

Toasting Fidel
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Fidel Castro Ruz stepped down this week after almost 50 years as the President of Cuba. Considered a dictator by Washington, Miami-Cuban ex-patriots and a handful of people in his own country, he was a greatly beloved leader to the vast majority of Cubans because he delivered a Revolution that changed and improved the lives of the Cuban people.

Cuba's history of foreign dominance is a long one. From the day Chris Columbus bumped up against it in his boat, Spain had her eye on Cuba's white gold: sugar. Cuba fought two wars of independence with Spain in the late 1800's. And when Spain was at the point of collapse, Teddy Roosevelt rode up San Juan Hill to win the last battle, sign the armistice, and lay claim to Cuba on behalf of the US government (first directly, then indirectly) for almost 60 years.

By the 1950's, Batista and his corrupt predecessors - all installed and protected by Washington - had succeeded in turning Cuba into a haven for capital, corruption, gambling and drugs.

On July 26, 1953, Fidel and a handful of young men and women - Haydée Santamaria and Melba Hernández among them- launched the first attack on the Batista government. Plans to capture the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba collapsed when a military garrison came upon one of the rebel battalions. When a black guard refused to kill him, Fidel's life was spared. Castro was tried, sentenced to jail, and subsequently released several years later in an amnesty intended by Batista to quell increasingly vocal public discontent.

Fidel left for Mexico, where he regrouped, added Che Guevara to the team, and returned to lead a Revolution built on the principles of Cuban philosopher Jose Marti and fully supported by the Cuban people. In January 1959, Cuba became a truly independent and sovereign nation for the first time since 1492.

Fidel and his new government instituted many reforms. Literacy was the first. Followed quickly by agrarian reform. The optimism of the Cuban people soared and Cuba's birth rate doubled. Remarkably, housing, medicine and education kept pace. In the mid 1980's, Cuba's standard of living was higher than the US based on Latin American indices (as compared with North American indices, weighted less on consumerism and more on the quality of life). Virtually all of its trade was with socialist bloc countries.

Then, in the early 1990's, the former Soviet Union collapsed, plunging Cuba into economic darkness overnight. The US Blockade tightened; Helms Burton extended the prohibition against US-based trading with Cuba to firms in ALL countries, threatening violators with retribution (asset seizure). The 1990's were hard times for Cubans. Many left. Fidel negotiated an agreement with Washington to accept up to 20,000 Cuban's a year who legally applied to emigrate. Washington consistently fails to live up to their commitment - they are

still working on the lists from the late 1990's, forcing perhaps 200,000 Cubans to wait in line. (Washington prefers the spectacle of rafts to support the illusion that Cuba is a tropical gulag.)

Yet the Cubans persevere. Despite all the hardships, Cuba was awarded the Right Livelihood Award by the Swedish Parliament in 1999 for world leadership in organic agriculture. In 2006, the World Wildlife Fund named Cuba the only nation to achieve "sustainability" based on ecological footprint and human development measures.

New economic relationships - e.g. with Venezuela, Chile, Argentina, China, Brazil and Canada - are sparking productivity. Oil reserves off the coast of Cuba promise better times ahead. Raul's leadership - particularly his call for debate and dialogue, asking communities "Where have we made mistakes? Where can we do better?" - has engendered a spirit of optimism within Cuban communities...

Keeping the Revolution alive is essential if the benefits socialism has brought to the Cuban people are to be maintained. To do so in a way that moves Cuba forward economically - particularly in the face of tourism's economic dominance - is Cuba's challenge: achieving economic prosperity without falling into the trap of consumerism is tricky.

Fidel has prepared his retirement as carefully as his most strategic battle. Many good men and women are in place. Raul's leadership has engaged Cubans in an essential dialogue. The January 2008 elections gave all politicians a strong mandate for governance. Seasoned leaders like Alarcon, Lage, Soberon and others will continue to steer the ship of state. This is not a country yearning to expose its tummy to the scratching economic hand of capitalism.

