

ACADEMIC ARTICLES

UNDERSTANDING THE CORE POLICY DRIVERS OF CANADA–CUBA RELATIONS: PLUS ÇA CHANGE ...

Peter McKenna

Peter McKenna is Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Prince Edward Island, Canada. He is the author of *Canada and the OAS: From Dilettante to Full Partner* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995) and, with John M. Kirk, of *Canada–Cuba Relations: The Other Good Neighbor Policy* (University Press of Florida, 1997).

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Abstract

This article chronicles and examines the decades-long Canadian–Cuban relationship—albeit with a greater focus on the federal Liberal governments of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, 1968–1984, and his son, Justin Trudeau, 2015–present. For analytical purposes, it poses a number of interesting and insightful questions about the “what” and “why” of Canada–Cuba relations. The overarching aim of this narrative, then, is twofold: (1) to outline the nature and extent of Canada’s Cuba policy since the beginning of the Cuban revolution in 1959 and (2) to identify what the central policy drivers are, from both the Canadian and Cuban perspectives, and how they still mould the bilateral relationship today. Lastly, it concludes with some general thoughts on the overall contours of Canadian–Cuban relations since the early 1960s.

Keywords: Canada, Cuba, engagement, US factor, policy drivers, mutual benefits

Introduction

It is often a challenge to encapsulate in a word or two the essence or defining characteristics of Canada's relations with revolutionary Cuba. But there is no disputing the fact that the Canada–Cuba relationship is rarely dull, devoid of controversy or intellectually disinteresting (Kirk and McKenna 1997; Wright 2008). In many ways, it has proven over the years to be a confounding, unique and unquestionably fascinating bilateral relationship. It has, of course, experienced its fair share of intense engagement, not-so-subtle patches of neglect and coolness, and times when it seemed to be mostly drifting along on diplomatic autopilot.

Since the 1959 Cuban Revolution, now marking its 65th anniversary in 2024, Canadian–Cuban relations have resembled a typically normal and functioning bilateral relationship – with all its attendant highs and lows (Kirk and McKenna 2010). Still, both countries have managed to maintain uninterrupted diplomatic, economic and people-to-people linkages for 65 years or so. Notwithstanding the positive or negative tone and tenor of the overall bilateral relationship, Ottawa and Havana have always agreed to dialogue with one another as opposed to not speaking at all or talking over each other's heads.

It is true that the Canada–Cuba relationship has endured its fair share of bilateral tensions and periods of considerable stress and strain. Yet the relationship has been historically underpinned by a near-implacable commitment to engage and exchange views with each other – across a wide range of policy and issue areas, no matter what the state of current political relations. The fact remains that both countries have come to realise that they get more benefits and advantages from engaging and speaking to one another than from not doing so. Simply put, a policy of constructive engagement, albeit not always smoothly or deftly executed, largely works well for the two countries.

Accordingly, this article seeks to examine the storied Canadian–Cuban relationship – albeit with a greater focus on the Liberal governments of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, 1968–1984, and his son, Justin Trudeau, 2015–present. While there is no attempt here to posit any new theory or model to better explain the workings of the bilateral relationship, it does pose a series of probing and illuminating questions about the “what” and “why” of Canada–Cuba relations. The central purpose of this narrative, then, is twofold: (1) to outline the nature and extent of Canada's Cuba policy since the onset of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and (2) to identify what the major policy drivers are, from both the Canadian and Cuban perspectives, and how they still shape the bilateral

relationship today. Lastly, it concludes with some general thoughts or observations on the overall contours of Canadian–Cuban relations from the John Diefenbaker years forward.

In the Beginning: The Diefenbaker and Pearson Years

In many ways, Progressive Conservative Prime Minister John Diefenbaker (1957–1963) set the framework for the conduct of Canada–Cuba relations – even though it was clear from the outset that he harboured grave doubts and concerns about the “communist” government of Fidel Castro (Molinario 2009). Diefenbaker the Cold Warrior was certainly no fan of Cuba’s “El Comandante,” but he also recognised the importance of maintaining diplomatic relations and open channels of communication with Havana. Arguably, the most significant factor in underscoring the early development of Canadian–Cuban relations was Diefenbaker’s unwavering commitment to dialogue, commercial interchange and engagement at a point in history when revolutionary Cuba had scant friends in the West. Of course, his very deep and visceral personal feud with US President John F. Kennedy – who had an obsession about neighbouring Cuba and was decidedly anti-Castro – played a central role in shaping “Dief the Chief’s” willingness to work and trade with, and talk openly to, the Cubans (Nash 1991).

While maintaining a profound loathing of President Kennedy, he was willing to give the Castro government a chance to prove itself, was cognisant of any action that might push Havana into the clutches of the Soviet Union and was keen to fill the commercial vacuum left after the US initially downgraded and then severed outright diplomatic and trade relations with the island in the early 1960s (Robinson 1989). It is true that the trade or commercial side of the bilateral relationship never lived up to its top-billing or potential in the initial years – as the US marketplace continued to be a major draw. But as far as Diefenbaker was concerned, it was the domestic political benefits that counted most, with his government taking particular pleasure in being seen as standing up to the Americans and not being pushed around by Kennedy’s Washington. Indeed, Diefenbaker was adamant about resisting stiff US pressure to break diplomatic relations with Havana, to endorse the punishing American economic blockade of Cuba or to fall into line militarily speaking even during the dangerous stand-off of the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis (McKercher 2011).

During this critical formative stage, however, the Canada–Cuba relationship eventually found itself engulfed in mutual suspicion and even diplomatic ambivalence. While the bilateral relationship began with positive and hopeful intentions, and the Cubans were always quick to declare their appreciation of

Diefenbaker's commitment to multi-faceted relations with Cuba, it did fall into a pattern of political misunderstanding, indifference and eventual disagreement. The Progressive Conservative government became increasingly more concerned about what was happening inside Castro's Cuba – namely, the nationalisations or expropriations of land and commercial enterprises, the nature of a series of political, economic and social reforms and the rounding up of political opponents. All the while, the Kennedy Administration was relentless in pressing Canada to back its hardline Cuba policy and to downgrade substantially its relations with Havana. Taken together, these developments made it challenging to say the least for Ottawa to maintain a normal and productive policy disposition toward Cuba. In the end, at least from Ottawa's standpoint, Canadian–Cuban relations became far more challenging and trying and thus a sort of economic and political disinterest set in under Diefenbaker.

The noticeable ambivalence of the latter Diefenbaker years would only be hardened and intensified during the Liberal governments of Lester “Mike” Pearson (1963–1968). In part, this was because Pearson – ever the diplomat, intellectual and pragmatic thinker – was striving to repair Canada's poor relations with the US, Canada's NORAD, and NATO ally, after the bilateral strains of the Diefenbaker interregnum. His own personal view, not surprisingly, was that Canadian–Cuban relations should be mostly placed in a diplomatic and economic holding pattern initially – or what Kirk and McKenna have dubbed a “coldly correct” policy framework (Kirk and McKenna 1997: 66–67) Even though there was economic interest on both sides to strengthen relations, both Ottawa and Havana were uncertain of each other's true motives or even what their respective national interests were in fostering cordial bilateral relations. Pearson's government did not know exactly how to approach or deal with revolutionary Cuba (though it had no interest in openly severing relations with Havana), was cognisant of not upsetting the Canada–US apple cart, though growing increasingly worried about the Castro government's domestic reform agenda and its support for the USSR and revolutionary movements in the developing world.

