repression increases to the point that the regime stinks enough to warrant exceptional measures. While this seems a remote possibility, it appears more plausible now than nine months ago.

## Canadian Economic and Security Interests

Canadian economic or security interests are arguably not a major factor, one way or another, when it comes to pushing hard or not for HRD. Canadian economic interests in Cuba are more significant than in Venezuela, for example, but prospects in the future are arguably better in Venezuela, as it used to be a more developed and bigger country with more potential for Canadian trade and investments. Under the current economic model in Cuba, the prospect of it becoming more prosperous and a better purchaser of Canadian goods and services is very limited. Since 2000, Cuba can buy food and medicine

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<sup>14</sup> Manuel Cuesta Morúa of the Partido Arco Progresista told Andrés Oppenheimer that democracies should “raise the status” of the “opposition” in Cuba (Oppenheimer 2021). The latest is that Cuesta Morúa is now detained by the authorities.

from the US, and, in 2019, in spite of what Cuban officials call the “US blockade,” the value of US exports to Cuba was slightly above Canada’s: US\$286.5 million v. CA\$285 million, respectively (OEC 2019; US Census 2019). The evidence suggests that in the advent of the normalization of trade relations between Cuba and the US, Canada’s alleged “advantage” for being there first would quickly dissipate.

Expropriation of Canadian assets following the revolution were settled very early, to the satisfaction of both parties. Looking at the economic dimension of the bilateral relations, it can be said, as Lacroix (2012) aptly put it, “there had been a not insignificant trading relationship with Cuba dating from the colonial era” (713). The value of bilateral trade with Cuba in the 2010s, at about CA\$1 billion a year, is lower than trade with the Dominican Republic (\$1.4 billion). Cuba is Canada’s 51st-largest merchandise trade partner.

Canada is the number one country for the number of visitors to the island (about 1 million a year until COVID-19), representing roughly 40 per cent of all foreign tourists. The tourist sector is the biggest source of income in hard currency for the Cuban economy, and COVID devastated this industry. Mexico has been the number one vacation destination for Canadians (2 million a year on average before COVID-19), however, with the Dominican Republic not far behind Cuba (0.84 million).<sup>15</sup> The “people-to-people” dimension of bilateral relations is, in strictly economic terms, much more significant for Cuba than for Canada.

Among the 127 countries for which data were available for 2017, Cuba was the 112th-largest destination for Canadian foreign direct investment (Dumont 2018). Efforts by a handful of activists and business consultants (such as former Canadian ambassador to Cuba Mark Entwistle) to drum up enthusiasm for investment in Cuba have not been very successful. No doubt the example of two Canadian investors being thrown in jail without due process, in 2011, highlighted the risk of doing business without much of a safety net, in the form of an independent judiciary and secure property rights.<sup>16</sup>

That Canada is far more important economically to Cuba than Cuba is for Canada, has not given Canada any visible leverage in relations with the island. There is no evidence that Cuba is more respectful of Canadian sensibilities than the other way around; in fact, the opposite is probably true. Cuba is evidently welcoming Canadian tourists and investments, but the regime’s priority has always been its own political survival, at the expense of economic prosperity if necessary. The reluctance to follow the market-Leninist path *à la* China or Vietnam is one illustration of this disposition.

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<sup>15</sup> In 2020, no country sent nearly as many tourists to Cuba as Canada: 406,620, followed by 106,940 from the “Cuban community” living abroad. The number of tourists to the island dropped by 95 per cent in 2020 and 2021, and only Russia sent more visitors during that period (Tourism Analytics n.d.).

<sup>16</sup> Canadian investors Sarkis Yacoubian, head of Tri-Star Caribbean, and Cy Tokmakjian, owner of the Tokmakjian Group, were arrested and imprisoned in Cuba in 2011 for alleged “corruption.” Tokmakjian was released from jail after three years of a 15-year sentence. Activists and Cuba scholars John Kirk and Peter McKenna (2018) wrote that his business was “closed down” (214–15). In fact, CA\$100 million worth of company assets including bank accounts, inventory, and office supplies, were confiscated by the government. Yacoubian was released after two years in jail, and his assets were also seized. Kirk and McKenna (2018), who, as a rule defend Havana, allow that the Cuban government showed a “lack of subtlety” in this affair (214–15).