I wish I was with my Cuban friends this week to toast - with some good Cuban rum - Fidel's great contribution to the Cuban people and to discuss this brave new world on their doorstep.

There are many lies told of Cuba. It takes traveling in Cuba - outside the tourist regions - to recognize the lies, but this is a worthy pursuit. I have had the opportunity, as an Agrologist, to work in Cuba since 1999, and have developed a high regard for the Cuban people, their society, and the man whose vision laid the groundwork for its success, Fidel Castro Ruz.

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Wendy Holm is an award winning Canadian Agrologist, Journalist and Writer living in Vancouver. Since 1999 Wendy has taken 470 Canadian farmers to Cuba in 23 delegations. She teaches a Cuba-based University of British Columbia course for Canadian undergraduate students (AGSC 302 International Field Studies in Sustainable Agriculture) and has also led delegations of entomologists and professional chefs to Cuba. Wendy was just awarded the 2007 AMEC Award for Sustainable Development or Protection of the Environment for a sustainable dairy project led by Canadian and Cuban farmers at the International Cooperation Awards sponsored by CIDA and Manufacturers and Exporters Canada. Wendy is currently Senior Cuba Associate, International Centre for Sustainable Cities.

On this week of his official retirement, enjoy the following copy of Alexandre Trudeau's The Fidel I Know, a beautifully eloquent reflection on El Comandante written when Fidel first stepped aside due to illness. I have it to circulate today thanks to my good Canadian-Cuban friend Gregory Biniowsky.

The Fidel I Know.

by [Alexandre Trudeau](#)

I grew up knowing that Fidel Castro had a special place among my family's friends. We had a picture of him at home: a great big man with a beard who wore military fatigues and held my baby brother Michel in his arms. When he met my little brother in 1976, he even gave him a nickname that would stick with him his whole life: "Micha-Miche."

A few years later, when Michel was around 8 years old, I remember him complaining to my mother that my older brother and I both had more friends than he did. My mother told him that, unlike us, he had the greatest friend of all: he had Fidel.

For many years, Cuba remained Michel's exclusive realm; whenever someone would accompany my father there, it would naturally be Michel. It wasn't until after both my father's and brother's deaths that I got a chance to visit Fidel and his country, Cuba.

Fidel may have been at first a political contact of my father's but their relationship was much more than that. It was extra-political.

Indeed, like my father, in private, Fidel is not a politician. He is more in the vein of a great adventurer or a great scientific mind. Fidel doesn't really do politics. He is a revolutionary.

He lives to learn and to put his knowledge in the service of the revolution. For Fidel, revolution is really a work of reason. In his view, revolution, when rigorously adopted, cannot fail to lead humanity towards ever greater justice, towards an ever more perfect social order.

Fidel is also the most curious man that I have ever met. He wants to know all there is to be known. He is famous for not sleeping, instead spending the night studying and learning.

He also knows what he doesn't know, and when he meets you he immediately seeks to identify what he might learn from you. Once he has ascertained an area of expertise that might be of interest, he begins with his questions. One after the other. He synthesizes information quickly and gets back to you with ever deeper and more complex questions, getting more and more excited as he illuminates, through his Socratic interrogation, new parcels of knowledge and understanding he might add to his own mental library.

His intellect is one of the most broad and complete that can be found. He is an expert on genetics, on automobile combustion engines, on stock markets. On everything.

Combined with a Herculean physique and extraordinary personal courage, this monumental intellect makes Fidel the giant that he is.

He is something of a superman. My father once told us how he had expressed to Fidel his desire to do some diving in Cuba. Fidel took him to the most enchanting spot on the island and set him up with equipment and a tank. He stood back as my father geared up and began to dive alone.

When my father had reached a depth of around 60 feet, he realized that Fidel was down there with him, that he had descended without a tank and that there he was with a knife in hand prying sea urchins off the ocean floor, grinning.