During this period, then, it is clear that any political and economic breakthroughs were few and far between – as a greater emphasis on containing Cuban influence in the world took on greater importance. By the mid-1960s, the Pearson Liberals were determined not to announce publicly any official backing or support for the Cuban government, to undertake any meaningful Canada–Cuba policy initiatives and thus were content to let the bilateral relationship effectively wither on the diplomatic vine (Kirk and McKenna 1997: 80–85). It is true that two-way trade did increase minimally, that Canadian diplomats in Havana did provide Washington with important intelligence and that Pearson, like Diefenbaker, was careful about not being perceived as a lackey of the US

when it came to Cuba. In an odd way, though, it was almost as if the Pearson government was trying to keep Havana at arm's length and yet not appear to be undermining the Castro government in Havana. At the same time, it did not want to send any outward signals of encouragement and support for Cuba (thereby upsetting the US) and still disagreed, quietly no doubt, with many aspects of Washington's tough Cuba policy.

While Cuban diplomats frantically sought to improve Havana's standing in Ottawa policy circles, it was clear that a Canadian diplomatic cold shoulder became the standard operating procedure – especially within the confines of Canada's intransigent Department of External Affairs (DEA). It was not uncommon for Cuban diplomats in Ottawa to detect a frosty environment that was mostly a function of a conservative-minded ideological bent inside "Fort Pearson," an opposition to strengthening the Canadian–Cuban relationship and, in stark contrast, in cultivating deeper and closer relations with its southern neighbour and defence partner. One incident, in particular, speaks to the confusing, challenging and confounding nature of Canada's relations with Cuba during the Pearson years. As Canada was about to celebrate its centennial year, the Pearson government became increasingly apoplectic over the prospect of having to offer an official invitation to Cuba's Fidel Castro to attend the 1967 Expo celebrations in Montreal. Canadian officials did everything humanly possible to dissuade the Cubans from sending a high-profile delegation – including a strange reference to the fact that the RCMP would be unable to effectively provide for the personal safety of Premier Castro (Kirk and McKenna 1997: 73). Not one to misread the diplomatic tea leaves, Havana subsequently sent notification to Ottawa that Castro would not be able to attend the international celebrations after all.

Pierre Trudeau Had a Soft Spot for Revolutionary Cuba

If bilateral relations sputtered during the Pearson period, they would manifestly reach new heights once Pierre Elliott Trudeau won the federal Liberal party leadership in June of 1968. Interestingly, Trudeau himself had a personal and pragmatic interest in Cuba (and Latin America in general) long before seeking public office in the 1960s. In his earlier years, he had travelled to the Soviet Union and communist China and was curious and concerned about what was happening in the developing world.¹ He saw the advantages of diversifying

1 Prior to the failed 1961 US Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, Trudeau had been picked up in the Florida Straits (and eventually deported) by the US Coast Guard for attempting to paddle his canoe from Key West to revolutionary Cuba.

Canada's foreign relationships and thus embarked upon a path to construct a healthy bilateral relationship with revolutionary Cuba. His years in office, especially the first ten from 1968 to 1978, were unquestionably the high-water mark of Canadian–Cuban relations. He noticeably intensified and built upon Canada's previous approach to Cuba of diplomatic engagement, respectful dialogue and commercial interaction. The Cubans, of course, were keenly interested in improving and deepening bilateral relations – and they now had a willing partner in left-leaning Pierre Trudeau.²

It is also worth emphasising that Trudeau was particularly close personally to Cuba's Fidel Castro and both men shared similar ideological perspectives and thoughts on the role of the US in the world. Indeed, the two men had a great deal in common: both were Jesuit-educated, lawyers by training, athletically inclined and unabashed charismatic leaders. They had a personal chemistry and developed a strong bond that led over time to a trusted friendship – even when they disagreed on matters of international affairs. When they would meet, it was not uncommon for them to have long, animated and in-depth conversations well into the night – mostly conducted in Spanish – about complex topics in world politics and global finance.³

So with both leaders and governments in Ottawa and Havana acknowledging a mutually beneficial relationship and both proponents of seeking counterweights to the US, Canada–Cuba relations were destined for positive results.⁴ Notwithstanding some bureaucratic resistance within the traditionally conservative DEA in Ottawa, Trudeau looked for ways (such as offering trade credits to Havana) to strengthen Canadian–Cuban relations. Wanting to be proactive on Cuba, then, he moved to establish the first government-to-government development assistance programme for Cuba in 1973–1974. There would soon be a substantial increase in ministerial visits to Cuba, two-way trade (jumping to \$650 million in 1980 from just \$68 million in 1970) and investment would grow, and the genesis of a strong personal connection between Trudeau and Castro was established.⁵ Commercial exchange and the interests of Canada's

2 Cuba's ambassador to Canada at that time, José Fernández de Cossío, played an instrumental role in pushing the two countries to significantly enhance and expand their bilateral interactions.

3 Trudeau would return to Cuba several times as a private citizen after leaving public office in early 1984. Out of a deep respect, and a clear sign of their close friendship, Fidel Castro agreed to be an honorary pallbearer at Pierre Trudeau's October 2000 funeral service in Montreal.

4 Much of the empirical ground covered here has already been ploughed by Kirk and McKenna, *Canada–Cuba Relations*, especially pp. 86–121.

5 For more trade figure data, see Kirk and McKenna, *Canada–Cuba Relations*, p. 107.

business community, it should be noted, had quickly become a key policy driver of bilateral relations. At the same time, high-ranking Cuban officials would visit Ottawa and Havana was eager to gain access to hard-to-purchase Canadian fertiliser, foodstuffs, machinery and high-tech goods.

It goes without saying that one of the major highlights of Pierre Trudeau's relations with Cuba was his January 1976 official three-day visit to Cuba. When the Cold War was still raging in different parts of the globe, and hopes of diminishing the stresses and strains of the East-West divide were on Trudeau's mind, he became the first NATO and Western head of government to visit revolutionary Cuba. With his youngest son in tow, Michel, there was obvious affection between himself and Castro – and even between Castro and Trudeau's wife Margaret. Trudeau's boisterous speech in Cienfuegos, near the US Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961, was not without controversy back home and, in fact, in other NATO capitals.