With regards to security interests, one can argue that while the US would welcome a closer alignment of Canadian foreign policy and US policy toward Cuba, the US learned long ago to accept and indeed benefit from Canada's friendly relations with the island (Munton 2015). Canadian foreign policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean is generally in sync with the US any way. Cuba is the only genuine exception to this rule, and Canadian governments have so far judged that it was a worthwhile one because of its symbolic value as a cost-free show of independence toward our southern neighbour. What is more, this policy is essentially as old as the Castro regime or even older. Nobody is expecting Ottawa to change course based on economic or security considerations alone if those remain unchanged.

## Opportunity for Broad-Based Multilateral Action

There has been no opportunity for broad-based multilateral action to pressure Havana to liberalize and democratize. In fact, in the past few decades, the trend has been to bring Cuba back into the community of Latin American and Caribbean states with open arms, with initiatives such as the Rio Group, now the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), and the Summits of the Americas. Prime Minister Stephen Harper opposed the presence of former president Raúl Castro at such a summit in 2009. But, in 2015, he went along with President Obama and acquiesced to extend the invitation, even meeting with Castro privately, away from Canadian journalists and photographers (but not Cuban) (Moss 2020). In discussions leading up to the Panama Summit of 2015, the near consensus among democratically elected leaders of the region was that failing to invite Raúl Castro would spell the end of inter-American summitry. Harper also facilitated the rapprochement between Presidents Obama and Castro, making a hotel room available in Toronto for the two negotiating teams to meet.

For some observers, opposing Cuba's participation in these summits was evidence of Harper's ideological obsession, whereas bringing Cuba to the fold was the pragmatic, even progressive alternative, as it indicates true independence vis-à-vis the US. No need to explain that democracy in Latin American and the Caribbean is a relatively new and fragile accomplishment. The idea that "sovereignty" means the government's right to do what it pleases within its own border, regardless of how beneficial it is for its own citizens in the form of individual freedom and prosperity, has strong currency in the region. And Cuba is its Mecca.<sup>17</sup>

To assess the probability of broad-based multilateral action of any kind in the region, one needs to keep in mind that Latin America does not exist as such. What exist is 46 countries and territories with their own agendas (and border disputes). Regional trade associations have not been particularly

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<sup>17</sup> In a very perceptive essay, Argentine political scientist Carlos Escudé (2014) explains how "total state 'freedom'" can mean, in Latin America (or the "periphery," more generally), "absolute domestic tyranny." He also wrote, "David-and-Goliath metaphors are dangerous when applied to states. They can make self-destructive brinkmanship popular, as in the case of the 1982 Falkland/Malvinas War, in which Argentina invaded a territory occupied since 1833 by the UK, a major rule-making state" (Escudé 2014, 50).

successful. There is also a sharp ideological divide between liberal-conservative governments on one hand, and leftist-populist ones on the other, each promoting their own alliances.

The Organization of American States (OAS) is a top-heavy organization that requires broad alignment of interests to gear up to action. It conjures up memory of the League of Nations, as it can hardly agree on any course of action beyond the most minimalist agenda of support to member states (Legler and Gabelli-Ríos 2018). The General Secretariat works with the Permanent Council, to which member states send ambassadors, as well as the General Assembly. Managing the Summit of the Americas every three years has required all kinds of consensus-building efforts on the issue of whether or not non-democratic Cuba should be invited to participate, for instance.

Contrastingly, the Lima Group was created in 2017 as a nimble coalition of the willing, to actively promote what the Secretary General of the OAS could only talk about: an end to the “usurpation” by dictator Nicolás Maduro and a transition to democracy in Venezuela. But the Lima Group, for the creation of which Canada was a major contributor, is the exception rather than the rule. So far there has been no indication that the Lima Group or something similar is in the cards to pressure either Cuba or even Nicaragua. The Lima Group speaks to how exceptional the case of Venezuela is, and its failure, so far, to effect change in Caracas is not making its formula more enticing in the region.

