
Diplomacy in Cuba

A CONVERSATION WITH PAUL HARE

FLETCHER FORUM: *Given your experience in Cuba, could you reflect on the United Kingdom's historical relationship with the island, as well as how to look forward in that relationship in light of recent events?*

PAUL HARE: Well, in 2002, we did a hundred-year celebration of diplomatic relations. Cuba became independent in 1902: it was one of the last of the Spanish colonies, and Britain actually established an embassy in late 1902. We never broke off relations. The United States did, and so the British actually looked after Canadian interests in Cuba until around 1945.

We were rather unscrupulous because the United States eventually fell out with Fulgencio Batista, the dictator of Cuba, in the 1950s, resulting in an arms embargo. The British saw this as an opportunity to sell arms to Batista, and then those British planes sold were actually used by Fidel Castro in the Bay of Pigs invasion to repel the invaders. So, the British had a role in stopping the Bay of Pigs invasion.

In terms of the relationship, Cuba was a place of fascination for the Left in Britain and, in fact, many British politicians when I was ambassador – Jack Straw, Charles Clarke, and Tony Benn, who were essentially Communists at universities. They admired Fidel and the Cuban Revolution, and in the 1960s they came to Cuba to cut sugar cane and work on projects. So, we had a political class in the Labour Party that

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was fairly pro-Fidel. There is currently a Cuba solidarity group in Britain, which the Cuban Embassy promoted, and due to this history the group works a lot with the trade unions.

Until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 and 1991, the UK had little trade at all with Cuba. Then, in the 1990s and 2000s, we were mostly interested in promoting British business and tourism. The UK is still one of the major sources of tourists to Cuba, after Canada, and now, interestingly, well below the United States because there is a massive flow of Cuban-Americans and others visiting. So, we were quite busy with a lot of business and political visitors, some of whom managed to fit Cuba into their itinerary for reasons best known to themselves, because it's a nice place to visit. So we would always have visitors—either from London or people who were vacationing there—who would ask just to come around, and it was fun. We met all sorts of people you'd never normally meet.

And then we did public diplomacy events. For the hundredth anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2002, we managed to get people like George Martin of the Beatles to visit—Cubans are the world's greatest Beatles fans. We also got Churchill's granddaughter, because Churchill had two spells in Cuba, one in the 1890s and one after the Second World War. We did more modern things, like featuring nanotechnology, and we had a Scottish week, because Havana is twinned with Glasgow in Scotland: we had whiskey tasting and bagpipes. There was significant British business in Cuba as well—Castrol Oil, hotels, shipping, and tobacco, for example. So there was never a shortage of events, because Cuba has this unique allure to people.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Did you find that Britain's history of having some sympathetic leftists during the Cuban Revolution was a benefit to you as a diplomat, decades afterward? Did your relationship, for example, have a different foundation than the Cuban relationship with the United States, given that the United States cut off diplomatic relations?*

HARE: Yes, that was actually very true. The Castros and the Cubans in the government were very cautious about the relations they had. They didn't want to take on vulnerabilities in terms of foreign investment, and that's still a bit of their mentality towards the West. And, when we were there, George W. Bush was the President for most of the time, and Tony Blair was our Prime Minister at that time. Blair was close to Bush, and, although Blair is Labour Party, Cubans would have been cautious about perhaps getting too close to the UK. But then certain figures in the Labour

Party would come as ministers, while retaining this leftist orientation; they were the ones who often got to meet Fidel, which was increasingly rare. We were lucky, and the ambassador was normally invited to tag along, so we got to meet him. The Castros have always been quite private in the way that they sent messages out to people and how they dealt with them. They have a formal diplomatic service, but they're very cautious in the way they develop relationships; they don't go in too enthusiastically.

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FLETCHER FORUM: *Did you find it difficult to balance this formal approach to diplomacy with your awareness of the backchannel negotiations, especially being new in the country and perhaps even wondering "Am I an outsider associated with Tony Blair, who could be associated with George W. Bush?" I imagine that was a difficult road to walk.*

HARE: Yes, there were a lot of factors in play because we also had to talk to the peaceful opposition, which had created some space at that time. There was a figure called Oswaldo Payá who created a petition under the Cuban Constitution, the Varela Petition, to promote greater openness in society with politics of the economy, and he was well-known in Europe. He received a prize from the European Union Parliament. He visited London, Madrid, and Paris as a politician in his own right. Although he was harassed and repressed in Cuba, he was seen as a figure who was trying to create more openness and space. Jimmy Carter came down in 2002, as well, and he was allowed to speak in public on live television about this Varela Petition. So we had that job to do as well. Our approach was to treat Cuba as a mainstream country as much as possible, hoping that it would behave in kind and wouldn't lock up or imprison its opponents. More openness in society would free up the economy and it would reach out in relationships with countries beyond the Eastern Bloc.

