

Light a candle for Cuba...
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“I lit a candle for Cuba after mass today” texted Marie who, together with husband Tony and 20 other Canadians, traveled with me in Cuba for two weeks in January of this year.

I wish all Canadians would light a candle for Cuba; the bully in the play yard is pummeling our friend Cuba into the dust, and our government is apparently paralyzed by inaction. “Look away” seems the message – it will soon be over.

Witnessing Trump’s brutal assault on Cuba and doing nothing to stop it is like watching the rape of a country and saying... well, she deserves it, if she insists on dressing in socialist colours like that.

Trump gaslights Cuba as “a failed communist state” because he and his capitalist buddies fear socialism and hope, by branding it communism, to invoke fear of “that thing hiding under the bed that will come out and get us in the night”.

Cuba is NOT a communist country; it is a socialist country that for 65 years has bravely resisted Washington’s punishing blockade. The Communist Party of Cuba was not formed until 1965. This was six years after the Revolution and in response to Khrushchev coming to Cuba’s aid when Washington slammed the door in her face, imposing a punishing economic blockade designed to quickly topple the new Revolutionary government.

Fidel’s revolution, birthed in a country then mired in poverty and illiteracy under the cruel thumb of dictator Fulgencio Batista, won for Cubans the independence they’d sought since colonization – first by the Spaniards and then by the Americans.

In 1899, just when Cuba was gaining the upper hand in its Third War of Independence against Spain, the US intervened, snatching victory from the hands of the Cubans and proclaiming Cuba a protectorate of the United States. The US withdrew its military presence in 1902 and for the next five

decades Cuba was governed by a series of presidents 'supported' by Washington.

Under Batista, who seized power in a military coup in 1952, universities were closed and free speech abolished. Large landowners controlled the country's resources. Corruption and gambling fueled government. Peasants in the countryside, living in "bohios" with dirt floors, were kept poor and illiterate. The purpose of the Revolution was to return to the Cuban people the dignity expressed some six decades earlier by poet, journalist and philosopher Jose Marti.

The first shot over the bow of the Cuban Revolution was in 1953, when Fidel and a small army launched an attack against the Moncada barracks in Santiago de Cuba province. Fidel was captured, tried, convicted and jailed, but subsequently released to Mexico in 1955. One year later, Fidel returned to Cuba with 81 men, including Chilean Che Guevera. Together they launched the revolution from the Sierra Maestra mountains and, with the strong support of the Cuban people, triumphed in January 1959.

Land reform was the first priority of the new Revolutionary government; land under control of large foreign owners (latifundios) was given back to the farmers who worked it. Illiteracy was all but eradicated in the first two years. Housing soon became a priority as the population, newly optimistic about the future, almost doubled in the first decade. Cuba opened universities in every province; 13 now surround Havana. The new government provided free education for all no matter what age. It opened the International School of Medicine to train doctors from around the world on the promise that they would go back and work in needy communities in their home country. Cuban doctors in missions around the world became known as "Fidel's army".

By the mid 1980's, Cuba's standard of living, based on Latin American indices, was higher than that of the United States; an estimated nine out of ten Cubans owned their own homes with no mortgages.

But in the early 1990's, the Soviet Union collapsed and with it the preferential prices Moscow paid to Cuba for sugar and other exports. The Cuban economy floundered. It was dealt a second blow when the international sugar market collapsed several years later, driving the price of

sugar below five cents a pound. This resulted in the closure of over half of Cuba's sugar mills. As a result, the Cuban economy was plunged into darkness, a time Cubans euphemistically refer to as the 'Special Period'. Still, no one went hungry. Still, no one went uneducated. Still, no one went unhoused. Still, the Cuban people survived, arriving in the mid 2000s with a strong economy based on biotech, minerals, medicine and tourism, a highly educated workforce and good living conditions.

In 1999, Cuba's GAO (El Grupo de Agricultura Orgánica) was awarded the Right Livelihood award (considered the "Alternate Nobel Prize") by the Swedish government for excellence in urban organic agriculture. In 2006, Cuba became the first nation to be accorded the World Wildlife Fund's Sustainable Development status based on social development index and ecological footprint.