This being said, with the demise of the OAS’s alternatives like the Bolivarian Alliance for the People of Our America and CELAC, and the crisis lingering in both Nicaragua and Venezuela, Cuba’s support in the hemisphere may reveal itself to be conditional on the country being stable with no overt repression. Should the Díaz-Canel government teeter closer to the edge of instability and unsustainability, Cuba may quickly run out of allies in the region, and some coordinated diplomatic pressure (though never a military intervention) could become an option for countries of the region, including Canada. One could predict that unlike the case of the Lima Group, Canada under Trudeau’s liberals would not likely be among the leaders of this possible coalition of the willing, but the Conservatives could if they manage to win the elections in the next few years.

Which brings us to the issue of Canadian politics.

## Parliament and Public Opinion

Canadians are arguably used to and may have come to expect an “independent” policy toward Cuba, meaning a policy opposed to both the US embargo (in particular, its extraterritorial implications) and more generally, to overt hostility toward the Cuban regime. This is not an original policy: Most countries have more or less the same. For the past 29 years, the international community voted every year at the UN, almost unanimously, to condemn the US embargo. About 1,400 companies from some 65 countries attended the latest annual Havana International Trade Fair in 2019, making it the second-largest trade show in Latin America. Still, apparently, to many Canadians, the friendly relations between the two countries has the feel of something exceptional and distinctly Canadian. The Canadian position is original enough where it matters: as a rare and cost-free opportunity for Canada to distance itself from a symbolically important US policy in the hemisphere.

The Cuban-Canadian community is about 30,000 strong, a relatively small and not organizationally visible group, in sharp contrast with the Cuban-American community. Nevertheless, some hitherto invisible Cuban-Canadians organized public demonstrations in several Canadian cities following the July 2021 crackdown in the island. Cuban-Canadians also pressed the Canadian government to facilitate family reunions in Canada.

Normally, the few vocal advocacy groups in Canada on Cuba are mostly Canadian (not Cuban-Canadian) who are apologists of the regime. Groups like the Canadian Network on Cuba, the Che Guevara Volunteer Work Brigades, the Association of Cuban Residents in Canada, and the various “friendship” associations in Canada’s largest cities, work closely with the Cuban embassy and Cuban consulates. Some of their activities are listed on the Foreign Affairs ministry website.

*All in all, it can be said that there exists a significant pool of sympathy for Cuba in the Liberal Party going back to Prime Minister Trudeau (1968–79, 1980–84).*

Finally, it is probably fair to say that, among the few academics who have been following and analyzing Canada-Cuba relations in recent years and even decades, most tend to be apologists of the regime. For that service, they are frequently invited to the island, by Cuban institutions and/or the Canadian embassy; they have privileged access to Cuban officials and institutional networks and can organize events and projects with Cuban colleagues from the island, even on sensitive topics, since they are beyond safe for the regime. No academic with even a mildly critical perspective on how Cubans are ruled could pull that off.

The Liberal Party has been in power for roughly 37 years since the revolution. The three prime ministers who have made an official visit to the island were Liberals: Pierre Trudeau, Jean Chrétien, and Justin Trudeau. The Trudeaus were gushing, but Chrétien stood his ground during conversations with Fidel Castro, and veered away from no-strings-attached engagement (promoted by his foreign ministers André Ouellet and especially Lloyd Axworthy) the moment he realized it was going nowhere (Bartleman 2005). All in all, it can be said that there exists a significant pool of sympathy for Cuba in the Liberal Party going back to Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau (1968–79, 1980–84).<sup>18</sup>

Liberal and Conservative governments sent ministers of foreign affairs and other cabinet officials to Havana for various business meetings that were deemed “successful.” Under Harper, officials made

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<sup>18</sup> The Canadian Parliament has “interparliamentary” and “friendship” groups with parliaments of legislatures of dozens of countries, including non-democratic ones. The Canada-Cuba Interparliamentary Group was founded in 2006 by Liberal Senator Marcel Prud’homme (1934–2017), who, incidentally, received the Cuba’s Friendship Medal, conferred by the Cuban Council of State to foreigners “in recognition to a trajectory of solidarity with Cuba and unconditional loyalty to the defense of the Cuban revolution.” It is now chaired by Independent (but, in fact Liberal) Senator Pierrette Ringuette. In 2020, out of 22 MPs in that group, three are Conservative, one NDP, and the rest are Liberals. In November 2020, the group organized a webinar on Canada-Cuba relations in the era of Trump, with two NDP members of Parliament, Senator Ringuette, the Cuban ambassador, and two scholars known for their unconditional support for the regime: Professor John Kirk (Dalhousie), who got the Friendship Medal, and Isaac Saney, also a professor at Dalhousie and co-chair of the Canadian Network on Cuba, practically an official organization of the Cuban government. A phone interview with Senator Ringuette made clear to this author that the group has no intention of organizing events that could lead to debate or critical perspectives on Cuba (personal communication, 9 January 2020).

