

U.S-CARIBBEAN RELATIONS IN A POST EMBARGO CUBA

Speaking at a roundtable on the future of U.S–Caribbean relations in a post-embargo Cuba, on Friday, June 26, at the Organization of American States (OAS) in Washington, D.C, Ambassador Kingsley C.A. Layne, C.M.G, delivered a comprehensive, experiential based presentation on the evolution of relations between the Spanish speaking country and the English speaking Caribbean, and his vision of the place and role of that relationship in the emerging Cuba/U.S rapprochement. He was SVG’s Ambassador to the U.S.A and Permanent Representative to the OAS (1990-2001), and Permanent Representative to the United Nations (1990-1994). He conducted the negotiations leading to the establishment of diplomatic relations with Cuba, and served as SVG’s first Ambassador to the Caribbean country to 2001.

Ambassador Layne’s Presentation

The subject we discuss this afternoon represents a natural progression of the development of principled relations between Cuba and the countries of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) in the post-independence era, as well as their long-standing and pivotal relationship with the U.S.

Cuba was a founding member of the OAS, having signed the Charter of the august institution, in whose house we meet, in 1948, and ratified it in 1952. When the Eighth Meeting of Consultation of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the OAS, meeting at Punta del Este, Uruguay, in January 1962, excluded the current government of Cuba from participation in the proceedings of the hemispheric body, there was not a single English speaking Caribbean member country. The country was never expelled from the organization, and remains a member, albeit an inactive one. Trade sanctions imposed on Cuba in 1962 and 1964 were initially relaxed at the Sixteenth Meeting of Ministers in July 1975, when, under pressure from a number of Latin American countries, it was agreed that member states were free to take whatever action they deemed appropriate in their bilateral relations with Cuba. The U.S first imposed its own embargo on exports to Cuba in October 1960, in retaliation for the nationalization of American owned properties, without compensation.

Caribbean-Cuba relations were formally launched on December 8, 1972 when Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago simultaneously established diplomatic relations with Havana. Significantly, this event predated the 1975 relaxation of OAS sanctions against Cuba, and represented a bold signal of self-determination and regional solidarity, at a time when the Cold War was still ongoing. When Cubana Flight 455 exploded off Barbados, on October 6, 1976 some thought that it was an act of reprisal for warming relations between Cuba and CARICOM. If anything it further cemented the nascent relationship between the two sides. December 8, has been designated CARICOM-Cuba Day by the respective Heads of Government since 2002. Flight 455 is commemorated on October 6 annually.

(2)

Close familial ties between the peoples of Cuba and the Caribbean were forged since the early twentieth century, when many young people from the islands migrated in search of work, and eventually settled there. I first met the late great Cuban Olympic heavyweight boxer, Teofilo Stevenson, in the village of Biabou, St.Vincent, when he came to visit his paternal relatives. Sir Alexander Bustamante, Jamaica's first Prime Minister, spent a part of his adventurous youth working in Cuba, and took the name Bustamante, in honor of a Spanish sea captain he encountered during his travels.

By 2000 all the independent countries of the Caribbean Community had established full diplomatic relations with Cuba. In the early 1990,s, when I shuttled regularly between Havana and Washington, D.C. negotiating the modalities of St.Vincent and the Grenadines' engagement with that country, on the instruction of Prime Minister, Sir James Mitchell, I was struck by two observations: (1) complete respect and understanding of the different historical journeys and experiences of our two countries; and (2) meticulous observance of the principle of non-interference in each others internal affairs. Prime Minister Mitchell had made it clear that SVG's engagement with Cuba was based on mutual respect, realpolitik, and regional solidarity, not ideological identity.

The CARICOM-Cuba relationship has blossomed and borne much fruit through strategic functional co-operation, in critical areas of need. There are over 1200 students from member countries studying in Cuba, in a range of disciplines, including agriculture, education, medicine, engineering, and Spanish. There are more than 1000 Cuban doctors, nurses, and other medical personnel deployed throughout the region. Since 1998, leaders of both sides have instituted regular summits, convened on December, 8th every three years in alternate countries. The first of these was held in Havana, 2002, then in Bridgetown, 2005, Santiago de Cuba, 2008, Port of Spain, 2011, and Havana, 2014. The next one is scheduled for St. John's, Antigua and Barbuda, in 2017. At a time when aid from traditional benefactors is falling, Cuba has been increasing its assistance to the region. By opening embassies in Suriname, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, and SVG, Cuba has become the only country with an embassy in every independent CARICOM country. Most also have embassies in Havana.