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I think the other thing about serving in a country like that is that the

people in power of course have been in power, when I was there, for forty-five years, and they knew everybody in the world, and they weren't bothered about an ambassador who would stay for three years. It's different when you're in a country where power changes. You know all the old fighters of Fidel were still there in the military, in key economic positions, and you never expected that to change. So, although Cuba was a very agreeable place to be, it was a complex place to understand how to act. Diplomats were carefully monitored. The media was part of the government too; when you're invited to give a newspaper or TV interview, then the questions were occasionally the same questions that the government would pose, because they were trying to test your loyalty.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Turning to communications and media, we've seen American telecommunication companies entering Cuba, as well as some Wi-Fi hotspots established in various cities. How do you see the internet and companies developing in Cuba, given the context of censorship and control of messages?*

HARE: That's one of the most interesting things about Cuba. The media – the printed papers, television, radio, and so on – is entirely controlled by the government, and, therefore, internet is a challenge. When we were there, we did have rather primitive e-mail and dial-up internet in the embassy and elsewhere, but, of course, Cubans did not. That was largely deliberate in that the government did not want individual Cubans to be online, although they were increasingly putting in terminals to service universities and hospitals and doctors, surgeries, where they needed it. But it is a challenge for the government, of course, to increasingly have to explain why Cuban youth in particular are so far behind the rest of the world. And now they're handling inflows of hundreds of thousands of Cuban-Americans who've lived a different life, with all their gadgets and tablets. Still, access to the internet at home is a decision that the government's put off.

FLETCHER FORUM: *What role do Cuban-Americans, both returning and still abroad, play in the relationship between the United States and Cuba?*

HARE: Cuban-Americans have been a big driving force of Cuba's diplomatic relations with the United States. The families who went abroad felt the need to send money to their relatives because of the poverty in Cuba. So, the concept of remittances started out with those motives. In 2009, though, once Obama effectively freed up travel and remittances, Cuban-Americans began to visit with slightly different motives. Now they have the

possibility of buying and selling real estate, which was banned for many years all throughout the revolution. Now, Cuban families are reconnecting over that. There are also now private-sector small businesses starting, like pizzerias, taxi services, and manicure salons. Cuban-Americans are bringing down the capital and the supplies on a regular basis to informally get a stake in these businesses.

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This is extremely important—in a way, far more important than what the U.S. government or the Cuban government are going to do. Soon there will probably be car ferries between the United States and Cuba, and Cuban-Americans will be able to go on and take large cargos of goods. Already right now, they're acting as middlemen in business; for example, working with some of the big music acts as intermediaries to set up concerts and new smart restaurants. It's small scale, but no other country apart from the United States has this kind of diaspora connection to Cuba.

FLETCHER FORUM: *That certainly speaks to the role that Cuban-Americans will play in Cuba's economic development. What role might they play in its political development?*

HARE: The Cuban government will watch that very carefully. They've resisted is the creation of an independent middle class and an independent private sector, which of course makes citizens less dependent on the government. Cuban-Americans know that to run restaurants and night clubs and so on, they need the government on their side. Of course, this serves the Cuban government in the sense that Cuban-Americans will be bringing money in.

Disadvantaged Cubans, however, who don't have family in the United States, are increasingly seeing these inequities. So they are the ones the Cuban government has to watch carefully. While some people can afford the fancy restaurants and cell phones, the ones who can't are the ones who look to the government. They were the ones who benefited a lot from the revolution in terms of education and healthcare, but they don't have the capacity now to look after themselves. That's a political consequence of economic development that the government will have to watch really carefully.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Speaking of political consequences and changes, Guantánamo Bay remains a highly politicized issue. How did you navigate the Guantánamo issue in your time as ambassador, and how do you see it evolving as relations normalize?*

HARE: While Guantanamo is obviously a big legacy issue, it hasn't, strangely enough, been a major bugbear between the Castros and various U.S. presidents, because it predates the revolution. But there has been and still is kind of a *de facto* close contact and collaboration between the Cuban military and the U.S. military at Guantanamo on things like migration policy. When Cuban migrants who don't make it to the U.S. are picked up and sent back to Cuba, they are often processed for re-entry at Guantánamo. The U.S. Coast Guard operates from there, and collaborates with Cubans on issues like drug trafficking. Still, regardless of these functions, it is, a major legacy issue. For example, I know that Michael Parmly, the former head of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana, has publicly taken the view that Guantanamo would be a good topic to tackle as relations evolve.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Could you discuss a defining experience or takeaway from your time in Cuba?*

HARE (speaking to his wife, Lynda): Why don't you answer, Lynda? What was our defining experience in Cuba?

LYNDA HARE: It was a very special posting for us; we had all of our six children there, and they were old enough to appreciate the uniqueness of the country. Compared to other ambassadors, Paul wasn't just a normal ambassador. He stepped out beyond the train track, so to speak, and did things which were greatly admired by other ambassadors: talking to Cuban dissidents, for example. We got to meet a lot of Cubans that ambassadors don't typically meet. You usually meet your fellow diplomats and the government, but we were in a very fortunate and unique position to connect with the Cuban people—for example, by becoming involved with work for children with cancer. So we actually got a very true vision of life in Cuba, and that was quite special.

HARE: There are some remarkably courageous and cheerful Cubans who live in a different age to us, in terms of what we've been used to. They're used to dealing with poor public transport and infrastructure, no running water, and power cuts, which pose daily hardships in Cuba. Things like toilet paper were very rare. Standing in lines for things—for example, to

update your driver's license—would take a full day. The bureaucracy is, at best, Soviet-style. So the Cuban people suffer and yet, through it all, they have the will to survive, to invent things, to make things work the best they can. Even though many of their families have left. So you have this drama, almost sadness, hanging over so many
 Cubans, a sense that they were divided.
 We remember them as remarkable.

We were never bored in Cuba, but to do that we had to drive our own experiences, because it's very easy to live in a cocoon in Havana. While you're looked after, of course, in an embassy, and the weather's good, and

you can travel when you want – which, of course, Cubans can't –there is an obligation above all that to really find out how Cuba works, to get out, to explore things that need exploring. *f*

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