Before a wildly enthusiastic Cuban crowd of roughly 25,000, Trudeau shouted in Spanish: "Viva Cuba and the Cuban people! Viva Prime Minister Fidel Castro! Viva the Cuban-Canadian friendship!" (Donaghy and Halloran 2009). Headlines in the Canadian media were critical, some members of the staid Canadian business community were not amused, and the opposition Progressive Conservative party was in an uproar. Not surprisingly, the US government was critical of Trudeau's speech and it certainly ruffled some feathers in official Washington. To be sure, shouting loudly "Viva el Primer Ministro Fidel Castro" was not something that Canadian government leaders typically did, but Trudeau was never much for following the official script or protocol. For his part, Castro responded by explaining: "We will never forget that in the most difficult years of the revolution, when almost every single country and state joined the blockade, only two countries in this hemisphere maintained relations with us ... Mexico and Canada" (Edwards 2016).

In the wake of his Cienfuegos speech, Trudeau became a big proponent of people-to-people exchanges between the two countries. It was actually during his tenure, and after two years of often tough negotiations with the Castro government, that large numbers of Canadians began to flock to Cuba for the sun, sea and sand. What began as a trickle (some 33,000 in 1977) has now turned into a veritable flood of Canadian vacationers (approximately 1.3 million in 2019). It was the beginning of something very unique between the two countries – that is, the formation of trust-building exchanges and deep friendships between several groups of Canadians and Cubans from all walks of life in the political, cultural, scientific and academic worlds, to name but a few.

Not everything, though, was smooth sailing in the bilateral relationship during the Trudeau years. By the late 1970s, the bloom had actually begun to come off

the Canada–Cuba rose as the two countries parted ways on a number of international issues. There was a dust-up over Cuba’s significant military support to the revolutionary governing party in Angola, the People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, at the time of his 1976 visit to Cuba, Castro had reassured Trudeau that Cuba’s intervention would be brief and, in addition, that its military contribution in Angola was largely inconsequential. Trudeau was later miffed that Castro had been less than forthcoming with him about the actual extent of Cuba’s substantial boots on the ground in Angola’s civil war. In his *Memoirs*, Trudeau explained: “After I went home, it became obvious that the numbers were much higher and that the Cubans intended to stay in Angola” (Trudeau 1993: 212). It was not long after that he instructed his Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to terminate its aid programme (with the exception of humanitarian assistance) to Cuba.

Still, the overall tenor of relations between Canada and Cuba was excellent during Pierre Trudeau’s years in office. Both sides understood that the relationship offered important benefits to each country and – as far as Trudeau saw things – that the pluses clearly outweighed any negatives. Even when there were sharp differences, the bilateral relationship remained intact and there was never any threat of severing overall trade or diplomatic relations. In fact, the two countries continued to dialogue and engage and the personal disagreements between Trudeau and Castro never poisoned their friendship or the Canada–Cuba well (Kirk 2021). Significantly, no other Canadian prime minister to date, including his son Justin, has been able to replicate the heyday of Canadian–Cuban relations during the late 1960s and 1970s.

Brian Mulroney’s US-influenced Cuba Policy of Indifference

While bilateral relations largely flourished during the Trudeau years, there would be no friendly overtures toward Havana – and certainly no prime ministerial visit to Cuba – during the subsequent reign of Brian Mulroney’s Progressive Conservative governments (1984–1993).⁶ One could best describe the Canadian–Cuban relationship during this period as one clearly shaped by Mulroney’s deference to Washington, combined with an obvious sense of governmental disinterest in the Caribbean island. To be sure, Mulroney’s coolness toward Cuba was a function of his implacable commitment to refurbish and recast the Canada–US relationship in a far more favourable light (especially after the bilateral tension between Pierre Trudeau and US President Ronald Reagan). As Mulroney himself

6 This section relies heavily on the work of Kirk and McKenna, *Canada–Cuba Relations*, pp. 122–145.

once observed controversially: “Good relations, superb relations with the United States of America will be the cornerstone of our foreign policy” (Martin 1993: 57). And as the self-described “Minister of Canada–US Relations,” there was no way that Mulroney would needlessly pick a fight with his American friends over relations with Cuba. It is true that the Mulroney Conservatives introduced the Foreign Extraterritorial Measure Act in the early 1990s to counter anti-Cuba laws in the US that could negatively impact Canadian business interests. But the fact of the matter was that he was not going to get on the wrong side of America by openly and aggressively seeking to assist the Cubans.

As far as the Mulroney government was concerned, the Cubans were essentially on their own and they should not look to Ottawa for political, economic or even humanitarian support (McKenna and Kirk 2012: 152). Indeed, when the March 1993 “storm of the century,” with its devastating hurricane-like winds, hit the island with a crippling thud, the Canadian government effectively looked the other way. (That did not mean, however, that people-to-people contacts were severed, that Canadians stopped flocking to Cuban beaches or that Canadian–Cuban solidarity groups did not make their presence felt.) Interestingly, Canadian businesspeople, in light of Cuba’s opening up of its commercial space after the demise of the USSR and the Eastern Bloc in the early 1990s, recognised significant economic possibilities and started to invest heavily in various sectors of the Cuban economy. But diplomatic inertia became the order of the day and Canada–Cuba relations were quickly pushed down (or pulled entirely from) the PC government’s list of top policy priorities. Under Mulroney, then, there would be little in the way of new foreign policy initiatives toward Cuba, scant ministerial exchanges or development assistance funding and nothing that would seriously bump up against US–Cuba policy.

Jean Chrétien’s “Northern Ice” and “Constructive Engagement” with Havana

In an effort to sharply differentiate himself from the more pro-US posture of Mulroney, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien (1993–2003) sought to strengthen Canada’s overall relationship with Cuba. His new approach, though, was actually based on the same old dictum: that is, engagement with Havana was the best way to achieve meaningful and enduring political, economic and social change in Cuba (McKenna and Kirk 1999). Chrétien also wanted to demonstrate to US President Bill Clinton that Canada’s policy of “constructive engagement” could be more successful in securing change in Cuba than over four decades of US hostility, isolation and estrangement. “Isolation leads nowhere. But if we are engaging them, discussing with them, offering help ... the people of Cuba and

the President of Cuba will certainly be happy to have a dialogue,” he once opined (Canadian Press 1998).

The early years of Chrétien’s government were more productive – especially under the tutelage of then-Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy (who made two visits to the country in the late 1990s) – than his final years in office. In fact, Canada led the charge to have Cuba readmitted to the Organization of American States (OAS), reopened a modest development assistance programme, promoted commercial linkages to the country and encouraged NGOs and universities to make valuable connections with the island. Additionally, the Chrétien Liberals consistently opposed the US economic blockade of Cuba at the United Nations (UN) (though regularly criticised Havana’s human rights record at the UN meetings in Geneva and before the UN Human Rights Commission itself), repeatedly urged the Americans to recalibrate their ill-conceived Cuba policy and steadfastly rejected Washington’s anti-Cuba Helms-Burton Law in the mid-1990s.

Of course, there would also be difficult conversations with the Cubans, turbulent Canada–Cuba waters and even bilateral low points. Though differences of opinion obviously existed, one could make the case that Chrétien’s April 1998 visit to Cuba was largely unsuccessful. In hindsight, it was a huge mistake to try to lecture Fidel Castro and Cuban officials about individual human rights, political pluralism and democratic freedoms (McKenna, Kirk, and Climenhage 2002). In a very testy meeting and exchange of views between the two leaders, Chrétien brandished a list of alleged political prisoners (the so-called Group of Four) whom he wanted the Cuban government to release immediately. Needless to say, Castro was not amused and angrily fired back about not interfering in Canada’s domestic affairs or sensitive issues like Quebec sovereignty.