some efforts to meet with non-government controlled “civil society.” Both Pierre and Justin Trudeau publicly announced a pending invitation to Fidel Castro (in 1976) and Raúl Castro (in 2016) to visit Canada, but none ever materialized.

In recent memory, most Canadians have occupied the centre and centre-left part of the ideological spectrum, giving 60 to 65 per cent of their votes to the Liberals, the NDP, the Bloc Québécois (BQ), and the Green Party. Following the 11 July protests, the former leader of the Conservative Party and of the Official Opposition, Erin O’Toole, said, “We can’t afford more of Mr. Trudeau’s glowing admiration for dictatorships” (Conservative Party 2020).<sup>19</sup> This sounds very much like Conservative leader (and former prime minister) John Diefenbaker criticizing Trudeau *père* for the same sin! (Wright 2007, 225). While the Trudeau government eventually condemned the government’s crackdown of the July protest, the NDP and the BQ preferred to focus on the US embargo as the main culprit for whatever goes wrong in the island, whereas the imploding and minuscule Green Party could not bring itself to make a foreign policy comment.

With path dependency, one doesn’t have to explain and justify the status quo as much as change. As change in Cuba is more a possibility, as was discussed several times in this article, one could suddenly contemplate the possibility of a re-evaluation of the constructive engagement policy. This would be more likely to happen with a Conservative government, though many new conditions would need to be in place for any Canadian government to invest political capital without obvious return.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Cuba is such a dormant fixture in our diplomatic landscape that in June 2019, Foreign Minister Freeland said, referring to Venezuela, that “With one voice, we must make it abundantly clear to the international community that the existence of a dictatorship in the Americas will not be tolerated” (GAC 2019). How easy it was to blink over the fact that Cubans have been ruled by dictators since Fulgencio Batista’s coup in 1952. The Castro regime continues to be a powerful incarnation of David against Goliath, with fading but still bigger-than-life characters and powerful myths.

What would it take for Canada and other countries to push harder for human rights and democracy in Cuba? This paper argues that there would need to be opportunities for democratization in the island in the form of a crisis plus the emergence of a coherent democratic opposition, in conjunction with opportunities for multilateral action and some guarantees for the few Canadian investments in the island. In Parliament and public opinion, changing circumstances in Cuba could allow a reassessment. The July 2021 protesters forced many to focus more on how Cubans are ruled and to reassess their perception of Cuba.

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<sup>19</sup> In an official statement on behalf of his party, Erin O’Toole said, “I want to be clear. I condemn the actions of the communist regime in Cuba and am calling on Justin Trudeau, Jagmeet Singh [NDP], Yves-François Blanchet [Bloc Québécois], and Annamie Paul [Green Party] to do the same” (Lilley 2021).

The cautious liberalization of the post-Fidel era was not a concession to political pressures from abroad, and the country never democratized. This much is clear: the US, Canada, European countries (and the European Union), countries of the hemisphere and the OAS, have all failed to convince Cuban rulers to change direction either economically or politically. President Obama's rapprochement did not "work," as current President Biden implicitly recognizes. Trump's tougher policy did not work either. The cliché shared by most Canadian Cubanists, that is, "you get absolutely nowhere if you go down and try to tell them [Cuban officials] what to do," is at least as accurate as saying that you get absolutely nowhere if you go down and *don't* tell them what to do at all, as they would prefer. When Canadian officials say engagement is preferable because "isolation" does not work, they are right about isolation but not about how engagement works better. Based on that assessment, it seems plausible that whatever support for democratization may emerge in the world community, the impetus for change needs to come from Cubans in the island. Like the "midwife of history" discussed by Marx to explain how violence can facilitate revolutions, here the midwife could very well be the support of both the Cuban exile and the international community to help when the old is dying and the new is yet to be born.

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## NOTES