In 2011, and in close consultation with the Cuban people, Raul Castro introduced sweeping new economic guidelines to modernize Cuba's socialist model, focusing on private sector growth, agriculture, and foreign investment. These new policy guidelines – Los Lineamientos - opened the door for roughly 200 different types of small and medium private enterprises. Once elected, Barack Obama took steps to improve relations between United States and Cuba. Before Trump came to office, Cuba was on a roll.

Cuba's socialist state – despite the economic blockade - has housed and educated all its population. Achieved global recognition for important advancements in science and technology. Created not one but two Covid vaccines to share with poor nations. Consistently produced world class athletes, artists, dancers and musicians. And doctors. And scientists. Most of Cuba's farms are cooperatives. And it has done it all without capitalism. No wonder Trump is furious. Such a model cannot be allowed to grow and reproduce.

Trump's retribution agenda for Cuba dates to the 90's, when his request to open Trump casinos, golf courses, television stations and hotels was denied. More recent requests and denials followed. Once in office, Trump imposed hundreds of punishing new sanctions. Then came COVID, shutting down Cuba's tourism economy for almost 3 years. Then came Trump's second term, when he doubled down, imposing harsher sanctions

against Cuba and threatening any nation who dared to support her through trade and investment.

Trump's actions over the past two months to strangle the Cuban economy have provoked a humanitarian crisis. By cutting off Cuba's supply of oil from Venezuela (long traded for doctors under the Latin American trade agreement ALBA) and threatening to punish any nation that sells oil to Cuba, Trump has issued Cuba a death sentence that will likely be carried out unless some nation comes to Cuba's defense and backs down the bully. Sadly, thus far, no-one seems ready to do that.

While China is supplying solar panels (and Cuba has been investing in solar energy for two decades), the infrastructure of this country runs on oil. The only solution for Cuba is for some nation to reconnect Cuba's oil pipeline.

The nation to stand up and do this should be Canada. Canada established its Embassy in Havana in 1946, but our relationship as friends and traders dates back to the 1700's when ships sailed the waters between Halifax and Havana, trading codfish and beer for rum and sugar. Canada and Mexico were the only two nations to not break diplomatic relations with Cuba after the Revolution. Cuba receives more tourists from Canada than from any other country. It's time for Canada to stand up and support Cuba.

Canada's International Affairs website notes: *"Canada's relationship with Cuba is based on a commitment to open dialogue, cooperation, and the advancement of trade and investment..."* Time for us to stand behind these words.

Perhaps Canada could invest, like Venezuela did, in Cuban doctors, strategically placing them in rural communities until we can grow our own. (Like Venezuela, we could trade them for Canadian oil!) Cuba's medical and biotechnology sector is recognized around the world for its excellent professionals and technological advancements. Canadian investment in Cuba's biotechnology sector could both help Cuba and result in lower prescription drugs for Canadians.

Canadian companies like Sherritt International have partnered with Cuba to develop its oil resources. Canada should ramp this up and similarly invest in Cuba's cooperative agriculture sector to reduce our dependence on

California produce. Canadian investment in Cuba's tourism sector would be welcomed with open arms.

Does Cuba have problems of its own making? Of course, it would be challenging to name a nation that doesn't, but there are many visionary policies that Cuba's socialist government has put in place. We need to learn from and support Cuba, not stand by to watch its crushing demise at the heel of the tyrant to the south who sees it as a retributive boutonniere for Marco Rubio and a legacy project for himself.

History will remember Canada for what we do today. Prime Minister Carney is criss-crossing the globe to build economic ties. Cuba is the first place he should look. Unlike Trump, he would be welcomed with open Cuban arms. Please Mr. Carney, on behalf of all Canadians who are lighting candles today for Cuba, make the right choice: **STAND WITH CUBA.**

Wendy Holm is a retired resource economist and award-winning journalist who has brought over 1,000 Canadian farmers and students to Cuba over the past three decades to study sustainable agriculture and cooperatives and also led 2 international cooperation projects during that time.