In the months that followed, the Chrétien government would intensify its criticism of Cuba, reduce its development assistance outlays and even support several anti-Cuba US initiatives at the UN Human Rights Commission meetings in Geneva. At one point in late 1999, Chrétien even mused out loud about the need to inject some “northern ice” into an already frosty bilateral relationship (Wright 2009). And after subsequently undertaking an internal policy review within the Department of Foreign Affairs, efforts to reintegrate Cuba into the OAS were halted, a proposed joint public health project in Haiti was quashed, calls from Cuban diplomats were suddenly not being returned and ministerial visits were abruptly cancelled. Tellingly, Cuba was conspicuously not invited to the Third Summit of the Americas in Quebec City in 2001 – although Canada had expressed firm support to include Cuba in the previous Summits in Miami and Santiago, Chile. To make matters worse, the controversial arrest and detention of 75 critics of the Cuban government in March–April 2003, the so-called

“Black Spring,” only further complicated bilateral relations. So as the bilateral relationship noticeably soured, relations between the two countries would be placed in semi-permanent deep freeze.⁷

Stephen Harper Takes Relations with Cuba to New Lows

There is no disputing the fact that relations with Cuba cooled even more under the Conservative government of Stephen Harper (2006–2015). For its first two years in office, there was not even a mention of Cuba in its official government pronouncements. (When Canadian officials were contacted in Ottawa and Washington, they were invariably at a loss to explain what exactly the Harper government’s Cuba policy entailed.) For a variety of reasons, including deeply right-leaning ideological convictions within his party caucus, Harper’s own predilection not to unnecessarily raise the ire of the anti-Cuba George W. Bush Administration and a lack of expertise on Harper’s foreign policy team (Kirk and McKenna 2009). It goes without saying that Harper’s own obsessively controlling style of governing and his right-wing ideology also cast a dark shadow over Canada–Cuba relations. As Carlos Dade, the former head of the Ottawa-based Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL), pointedly explained: “These guys personally don’t like Cuba. They don’t like Communists. And so, they’re still fighting the Cold War” (Heidrich and Macdonald 2022: 16).

It is worth noting that the ruling Harper Conservatives continued to oppose the US embargo against Cuba at the UN, maintained trade and people-to-people contacts with the island and sent Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird to Havana in February 2013 to conduct high-level discussions with his Cuban counterpart. But the overall tenor and approach to Canadian–Cuban relations was decidedly negative, purposely dismissive of engaging constructively with the Castro government and oftentimes petty in its governmental actions. For instance, Peter Kent, Canada’s Minister of State for the Americas, said the following in a January 2009 newspaper interview:

7 As for Paul Martin’s two-year stint as Canadian prime minister, there was precious little of any substance to report about Canada–Cuba relations. There were no notable bilateral policy initiatives, no high-profile cabinet visits to speak of and no major economic or trade announcements. To be honest, it was hard to discern exactly what the Martin government actually thought about Castro’s Cuba – or if it thought about it at all. While there were no signs of any outright hostility toward Havana, the truth was that Cuba was not on Martin’s radar screen and thus the bilateral relationship was left to drift aimlessly on diplomatic auto-pilot.

Some [people] are too willing to accept a candy-coated vision of what life in Cuba really is. It's still a good place to go and have a great vacation in an artificial bubble. But Canadians should be realistic ... It is still a dictatorship, any way you package it. (Blanchfield 2009a)

In another interview some three months later, Kent spoke critically of even considering the notion of Cuba's reintegration into the hemispheric fold: "I would say the majority of countries in the Organization of American States feel that Cuba, while it is welcome to return, should return after embracing the democratic practices and principles set out in the OAS charter" (Collins 2009). It is very well-known in the small community of Cuba experts that the government in Havana is not going to accept any conditionality on its full re-inclusion in the region's principal political institution.

At the fourth Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago in mid-April 2009, Prime Minister Harper once again confirmed the frosty nature of Canada–Cuba relations. While he singled out the US blockade of Cuba for criticism in an interview with conservative-minded Fox News, he consciously slighted the Cubans by referring to himself as "an anti-Communist Conservative." (Interestingly, in one of his many newspaper op-eds or "Reflexiones" in the *Granma* newspaper, Fidel Castro described Harper as an "openly rightist man and the only one to have been ill-mannered toward Cuba.") In addition, Harper went on to say the following during the Summit's private proceedings: "President Obama has indicated a new openness to Cuba ... we would hope the Cuban government would reciprocate and look at some of the changes it needs to make" (Blanchfield 2009b). Harper's antagonistic approach to Cuba would also be repeated at the 2012 Summit of the Americas in Colombia, where Canada was the only country to support the US opposition to Cuba's full participation in the hemispheric gathering. Of course, Canada's firm ideologically-based position on Havana became untenable once the Barack Obama Administration decided to terminate its policy of isolating Cuba in favour of engagement and country-to-country diplomatic negotiations. During the 2015 Summit in Panama, then, Harper had little choice but to claim that he was happy to see Cuba's return to the hemispheric community (Kirk and McKenna 2018: 211–212). Revealingly, though, he made sure that no Canadian media were invited to cover his unexpected bilateral meeting with Cuban President Raúl Castro in Panama City.

Justin Trudeau's Short-lived "Honeymoon" with Cuba

While the Canada–Cuba relationship certainly flourished under Pierre Trudeau, it has been far less so under the leadership of Trudeau Jr. Having said that, I am

certainly not talking here about anything resembling the dark days of Canada–Cuba relations during the Stephen Harper interregnum (Wylie 2019: 1–2). And there is no suggestion here that the bilateral relationship is presently rocky by any stretch, but just to say that the diplomatic tone is different and the level of engagement is arguably less. To be sure, Justin Trudeau has said most of the right things about his valued personal family history with Cuba and about the bilateral relationship in general – especially Canada’s sharp differences with US policy toward Cuba and opposition to Washington’s economic blockade. As he stated in his November 2016 speech to the assembled students and dignitaries at the University of Havana:

... I hope that with these short words I’ve been able to give you a sense of why the Canada–Cuba relationship is so important to us – so important to me. It truly is a special friendship and I will do everything I can to continue to move it forward.⁸

At a later engagement, he clearly differentiated Canada’s approach to Cuba from that of its southern neighbour when he said pointedly:

It’s no surprise we disagree with the approach that the United States has taken with Cuba. We think our approach is much better, of partnership, of collaboration, of engagement, but it’s not our job to tell our friends and allies what they should do and shouldn’t do. It’s our job to make sure that we’re doing what we know we should do and can do in terms of creating opportunities for Canadians, for Canadian companies, but also for Cuba. (MacCharles 2016)

After almost a decade of Harper’s cold shoulder and sharp elbows toward the Cubans, the bilateral relationship under Trudeau was back to a seemingly warm embrace – beginning with the visits of two Canadian naval vessels to Cuba in 2016. Like his father before him, the centrepiece of his Cuba policy was his high-profile pilgrimage to Havana in November 2016. He met with Raúl Castro and the two embraced affectionately (with the Cuban President presenting him with a copy of his father’s 1976 speech in Cienfuegos), had a fulsome discussion with top Cuban officials, exchanged pleasantries with three of Fidel Castro’s sons and spoke to students at the University of Havana, which was carried live by Cuban state television. He did not shy away from saying what his father had essentially said in 1976 – albeit with much less emotion and enthusiasm – that “Canada has always been a steadfast and unflinching friend to Cuba, and we’ve never found

8 See, Government of Canada, “Prime Minister Trudeau Delivers Remarks at the University of Havana” (Ottawa: Prime Minister’s Office, 16 November 2016), p. 3.

any contradiction for us between being strong friends to Cuba and good friends and partners with the United States” (MacCharles 2016).

