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Review by **Asa McKercher**, Trinity Hall, Cambridge

In early January 2012, Diane Ablonczy, the Canadian Minister of State for Latin America, travelled to Cuba for her first official visit to the island. In contrast to her party's longstanding position on Cuba, Ablonczy – one of the more conservative Conservatives – went, not to lecture Cuba on human rights, but to talk business, a softening of Ottawa's attitude on a thorny issue and a *volte-face* seen also in recent Canadian policy toward China. At the same time as Ablonczy set off for Havana, Canadians of all sorts were beginning their annual trek from their wintry homeland to Cuba's sunny shores. Indeed, benefitting from their country's stance of maintaining open diplomatic and economic relations with Cuba, over one million Canadians were expected to make the trip.¹ Yet all was not well with Canadian-Cuban relations that year. In April, on the front page of *Granma*, Fidel Castro delivered a withering attack on Canada both for the environmental damage wrought by Canadian companies overseas and for Ottawa's seeming support of London over the Falkland Islands. A week later, at the Summit of the Americas in Cartagena, Stephen Harper, Canada's prime minister, sided with Barack Obama in blocking an attempt by Latin American nations to invite Cuba to the next summit meeting.² As these instances show, relations between Ottawa and Havana can be oddly ambivalent. Still, such ups and downs are reflective of a normal state-to-state relationship, one that stands in stark contrast to the hostility between Havana and Washington.

To assess the Canadian-Cuban relationship, Lana Wylie, a professor at McMaster University who over the last few years has done much to deepen understanding of the Canada-Cuba dyad, has brought together a diverse group of scholars for a special issue of the *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* examining "The Politics of Canada-Cuba Relations: Emerging Possibilities and Diverse Challenges".³ As Wylie explains in her introduction, in light of changes on the island – Raul Castro's assumption of the presidency and his resulting reforms – and the prospect of a softening of U.S. policy under President Barack Obama, there is a need for such an examination. The contributors, who range from academic stalwarts – John Kirk, Peter McKenna and Arch Ritter – to, importantly, Cuban scholars – Raúl Rodríguez and Luis René Fernández Tabío – provide perceptive prognostications, interesting insights, and prudent prescriptions about the relationship between Canada and Cuba.

Probing the interaction between the island nation and the northern dominion over the *longue-durée*, Rodríguez offers a valuable historical look at bilateral relations. The bulk of

¹ Chris Turner, "On Tipping in Cuba", *The Walrus*, April 2012.

² Fidel Castro Ruz, "Stephen Harper's Illusions", *Granma*, 9 April 2012; Jennifer Ditchburn, "Canada Splits with Latin America on Cuba, War on Drugs", *Globe and Mail*, 15 April 2012.

³ See Lana Wylie, *Perceptions of Cuba: Canadian and American Policies in Comparative Perspective* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010); Robert Wright and Lana Wylie, ed., *Our Place in the Sun: Canada and Cuba in the Castro Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

his study focuses on the policymaking process in Ottawa during the initial years of the Revolution. Using documents from Canadian archives and – most interestingly – from Cuba, he offers an important look into just why it was that Canada, a Western country and ally of the United States, sought, over Washington's objections, to maintain diplomatic and trade ties to Cuba. As he notes, though, the government of Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, in power from 1957-1963, walked a "thin line" between engagement with Fidel Castro and its commitment to its alliance with the United States. Cuba, meanwhile, sought "a much-needed short-term open door to the West" (75-6). In the early years of the Revolution, then, the foundation of the relationship between Havana and Ottawa was hardly strong, but a decision to engage with Cuba had been made.