Back on the surface, they feasted on the raw sea urchins, seasoned with lime juice.

Fidel turns 80 years old today. A couple of weeks ago, he shocked the world by turning power over to his brother Raul after holding it without interruption since the 1959 revolution. In newspapers across the world, pundits solemnly declared that even giants are mortal and that no revolution is eternal. Historians even began to prepare the space that will be granted Fidel in history books.

Fidel may seem an anachronism: a visionary statesman in a world where his kind have long since been replaced by mere managers, a 20th-century icon still present in the 21st century.

There is also wild speculation about what fate awaits Cuba after Castro. It is important to note, however, that while the whole world works itself up about the matter, Cubans themselves play it cool. Some of my shrewder Cuban friends even say that this

temporary withdrawal from power is another one of Castro's clever strategies; that it is something of a test and that he will soon be back at the helm. They say that, on one hand, Castro is allowing the Cuban people, and more specifically the Cuban state apparatus, to become accustomed to the leadership of his brother Raul. On the other hand, Castro is carefully watching for hints as to how the world — and, more importantly, the United States — will react to his final departure.

Cubans remain very proud of Castro, even those who don't share his vision. They know that, among the world's many peoples, they have the most audacious and brilliant of leaders. They respect his intellectual machismo and rigour.

But Castro's leadership can be something of a burden, too. They do occasionally complain, often as an adolescent might complain about a too strict and demanding father. The Jefe (chief) sees all and knows all, they might say. In particular, young Cubans have told me that an outsider cannot ever really imagine what it is like to live in such a hermetic society, where everyone has an assigned spot and is watched and judged carefully. You can never really learn on your own, they might say. The Jefe always knows what is best for you. It can be suffocating, they say.

I met a young man in the small provincial town of Remedios who worked there as a cigar roller. We shared a great love for the works of Dostoyevsky. When I expressed to him my excitement at meeting a fellow aficionado of Russian literature, he flatly told me: "Yes, Fidel has taught me to read and to think, but look what work he sets me out to do with this education: I roll cigars!"

Cuba under Castro is a remarkably literate and healthy country, but it is undeniably poor. Historians will note, however, that never in modern times has a small, peaceful country been more subjected to unfair and malicious treatment by a superpower than Cuba has by the United States.

From the very start, the United States never gave Castro's Cuba a choice. Either Castro had to submit himself and his people to America's will or he had to hold his ground against them.

Which is what he did, in the process drawing the Cuban people into this taxing dialectic that continues to this day. Cubans pay the price and may occasionally complain of their fate, but they rarely blame Castro. The United States never fails to make the Cuban people well aware of its spite for this small neighbouring country that dares to be independent.

With the possible exception of Nelson Mandela, already well into retirement, Fidel is the last of the global patriarchs. Reason, revolution and virtue are becoming more and more distant and abstract concepts. We will perhaps never see another patriarch.

We thus have to conceive of the departure of the last patriarch in psychoanalytical terms. The death of the father doesn't signal our liberation from him — quite the contrary. The death of a father so grand and present as Castro will, rather, immortalize him in the minds of his children.

It is true that Cubans may eventually cast away the communist orthodoxy of the revolution. They will become tempted by American capital and values as soon as the embargo against them is lifted, something that will surely follow in the not so distant future. They will have new opportunities for individual fulfilment and downfall. Without a doubt, Cuba without Castro will not remain unchanged.

But Cubans will continue to be subjected to Castro's influence. Whether they like it or not, they will continue to be called out by his voice, by his questions, by his inescapable rationality, which, whether they heed its call or not, demands they defend the integrity of Cuba and urges them to seek justice and excellence in all things.

For a generation to come, they will be haunted by the vision of a society that never existed and probably never will exist, but which their once-leader, the most brilliant and obsessed of all, never stopped believing could exist and should exist.

Cubans will always feel privileged that they, and they alone, had Fidel.