While the principal purpose of the visit was to enhance Canada–Cuba trade and investment ties, Trudeau participated in a roundtable session with a host of civil society organisations (Grenier 2022; Grenier 2021). After meeting with a group of hand-picked Cuban dissidents, Trudeau told reporters that he broached the thorny issue of human rights with Castro behind closed doors (Press 2016). He also placed a wreath at the José Martí memorial to Cuba’s Revolutionary War dead in Havana’s Revolutionary Square – as his father had done 40 years earlier. There was also a series of bilateral agreements that were announced and an invitation to Canada to be the host country of honour at the prestigious Havana International Book Fair in February 2017 (Kirk 2021: 132). Arguably more significant was the fact that the two countries agreed to establish a High-Level Dialogue arrangement between respective foreign ministers and their officials.

Trudeau Jr., like his father, has experienced episodes of controversy when it comes to Canadian–Cuban relations. On the late November 2016 passing of Fidel Castro, Prime Minister Trudeau issued an official government statement of condolences on behalf of Canadians. What he had not anticipated, however, was the subsequent public backlash that followed his respectful words about Castro and his solidarity with the Cuban people. One line in particular appeared to catch the eye and ire of his critics: “Fidel Castro was a larger-than-life leader who served his people for almost half a century. A legendary revolutionary and orator, Mr. Castro made significant improvements to the education and health-care of his island nation.”⁹ The howls of outrage from media pundits, opposition party members, US Senators and even Stephen Harper’s son, Ben, were instantaneous and blunt. Emblematic of the negative chorus was Florida Republican Senator and anti-Castro critic, Marco Rubio, who tweeted angrily: “Is this a real statement or a parody? Because if this is a real statement from the PM of Canada it is shameful & embarrassing” (Park 2016).

Similar to his father, bilateral relations under Justin Trudeau have also had their fair share of “Angolas” or difficult moments. The so-called “Havana Syndrome” brain trauma, which impacted some 27 Canadian diplomats and their family members beginning in late 2016, raised serious questions about the state of Canada–Cuba relations. While the Trudeau government’s response was clearly more measured than that of the incoming Donald Trump Administration

9 Prime Minister of Canada, “Statement by the Prime Minister of Canada on the death of former Cuban President Fidel Castro” (Ottawa: Prime Minister’s Office, 26 November 2016), p. 1.

(including a decision not to issue a travel advisory for Cuba, refer to them as “attacks” or expel any Cuban diplomats), the Cubans were not entirely satisfied. In fact, after reassuring Canadian officials that it was not involved in these alleged “sonic attacks” and anxious to get to the bottom of this controversy itself, Havana eventually became disappointed in the Canadian response to the concussion-like injuries. Significantly, the Cubans were looking for an endorsement of the Castro’s government collaborative approach to the brain injury claims and its willingness to allow the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) to investigate the trauma-related incidents in Cuba. But a more fulsome backing of Havana’s actions to get to the bottom of things did not fully materialise in Ottawa – much to the chagrin of the Cuban government.

It is true that Canadian officials did not assign initial blame to the Cuban government for the concussion-like symptoms of diplomats in La Habana. But Havana was later designated an “unaccompanied post”, where no family members are allowed to accompany Canadian diplomats to their posting. As a result, the number of staff at the Canadian embassy, including key consular officers, was reduced by 50% – mimicking a similar move by the Trump White House (Wylie 2019: 5–6). Compounding the problem was Ottawa’s decision to also shutter Canada’s Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Office in Havana. All of this, of course, made it exceedingly difficult for anxious Cubans to obtain travel visas to Canada. In late July 2019, though, Canada did restore some visa, passport and biometric service personnel to the embassy in Havana.¹⁰

For its part, Cuban officials were frustrated by the downsizing of Canadian embassy staff in Havana. Cuba’s then-ambassador to Canada, Josefina Vidal, uncharacteristically stated that “Canada’s decision [about the staff reductions] made public today is incomprehensible.” She went on to say that such a move will “not help find answers to the health symptoms reported by Canadian diplomats, and which will have an impact on the relations” (Blanchfield 2019). Moreover, she suggested that the Trudeau government’s actions would only serve to intensify tensions between Cuba and the US. Vidal explained baldly:

This behaviour favours those who in the United States use this issue to attack and denigrate Cuba. It is well known that some individuals with high-level positions within US foreign policy are trying very hard to create a climate of bilateral tension seeking to portray our country as a threat. (Campion-Smith 2019)

10 Michelle Zilio, “Canadian embassy in Cuba reinstates some services suspended over diplomats’ unexplained brain injuries,” *Globe and Mail* 30 July 2019, p. A4. As of this writing, a full contingent of diplomatic staff has still not returned to the Canadian embassy in Havana.

In addition, Havana has certainly not appreciated Ottawa’s insertion of the current humanitarian crisis in Venezuela into the Canada–Cuba relationship. For its part, Canada does not recognise the legitimacy of the Cuba-friendly Nicolás Maduro government in Caracas. Instead, it aligned itself with a number of other countries, including the US, and recognised the one-time Acting President of Venezuela, Juan Guaidó. The Trudeau Liberals also made it clear that it viewed Cuban involvement behind the scenes in Venezuela as a major policy driver of the Maduro government. Then-Global Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland (who even created a Venezuelan Task Force within the Department) was a leader in the establishment of the so-called Lima Group – comprised of some 14 countries, rejected Maduro’s leadership and backed Guaidó. In a May 2019 tweet directed toward the people of Venezuela, Freeland explained: “Canada stands with you and commends the courage of Venezuelans demonstrating their desire for a return to democracy. It is time for the Maduro regime to step aside and allow for a peaceful end to this crisis.”¹¹

High-level diplomatic discussions on the years-long crisis in Venezuela did, however, take place between the two countries. In fact, Minister Freeland made two trips to Cuba in 2019 (and another meeting was held in Ottawa) to exchange views with her Cuban counterpart, Bruno Rodríguez, on this very thorny issue.¹² It was very likely that Freeland had a specific message for the Cuban side: stop meddling in internal Venezuelan affairs and promptly distance yourselves from Maduro. Not surprisingly, the Cuban government was not about to cut off a long-standing friend or take its marching orders from Ottawa. With no progress made, both sides essentially agreed to respectfully disagree and to carry on accordingly.