Relations between the two countries continued, overcoming the vagaries of the ongoing Cold War and continuing U.S. hostility. Moreover, since the end of the superpower standoff, ties between Canada and Cuba only strengthened, notably in the economic sphere. With the loss of Soviet subsidies in the early 1990s, Havana sought foreign investment and joint ventures to revive its economy and preserve the revolution. As Ritter, the authority on Canadian-Cuban economic questions, makes clear in his contribution, through tourism, finance, and trade Canada has been of vital importance to Cuba's economy, particularly in terms of foreign exchange. Yet, he also notes that trade figures between the two countries have largely stagnated. Further, he highlights reasons why stagnation might be the norm: Cuban resistance to foreign investment and trade; the damage that might be wrought to Cuba by the potential loss of subsidies from Venezuela should Hugo Chavez exit office – or this world; the deterioration of infrastructure on the island; and the lack of reforms to boost small enterprise. Alongside these problems, he contends that should the U.S. embargo end, Canadians would be forced out of the Cuban market by the United States, which "will overwhelm the Canada-Cuba interaction" (137).

While economic ties might be on shaky ground, the contributors note the firmness of the political relationship, although there is some debate amongst them over what form diplomacy should take. In the 1990s, Ottawa not only confronted the threat posed to Canadian sovereignty by U.S. congressional legislation meant to strangle the Cuban economy, but sought to expand ties with Havana. McKenna and Kirk observe that Jean Chrétien, Liberal Prime Minister from 1993-2003, was motivated by "a firm belief that engaging – rather than haranguing and ostracizing – the Cubans was the best way of fostering meaningful and positive political and economic change in Cuba" (81). This policy, dubbed 'constructive engagement,' became Canada's defining position on Cuba. It also led to testy exchanges over human rights between Fidel Castro and Chrétien in 1998 and to a resulting frostiness in government-to-government relations thereafter.

While all of the contributors who touch on the question agree that constructive engagement of the sort practiced by Chrétien and, more or less, by the Harper government, has failed, there is some debate over what form Canadian policy should now

take. Sensibly, none of the reviewers advocate that Canada mimic the U.S. approach.⁴ Critical of constructive engagement, in his piece Calum McNeil analyses the importance of emotion in influencing foreign policy, arguing that emotional views of Cuba, alongside a belief in “the inevitability of regime change”, have led both the U.S. and Canada to approach Cuba with a similar end goal in mind (170). His view, essentially, is that Ottawa needs to drop the “constructive” and stick to engagement. Similarly, Fernández Tabío contends that United States policy and Canadian policy have failed equally because amongst Cubans they are both seen as affecting the country’s “sovereignty and independence” (150). He is hopeful, though, that Canadian-Cuban relations, built on mutual respect, will serve as “a new paradigm for North-South relations and inter-American relations” (150), provided, that is, that Ottawa ends its effort to change Cuba.

For their part, Kirk and McKenna are no less critical of constructive engagement for having involved the use by Canadian officials of “heavy-handed and inelegant” tactics such as setting preconditions and making unreasonable demands (92). Like McNeil and Fernández Tabío, they also criticize this approach for having impugned Cuban sovereignty and independence, notions highly prized by the revolutionary government and Cubans alike. Yet, McKenna and Kirk defend constructive engagement for having led to investment, trade, and people-to-people contacts, all of which have redounded to the mutual benefit of Canada and Cuba. Indeed, they argue for the continuance of constructive engagement, counselling Canadian policymakers to dial back their rhetoric about human rights and abandon the position of imposing preconditions upon diplomatic relations all while increasing government, military, academic, cultural and private-sector contacts between the two countries (96). To this reviewer, this approach sounds more like “engagement” than “constructive engagement”. Perhaps I am mistaken, but I have always assumed that the “constructive” aspect implied trying to change Cuba through increased contact of the sort that impinges upon Cuban sovereignty.

