

# Dancing with Fidel

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In her just-released documentary FIDEL, film-maker Estela Bravo uses the words of Sydney Pollack, Ted Turner, Arthur Schlesinger, Nobel Prize winner Gabriel Garcia Marquez, former CIA agent Philip Agee, former US Special Interest's Section head Wayne Smith, Nelson Mandela and others to paint a fresh picture of one of the most influential, enigmatic and controversial personalities of our time: Cuban President Fidel Castro.

At 32, Fidel led a popular revolution to overthrow a dictator through armed struggle. He has outlived nine US presidents and survived four decades of US-sponsored invasions, assassination attempts and terrorist actions, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the tightening of the US embargo. Today, Fidel says to Bravo's camera, it will be the people's conscience, ideas and the needs of history – not weapons – that will change the world.

Traveling through Cuba with the tenth delegation of Canadian farmers in just three years, we are struck by the vast capacity and potential of the Cuban people. While some have chosen to escape the punishing conditions of the "special period" (following the collapse of the former Soviet Union), the overwhelming majority of Cubans have resisted the tightening economic screws of US foreign policy (turned in response to US economic interests in sugar, tobacco and citrus) with dignity, strength and determination.

This determination is particularly evident when it comes to agriculture. Out of sheer necessity – the loss of export markets, agricultural inputs and half her food supply when the Soviet Union collapsed – Cuba became a world leader in organic agriculture in less than a decade. (The economic potential of Cuba's achievements in organic production is significant, as a benefit cost analysis of retail-packed organic orange-grapefruit-banana-papaya-mango juice blends versus sugar would I suspect clearly demonstrate...) In 1999, Maria del Carmen Perez accepted for Cuba the prestigious Right Livelihood Award of the Swedish Parliament for global leadership in organic farming methods. Sra. del Carmen Perez is a member of ANAP (Asociación de Agricultores Pequeños), a national farmer organization that since the Revolution has been a strong and effective lobby for Cuba's farmers (the "one voice" so lacking in Canada).

Of course there are problems. Many problems. There is a serious shortage of goods in the peso economy. Tourism's cash cow (replacing sugar as an economic engine) leaves some very big cow pies indeed; managing the interface between the peso and dollar economy is fraught with difficulties... Cuba lags way behind in meat and milk production. As in Canada, Cuba's organic movement faces pressure from those who see it as a stop-gap measure and who equate a lifting of the blockade with a return to conventional, high-input farming. There is not a country in the world immune to the vagaries of bureaucracy and politics - this January, one of our farmer delegations was unfortunately denied farm access, a problem requiring intense efforts by many to resolve and which resulted in a complete restructuring of our administrative arrangements.

But difficulties aside, the Cuban experience is truly remarkable. And the potential is vast. What is it in the fabric of Cuban society that has allowed this small David to so successfully stand up to the towering US Goliath? And while many nations are now challenging America's punishing treatment of Cuba, why is it that Canada remains so silent?

Like the insecure sidekick of the school-yard bully, it would appear that Canada is more interested in currying favour with the US than in taking a principled position in defense of Cuba's right to equity on the global stage.

In this post-September 11<sup>th</sup> world, economic terrorism must be named and rejected as vigorously as other forms of terrorism. Canada once enjoyed a reputation for strong and balanced leadership in international affairs. It is time to reassert that voice.

At the end of Bravo's film (which may have its world debut in Canada) writer Alice Walker concludes her otherwise serious comments with a personal observation on Fidel the man: "what I find really amazing" Walker chuckles, "is that apparently Fidel can't dance..."

On the contrary, I'd say Fidel has demonstrated some pretty fancy footwork indeed. Many nations have come to realize that Cuba's commitment to social justice and defense of sovereignty in the face of globalization is a dance we must all learn if we are to arrive at solutions properly respectful of our collective future.

As we travel through this complex and fascinating land observing the struggles and triumphs of Cuban communities, the sustainability of Cuban agriculture, the strength of the political voice of Cuba's farmers and the tenacity and determination of the Cuban people, it would seem a few dancing lessons from Fidel would be appropriate for us all.

Oh darlin', save the last dance for me...

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