Similarly, critical comments by the Trudeau government over Havana’s 11 July 2021 brutal crackdown on popular dissent were not well-received by the Cuban leadership. Initially, Trudeau was more circumspect in not condemning outright the suppression of country-wide Cuban demonstrations. But after pushback from the federal Conservative Party and conservative newspaper columnists, he quickly reversed himself and adopted a tougher line toward the arrests of hundreds of

11 Statement by Minister Chrystia Freeland on Venezuela, Twitter, 1 May 2019.

12 It was not always clear what exactly Canada wanted Cuba to do in its efforts to resolve the crisis in Venezuela. But it appeared to be based on pushing the Cubans to recalibrate their support for Maduro and for them to somehow turn Havana against the beleaguered Venezuelan President. See, Benjamin N. Gedan and Nicolás Saldías, “Canada’s strong ties with Cuba could be the key to solving the crisis in Venezuela,” *Washington Post* 7 June 2019, p. A23.

Cuban protesters.¹³ “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 said later at a public gathering in Montreal. He then went on to add: “We stand, as we always will, with the people of Cuba who want and deserve democracy, freedom and respect” (Dyer 2021).

In the past, Ottawa typically played down these types of domestic incidents in an effort not to antagonise the Cuban government (or attract unwanted governmental attention to Canadian corporate assets in the country). But in early February 2022, Canada’s Department of Global Affairs, joining with the US State Department, sent out the following tweet: “Canada condemns #Cuba’s harsh sentencing following the July 2021 protests. Canada strongly advocates for freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly from intimidation. We stand with the people of Cuba in their aspiration for #democracy” (Torres 2022). There was a sense that those pointed remarks by Ottawa came as a bit of surprise to the Cuban government and matched the rhetoric coming out of Washington – thereby serving to compound Havana’s disappointment.¹⁴ The Cubans could be forgiven, then, for thinking that the tone and tenor of the bilateral relationship had changed noticeably, and not in a positive way.

In early September 2022, months after the toughly worded tweet from Ottawa about the 11 July 2021 Cuban crackdown, the bilateral relationship appeared to be stuck in a holding pattern. Canada’s Foreign Affairs Minister, Mélanie Joly, spoke by telephone with her Cuban counterpart, Bruno Rodríguez, about the state of Canada–Cuba relations. She expressed Canada’s willingness to contribute to the recovery efforts (no dollar amounts were mentioned) after the deadly August fire (some 14 Cuban firefighters were killed in the blaze) at the

13 Then-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Marc Garneau, had a frank exchange with Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez on the July 2021 crackdown almost two weeks later. In the words of the government’s readout: “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.” Government of Canada, “Minister of Foreign Affairs speaks with Cuban counterpart,” Readout (Ottawa: Global Affairs Canada, 23 July 2021), p. 1.

14 Interestingly, the Trudeau government declined to impose sanctions on the Cuban government – though the Biden Administration was quick to do so – for the July 2021 suppression of island-wide protests. A Global Affairs Canada spokesperson pointed out that Ottawa was concerned about the crackdown and called for greater democracy and defence of human rights in the country. See, Stephen Wicary, “Trudeau Leery of Cuba Policy Change Despite Crackdown on Dissent,” *Bloomberg.com* 22 July 2021.

Matanzas fuel storage depot and to assist those tragically affected by the devastating incident.¹⁵ Joly remarked:

I spoke with Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez about the explosion in Matanzas and our support for the recovery efforts. Together, we are working to help people and ensure a robust recovery. I also raised the importance of human rights and economic growth. (Miyares 2022)

It is unclear how the Cubans viewed the paltry financial assistance from Canada (when compared to past contributions to hurricane situations and to what other countries were providing this time around), but they certainly would not have been impressed with the tacking on of human rights considerations to the Minister's statement. Notwithstanding some coolness in the Canadian–Cuban relationship, Havana continued to indicate its willingness to strengthen relations with Canada and to work closely on initiatives of mutual interest (including in the cultural sector).¹⁶

Untangling the Policy Drivers of Canada–Cuba Relations

When I spoke with my Cuban colleague in May 2023 in Cuba, the first thing that I asked him was about the current state of the Canadian–Cuban relationship, which he quickly noted was “good.”¹⁷ But what I really wanted to know was why Cuba attaches such importance to cordial and constructive Cuba–Canada relations. Do the two countries actually need each other for their own foreign policy purposes? Though his reply to my queries in general did not entirely surprise me, I was curious about some of the rationale that he offered. Of course, he had a pertinent question of his own: Why exactly is Canada so committed to positive and respectful relations with Cuba? Stated crudely, what is in it for Ottawa and Havana?

15 In the wake of monstrous Hurricane Ian in late September 2022, which did tremendous damage to the western part of the island, Ottawa indicated that it would use monies from the embassy's Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives (under \$100,000) to provide medicines and medical equipment for the recovery efforts in the hard-hit provinces of Pinar del Río and Artemisa.

16 This was confirmed in an April 2023 visit of Cuba's ambassador to Canada, Héctor Igarza, to Ontario's Legislative Assembly, where he exchanged views with then-Ontario's Lieutenant Governor and the Speaker of the provincial legislature. See, Ileana Ferrer Fonte, “Cuba and Canada ratify will to strengthen relations,” *Prensa Latina*, 7 April 2023, p. 1.

17 Confidential personal interview in Cuba, 8 May 2023.

Part of the explanation for Canada desiring solid relations with Cuba is actually historical in nature. The overall relationship – despite its fair share of bumps along the Canada–Cuba road – functions reasonably well and has done so for many decades. And the manner in which bilateral relations have been conducted in the past continues to influence the approach to multi-faceted relations today. Successive Canadian governments, irrespective of political party stripe and often in the face of persistent US pressure, have had uninterrupted bilateral relations with revolutionary Cuba since 1959 (or, to be precise, since the establishment of official relations in 1945). Indeed, Canada’s risky decision in 1962 not to sever completely relations with Cuba (one of only two countries in the Americas not to do so) is often cited by both countries as a singularly defining moment in time. It has not hurt that Canadians themselves have developed a comfortableness with the relationship itself over the years. In other words, the relatively long and storied history of the bilateral relationship has effectively cemented a certain permanence and resiliency even today.

The durability of Canadian–Cuban relations is, in part, a function of Ottawa’s fairly recent “discovery” of the Americas as a key foreign policy focus. From Pierre Trudeau to Stephen Harper (though less so under Justin Trudeau), Canadian governments have come to realise that Canada’s future very much rests in this hemisphere – as evidenced by Ottawa’s decision to take its seat at the OAS in 1990, negotiating the NAFTA in 1994 and participating in the various Summits of the Americas since the early 1990s. It was also well understood in Ottawa policy circles that for Canada to preside over a credible and successful Americas policy, it would also need to cultivate cordial and productive relations with revolutionary Cuba. By courting and engaging the Cubans, Canada not only sends a potent signal to a host of other Latin American and Caribbean countries, but it also serves to deliver a pointed message to officialdom in Washington. Put another way, any effort by Canada to engender a meaningful Americas policy would fail in the face of a dysfunctional relationship with Cuba – which is highly respected within the region and punches well above its weight internationally.