Semantics aside, it seems doubtful whether the Canadian government will totally abandon its preference for some sort of constructive change in Cuba. In her contribution, Heather Nicol laments a shift in Canadian press coverage of Cuba toward a more critical viewpoint emphasizing the lack of Western-style human rights on the island. This emphasis, she avers, stands in marked contrast to past representations of Cuba in the Canadian media. She points, for instance, to a section of Robert Wright’s 2007 study of Canadian-Cuban relations, *Three Nights in Havana*, noting that in the immediate period following the revolution, favourable press coverage of Castro led to friendliness toward Cuba in Canada (103). Yet, the passage she cites refers to press coverage in January 1959, when, it is true, Canadian newspapers did welcome the Cuban revolution, as did the press throughout the West, even in the United States. Quickly, though, the consolidation of communism on the island, Cuba’s tilt toward the Sino-Soviet bloc, and Cuban foreign

⁴ For a recent attack on Canadian policy, see Roger F Noriega, “Castro & the Failure of Engagement”, *The Dorchester Review* 1, no. 2 (2011), 85-8.

policy throughout what was then the Third World, led the Canadian press – like Canada’s government – to take an increasingly dim view of the Revolution.⁵ For the press in Canada, however, there was little support for U.S. policy, especially when Washington sought to infringe upon Canadian independence vis-à-vis trade or diplomatic ties with Cuba. This ambivalence about Cuba in the press was the case in the 1960s just as it was the case in the 1990s, just as it remains the case today. *Pace Nicol*, then, I posit that recent critical press coverage of Cuba has a longer pedigree and is not simply reflective of the contemporary “corporate media agenda, [and] Americanization of the news” (115). Perhaps, though, this contention simply reflects the bias of the historian.

To return to the issue of engagement, Nicol posits that “the critical press does work in that it assists in the development of a human rights agenda and as opposition to Canada’s traditional foreign policy approach of constructive engagement in Cuba” (113). She adds that the media supports “Harper’s conservative human rights agenda” (110), of which she disproves because it apparently runs counter to constructive engagement. But is the constructive aspect of constructive engagement not predicated around emphasizing human rights? If so, is the Harper government’s current position on Cuba really that different from the attitude adopted by the Chrétien government, especially after the icy Castro-Chrétien summit in 1998? Moreover, and far be it for me to relish defending Stephen Harper, but I wonder how much his emphasis on human rights is really a novel departure for which the corporate media is to blame. After all, at home, Canadians put a high price on human rights, to the point, it seems, of absurdity.⁶ And abroad, successive Canadian governments have gone to war, repeatedly, to defend human rights – in Bosnia, Kosovo, Libya, and Afghanistan – and Canada, in conceiving and supporting the concept of Responsibility to Protect, has ranked human security as a high priority in global politics. Human rights are clearly important to many Canadians. Thus, it seems uncertain how far Canadians will go to de-emphasize the importance of human rights in regards to Cuba. As Nicol correctly points out, with Harper government, like its predecessors, the emphasis on human rights “is more rhetorical than actual” (114). Indeed, Canadians and Cubans disagree about a number of things. And the Cuban revolution has always sparked disagreement. In their brief contribution, Julia Sagebien and Paolo Spadoni look to recent criticisms of Cuba in the Canadian press and by Canada’s government, arguing, “The word C-u-b-a, like all proverbial four-letter words, elicits in many individuals strong knee-jerk reactions and vehement disagreement” (176).

⁵ In 1967, the Cuban embassy in Ottawa complained to Canada’s Department of External Affairs about apparent collusion amongst Canadian newspapers to defame Cuba; see S. Gooch to P. Bridle, “Alleged Cuban Broadcasts to Canada – Press Treatment”, 31 October 1967, LAC, RG 25, vol. 10045, file 20-1-2-CUBA pt. 6.

⁶ Sarah Boesveld, “Gender vs religion: Woman refused haircut by Muslim barber highlights problem of colliding rights”, *National Post*, 30 November 2012. And see: Michael Ignatieff, *The Rights Revolution* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 2000). Canada’s largely social democratic political values do lead to a general appreciation for the Cuban revolution’s social achievements.

Disagreements between Canada and Cuba – on human rights, the Falklands, free trade – have not resulted in the sundering of normal relations, nor are there any signs that they will. Engagement between the two countries, constructive or not, thankfully continues, as does the very valuable people-to-people contact between Canadians and Cubans. The contributions to this collection are an excellent example of the benefits of academic exchange between Canadians and Cubans, and scholars and policymakers interested in the bilateral relationship between these two countries will be well-served by reading them.

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