Caribbean Community countries have consistently advocated for Cuba's greater inclusion in the activities of the hemisphere. At the United Nations they have moved from abstention, in the annual General Assembly vote to lift the U.S. trade embargo, to voting for its removal. In bilateral and multi-lateral contacts with the United States Government CARICOM member states have never ceased plugging for Cuba's interests, fully cognizant of U.S concerns.

At his meeting with Caribbean Community leaders, during his visit to Jamaica, en route to the Seventh Summit of the Americas in Panama, U.S. President Barack Obama lauded the strong commitment, and enabling role of CARICOM countries in the on-going normalization of relations between his country and Cuba.

(3)

Even as this thrust gains momentum, many are skeptical of the possible implications for the rest of the region, especially in the vital tourism sector. Out-going CARICOM chairman, Prime Minister Perry Christie, addressed the subject when it was put to him in the Bahamas by expressing confidence that the non-Cuban Caribbean tourism sector has had a long time in the industry, and has acquired the requisite experience and expertise to compete successfully.

Regional leaders must take special care that the smaller countries of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), the sub-regional grouping within the broader Caribbean Community, are not marginalized and become a less involved and poorer backwater of the Community in the south, with the natural exception of Trinidad and Tobago and its petroleum based economy. These countries constitute the second wave of CARICOM countries to establish diplomatic relations with Cuba. Their determination to normalize relations and co-operate with that country as a member of the greater Caribbean family of nations is highly commendable, in the face of early suasion against the policy, from powerful sources now pro-actively engaged. Caribbean Community countries must approach the unfolding scenario of Cuba-U.S re-engagement as a united bloc with common interests, if the region is to take full advantage of emerging synergies in the process. I believe that Cuba will be a solid and dependable partner of the Caribbean in this venture.

There are many potential challenges facing Caribbean Community countries as the Cuba-U.S re-engagement continues apace, thereby opening up hitherto forbidden areas of economic activity for the Cubans. In the heavily tourism-dependent Caribbean, the re-entry of Cuba represents the biggest ripple in the usually calm pond for half a century. Already, that country is recording significant growth figures: 36% rise in U.S. arrivals; 14% rise in arrivals from around the world between January-May, compared to the same period last year. The country is also attracting much investment in anticipation of greater liberalization of the economy. Spain's conservative government has just established a US\$45m. line of credit for Spanish investment projects on the island, while pressuring Cuba to speed up reforms. This can draw in another US\$400m. Mexico and China are also major players in the investment surge. Other real benefits of normalization so far include: U.S. travelers can now book rooms in Cuban homes, which enhances the cultural experience of visitors, and increases accommodation capacity in the host country; the cost of calls has been cut; U.S. has approved new ferry services from Florida to Cuba, and opened the door for direct air services, already being utilized by at least one U.S. carrier. In the area of medical sciences, a New York medical centre is preparing to run a clinical trial on a Cuban lung cancer treatment.

(4)

The major issues for resolution between the two countries are thorny and fundamental, and have the potential to prolong, if not derail the process. For the U.S. they include: human rights; law enforcement co-operation, including U.S. fugitives living in Cuba; and compensation for confiscated U.S. property. For the Cubans the major issue remains the lifting of the embargo, and compensation for damages to Cuba from it. The U.S. has already removed Cuba from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, thus clearing the way for greater institutional engagement. Powerful groups opposed to the warming of relations believe that the new policy rewards Cuba for its years of human rights abuses, and some presidential candidates have spoken out against rapprochement. However, the process has strong support among ordinary people in both countries. Optimism is somewhat tempered by the uncertainty that whatever progress is made under this administration could be reversed by a future one that does not share its enthusiasm for normalization. Cubans are aware of this possibility, and show no signs of easing the exodus.

In the current dynamic situation, the countries of the Caribbean Community are well placed to leverage their position of mutual trust, earned from their principled relationship with, and embrace of, Cuba, in difficult circumstances, and their strong, traditional ties with the U.S, co-existing side by side. These relationships will continue to grow and mature, and can herald a new era of wider strategic co-operation for development and security in the Caribbean, based on trust and enlightened self-interest.

The event was a part of the National Caribbean American Legislative Week 2015, celebrating the 10th Anniversary of National Caribbean American Heritage Month, under the auspices of the Institute of Caribbean Studies (ICS). The Institute was founded in 1993 by Dr. Clare Nelson to provide a forum for the public and private sectors, the non-government organization community, scholars and others interested in promoting dialogue, and assist in the execution of actions that result from that dialogue.

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