Additionally, Canada has clear economic and investment interests in Cuba – particularly in the mining, energy and tourism sectors. For Canada, Cuba is its largest commercial market in the wider Caribbean region. Two-way trade typically tops \$1 billion annually and, most important, the balance of trade consistently favours Canada overall. Every Canadian government is mindful of the fact that with the Americans mostly shut out of the Cuban marketplace, there are numerous trade and investment opportunities for Canadian businesses. There is also a belief, rightly or wrongly, that substantive commercial relations with Cuba could help to open the door to other economic possibilities throughout the wider region of Latin America. And these companies have always

recognised that closer political relations with Havana could help to facilitate increased investment possibilities in Cuba.

Toronto-based Sherritt International Corporation, which is heavily involved in nickel extraction, still remains the largest single foreign investor on the island. But other Canadian companies (no one is really sure of the exact number) are invested in oil and natural gas production, biomedical development, food products and renewables. To be sure, Ottawa's approach to Cuba is often influenced by voices coming from corporate Canada – as was the case in the mid-1990s during the controversy swirling around the anti-Cuba Helms-Burton Act. These companies have lobbied Ottawa to stay the course in Cuba and are obviously interested in carving out a larger piece of the Cuban pie and establishing a firmer investment footprint in the country and even beyond (especially as an insurance policy should the US move to normalise relations with Cuba sometime down the road).

Another important policy driver for Canada is the long-standing and extensive people-to-people contacts between the two countries. Hundreds of thousands of Canadians (many from Quebec and Ontario) vacation in Cuba every year and have formed long-term personal relationships with countless Cubans. Indeed, the Cubans themselves are quick to say that Canadians are often viewed as “family.” And most major Canadian cities, such as Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal, have a vibrant group of activists and well-established Cuban solidarity movements. Add to that formal and informal scholarly interactions, scientific collaboration (on such things as cancer vaccines) and Canadian and Cuban university exchange programmes. There is also a bevy of other less well-known engagements in culture and sport and even art and music.

Over the years, political leaders in Ottawa have come to recognise that talking and working with the Cubans is a better overall strategy for success. They have witnessed over 60 years of a US approach to Cuba that is based largely on estrangement, regime change, and economic strangulation and found it woefully lacking. For them, engagement with Havana opens the door to positively influencing the economic and political facts on the ground. Of course, it does not automatically or even inevitably mean that the Cubans will necessarily comply with Canadian expectations or desires. But they know for sure that punishing and ostracising Cuba will only result in the Cubans shutting down and stubbornly turning inward. And it is well-known since 1959 that the Cuban government marches to the beat of its own drummer – and on its own timetable and hymn sheet. Engaging with the Cubans in a respectful and frank manner, then, is viewed as the only effective approach for Canada to adopt.

One should not, moreover, underestimate the importance of pointing to the Canada–Cuba relationship to symbolise – or perhaps to demonstrate concretely – an independent Canadian foreign policy. Playing the so-called “Cuba card” or

carving out a distinctive Cuba policy from that of the hardline US posture, along with refusing to accept the strictures of Washington's economic isolation of Cuba, still has political currency in Canada, and is indeed endorsed by many Canadians. Engaging with the Cuban government is clearly viewed by the political leadership in Ottawa as one of the seminal examples of Canada showcasing its policy-making autonomy on the world stage. Whether this nostrum is actually true or not, no Canadian government wants to willingly surrender the independence or sovereignty quotient derived from friendly relations with Havana.

Successive Canadian governments, then, are well aware of the symbolic, nationalistic and political value of Ottawa's close and constructive relations with Havana. That explains why political leaders in Canada have almost never missed an opportunity to showcase Canada's distinct and different Cuba policy as opposed to the failed, isolationist and hostile posture of countless US administrations. They clearly know for reasons of domestic political consumption that it is in their best interests to demonstrate foreign policy independence – whether real or imagined – from Canada's southern neighbour. Not only is it politically popular in Canada, but placing a “Made-in-Canada” Cuba approach in the policy window also reassures Canadians about their sense of pride and national identity. Simply put, a Cuba policy that clearly differentiates Canadians from their American cousins is plainly good policy and even better politics.

Taken together, these various explanatory variables are all linked by one critical overarching element – namely, raw political or electoral considerations. To be sure, taking a page from the US playbook on Cuba would be a real vote-loser for any federal political party in Canada. Even former prime minister Stephen Harper recognised, notwithstanding his personal and philosophical objections to the Cuban government, the electoral import of maintaining functional relations with Havana. The fact is that productive relations with Cuba are politically popular in Canada and a large number of Canadians would be angry if it were otherwise.

Getting back to an earlier question from my Cuban friend about the key “push” and “pull” factors underscoring Cuba's interest in close bilateral relations with Canada, he was adamant that it had a great deal to do with those roughly 1.3 million Canadian tourists (pre-pandemic, of course) spending money in Cuba. During the COVID-19 period, when Canadians were told by their federal government not to leave the country, the tourism sector in Cuba took a major hit in revenues. It is clearly an important component of the Cuban economy, a critical foreign exchange earner and a major employer on the island. The Cuban government believes, then, that cordial relations with Canada will serve to keep Canadian sun-seekers (who are one of the top visitors to Cuba) coming back.

While two-way trade is modest overall, the Cubans still see this aspect of the bilateral relationship in more political terms. Stated differently, Canada stands as an alternative Western trading partner to the US (with similar high-tech, machinery and food products to export), is firmly opposed to the US blockade of Cuba (and votes annually with Cuba against the embargo at the United Nations) and is willing to have normal relations with Havana (Rodríguez 2008, 2018). Constructive relations with Canada, then, also highlight and expose the absurdity and outmoded nature of US policy toward Cuba.

Unlike Washington, Canada has also not attached major conditions or demands on maintaining political, economic and people-to-people relations with the Cuban government. The fact that Canada recognises the legitimacy of the Cuban government and largely refrains from trying to tell the Cubans what to do is greatly appreciated by the Cuban leadership. In this way, Havana can point to relations with Canada, a Group of Seven country, as a model of how other Western countries can construct profitable relations with Cuba (and thus minimise the effects of US ostracism and sanctions).

Equally important, the Cubans believe that Canada could be a valuable interlocutor with Washington – as was the case in 2013–2014 when both Washington and Havana were trying to cobble together a US–Cuba entente under Obama’s presidency.¹⁸ At different points in time, Canada has raised with Cuba the possibility of offering its “good offices” or serving as a mediator between Havana and Washington (McKercher 2015). The Cubans are also well aware of the closeness, collaboration and integrated nature of the Canada-US relationship and undoubtedly believe that Ottawa should have privileged access to the sources of power in the White House. So it would not be surprising to think that Havana occasionally asks Ottawa to speak to the US about moderating its views on Cuba and toning down its harsh rhetoric.¹⁹

Clearly, the Cuban government is interested in bolstering political, economic and people-to-people relations with Canada for a number of pragmatic reasons: such as the million-plus Canadian tourists (in the pre-pandemic years) that travel to Cuba annually, the fact that the Canadian government provides export financing and credit to Cuba, that it continues to provide helpful development assistance funds and that Canadian companies are still the top foreign investors on the island. At the same time, Canadian officials are (and certainly have been

18 Canada has claimed that its role during these high-level negotiations was mostly that of a facilitator (and has sworn itself to secrecy). Moreover, Cuba’s government has long known that if push really came to shove, Canadian political leaders would likely side with the US when it came to all things Cuban.

19 Confidential personal interview in Cuba, 9 May 2023.

in previous years) involved in improving Cuba's tourism sector, banking system and tax structure and in its economic planning procedures and institutions. Constructive relations with Canada, then, provide a slew of benefits to Cuba, and without any onerous strings attached or preconditions. Cuban officials also know that Canadian governments, for the most part, do not do Washington's bidding and are not trying to punish the Cuban people or destabilise the government in Havana.

Lastly, a cordial relationship with Canada fits into the central tenets of Cuban foreign policy – namely, an obsession with protecting Cuba's political independence and sovereignty, advancing counter-dependency practices and locating counterweights to the US, promoting international solidarity and ensuring governmental survival (Alzugaray 2012; Fernández 2003; Erisman 2000). Canada fits the bill on almost all of these core elements. By its very diplomatic recognition and commitment to high-level exchanges, Ottawa acknowledges the legitimacy of the Cuban government (even if its closest and most important neighbour does not) and its key role in the wider hemisphere. Canada also provides Havana with an alternative trade and investment partner to lessen Cuba's dependence on any one country. And through its actions at the UN, the large numbers of Canadian tourists visiting the island and its many other people-to-people connections, Canada serves as a useful solidarity model for the Cuban government to single out for emulation by other countries (and also demonstrates that Cuba still has friends in the world).

As the above discussion illustrates, both countries derive certain benefits from maintaining normal and profitable relations with one another through pragmatic engagement. Each side has come to appreciate how the Canada–Cuba relationship provides a host of commercial, diplomatic, domestic political and symbolic advantages. Finally, Canada and Cuba are also acutely aware that they share a vulnerability to their giant neighbour – and a common desire to maintain their independence in decision-making in both the domestic and external domains. When taken together, this explains why the bilateral relationship, even if the main political principles and circumstances are constantly changing, has been so resilient and enduring since 1959.

Concluding Thoughts

There is no disputing the fact that Canadian–Cuban relations over the decades have been unusually friendly, frosty at times and understandably complicated. So, how is it possible to make sense of Canada's long-standing engagement and dialogue with revolutionary Cuba? It is instructive to note that US–Cuba policy (and the covert and overt pressures sanctioned by the

last 13 US presidents and countless Congresses) has been a major factor in shaping Ottawa’s often contrasting, pragmatic and principled Cuba policy. While US President Joe Biden is still trying to figure out the nuts and bolts of his own approach to Cuba – which seems to be a mix of carrot and stick all within an all-important domestic political framework – it nevertheless leaves Canada looking over its shoulder to see what the Americans are doing. The bottom line, however, still remains largely the same over the last 60-plus years: that is, Canada gets more from Cuba by talking and interacting with the Cubans than aggressively trying to ostracise them.

One intriguing point is the glaring fact that the Justin Trudeau years pale in comparison to the bilateral relationship’s apex during Pierre Elliott Trudeau’s tenure. He was committed and personally invested in expanding and strengthening the overall Canada–Cuba relationship. That, in and of itself, is a huge difference from Trudeau Jr.’s tepid approach today, which departs significantly from his father’s championing of relations with Cuba and building a close friendship with Fidel Castro. None of that is present in the current Trudeau occupying the prime minister’s main office in the former Langevin Block – even though there is arguably less US pressure on him today to adopt a harder line toward Havana. Needless to say, there is no political will in Ottawa today to push for deeper relations with Cuba. And when it comes to closer Canadian–Cuban relations, the resistance clearly comes from the top, senior staffers in the PMO, Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland and elements from within the Global Affairs Department.²⁰ The Trudeau Liberals have apparently calculated that the risks (especially those of an electoral nature) of enhancing Canada–Cuba relations somehow outweigh the potential benefits.

Many of the reasons that underscored Pierre Trudeau’s rationale for closer relations with Cuba are now noticeably absent from Justin Trudeau’s approach toward the island. To be sure, there is no deep personal interest or connection to Cuba, no real understanding of the benefits derived from the relationship, no ministerial commitment to overrule a sceptical and Cuba-resistant Global Affairs Canada and no sense that pursuing warmer relations with Havana is a political winner. Accordingly, Trudeau’s Finance Minister, Chrystia Freeland, has been allowed to have significant influence on shaping a Cuba policy of coolness and minimum engagement. Where his father took charge and did not allow sharp differences of opinion between the two countries to hobble the bilateral relationship (such as over the Angolan civil war in the 1970s), Justin Trudeau has

20 In the words of one federal Liberal MP: “It is more than likely that Freeland is driving Cuba policy today.” Confidential interview with a Liberal Member of Parliament (MP), 6 June 2023.

permitted divergent views on Venezuela, the July 2021 Cuban crackdown and the war in Ukraine to stifle constructive Canada–Cuba relations.

All of this begs the question: Why has the Canadian–Cuban relationship been so durable in the face of several bilateral bumps along the road? For one thing, the “US factor,” “Cuba card” and expanding Canada’s footprint in the Americas, along with the many other economic and political advantages, still remain for Canada. Second, it is critically important to remember that the Cubans have undertaken significant efforts to make the bilateral relationship work. It is also worth highlighting that the resiliency of the people-to-people contacts in terms of hundreds of thousands of Canadian tourists, valuable educational and cultural ties, important business linkages and active solidarity groups in Canada all make anything other than engaging with the Cubans more difficult. Moreover, officials in Ottawa realise that the opposite of engagement would entail embracing a failed US approach to Cuba, which is obviously a political and economic non-starter. Lastly, the electoral considerations alone are not lost on Canadian political leaders and thus require the continuation of constructive relations with Havana.

In light of the previous discussion, then, where do Canada–Cuba relations go from here? As is always the case in the bilateral relationship, the actions of the Cuban government itself (and the changing of personalities at the top) – both domestically and externally – will shape the contours of the Ottawa–Havana nexus. It is equally true that if there is to be any dramatic change in tone and substance in bilateral relations, the initiative will have to most likely come from Canada. Indeed, the Cubans have always made it known that they are ready to warmly embrace the Canadians at any time. In the end, though, Canada will most likely continue to muddle through in various permutations of engagement and dialogue more or less constructively, as it has done for the last six decades or so. But in doing so, it will once again spurn the tremendous potential and benefits that would result from actively seeking closer and deeper ties with Cuba.

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