

Australia, Cuba and the United States

A Submission to A People's Inquiry: Exploring the case for an Independent and Peaceful Australia

Lachlan Hurse

President

Australia-Cuba Friendship Society (Brisbane Branch)

1 August 2021

Introduction

In February 2016 the Australia Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop attended the inaugural 'Cuban Award' night hosted by the Cuban Ambassador in Canberra, along with representatives of the Australian Labor Party, union leaders including Paddy Crumlin from the Maritime Union of Australia, members from the Australia-Cuba Friendship Society, representatives of the diplomatic corps and other dignitaries, including the noted neurosurgeon, Dr Charlie Teo.

The event was an indication of the growing ties between Cuba and Australia at a government level, and the links established through civil society; unions, solidarity organisations, and businesses. It also indicated how much Australia's foreign policy towards Cuba has, to our credit, diverged from United States policy, which has imposed harsh economic sanctions (known inside Cuba as 'the Blockade') since 1961 in a deliberate attempt to create political instability by starving Cuba of access to international trade.

These economic sanctions have been part of a long-term campaign by the United States to deny Cuban sovereignty and bring the republic back under US control. This has included numerous subversive attacks including US-backed military intervention at the Bay of Pigs, numerous attempts on the life of Fidel Castro, the financing of terrorist activities inside Cuba and biological warfare, the financing of 'dissident artists' and most recently cyber-attacks fomenting civil unrest in July 2021. As documented by 'The Cuba Money Project' website, which draws on official US documents, the United States continues to pour millions of dollars into its campaigns against Cuba aimed at overthrowing the government.

Notwithstanding Australia's supine position to US foreign policy, there have been diplomatic relations with the establishment of a Cuban Consulate in Australia in 1989, and a Cuban embassy in 2008.

Australia has pursued commercial relationships with Cuba, in the fields of mining and biotechnology amongst other things.

Since the 1980s Australia has received visiting Cuban delegations, including a ministerial visit by the Cuban Minister for Sugar, scientists sponsored under FAO programs, sporting teams, musical performers, and performing dance companies. The Australian Government has entered into several Memoranda of Understanding with the Cuban Government in relation to cooperation in sport, diplomatic relations, and migration issues.

Furthermore, the Australian Government has permitted Cuban literacy advisors to work in Australia under the 'Yes I Can' program run by Literacy for Life Foundation, mainly in remote areas of New South Wales and the Northern Territory funded in part by Commonwealth Government programs.

In 2020 Australian businesses signed letters of cooperation with Cuban counterparts and currently Meat and Livestock Australia is conducting trials of a cattle tick vaccine produced by Cuban company, BioCubaFarma.

The United Nations Annual Resolution on the Embargo

There has been consistent bipartisan support by successive Australian Governments in the United Nations for the annual vote on the motion put by Cuba on the "Necessity of ending the economic, commercial and financial embargo imposed by the United States of America against Cuba". In its Country Brief on Cuba, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade notes that 'the embargo remains an impediment to bilateral trade'.

Most recently, on 23 June 2021 Australia joined with 183 other nations in voting in favour of this motion, which has been passed annually for the past 29 years. Australia has voted in support of this motion since 1996.

Nevertheless, there is a particular moment in Australian diplomacy that bears a special mention as it reveals how Australia has bent to United States pressure regarding Cuba which ultimately backfired.

In a particularly disdainful act, during the debate on Cuba's annual motion at the General Assembly in 2006, Australia attempted to move an amendment which would have noted that the US sanctions 'were motivated by valid concerns about the continued lack of democracy and political freedom in Cuba'

The United States had failed to find any European sponsor for the amendment, and subsequently pressured Australia to put it.

As a result, Australia was subjected to a humiliating speech from the Cuban Foreign Minister, Perez Roque, as reported by the Cuban News Agency (ACN):

'In response to the Australian action, the Cuban Foreign minister said Australia has no moral authority to refer to the human rights situation in Cuba, and called the country "the puppet" used by the US to propose its amendment.

The Australian government is an accomplice of American imperialism, a sort of "pocket imperialism," that is always willing to follow its mentors in Washington, he added.

Perez Roque remarked that the Australian government has no moral ground to criticize Cuba while it submits its own indigenous population to a truly apartheid regime and supports the torture centre kept by the US in the illegally occupied territory of Guantanamo in Cuba.'

The amendment was lost (126-51 with 5 abstentions).

Thankfully Australia has not repeated this since and has voted consistently against the embargo.

The Australian government has since built the relationship with Cuba further, with a visit to Cuba by Australia's Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop in 2017. This was reciprocated with a visit to Australia by Cuban First Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs, Marcelino Medina González in 2018.

Conclusion

The overall stance of Australia to Cuba shows that it is possible to steer a foreign policy independent of the US that delivers benefits to the Australian people and also aims to deliver greater justice for the people of Cuba who have suffered the wrath of the United States for asserting their own

sovereignty. The example in 2006, where Australia succumbed to pressure by the United States into doing its dirty work in the United Nations General Assembly has not been in our national interest, nor in the interest of a safer, more just and peaceful world. If it is possible for successive Australian governments to build relations with Cuba, it surely is possible for Australia to develop independent foreign policy with the rest of the world.

Sources

Blumenthal, M. (2021) *Cuba's cultural counter-revolution: US gov't-backed rappers, artists gain fame as 'catalyst for current unrest'* <https://thegrayzone.com/2021/07/25/cubas-cultural-counter-revolution-us-govt-rappers-artists-catalyst/> accessed 1 August 2021

Chowdhury F. (2021) *Subvert Cuba: Imperialist campaign and few facts* <https://countercurrents.org/2021/07/subvert-cuba-imperialist-campaign-and-few-facts/> accessed 1 August 2021

DFAT (2021) *Cuba country brief* <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/cuba/Pages/cuba-country-brief>, accessed 1 August 2021

Eaton, T (2021) *Cuba budget request reflects competing interests* <https://cubamoneyproject.com/2021/07/21/budget/> accessed 1 August 2021

Macleod, A. (2021) *Media Play Up Protests, Play Down Effect of US Sanctions in Cuba* <https://fair.org/home/media-play-up-protests-play-down-effect-of-us-sanctions-in-cuba/> accessed 1 August 2021

Voltairenet (2006) *Cuba Denounces US Maneuvers at the United Nations* <https://www.voltairenet.org/article143970.html> accessed 1 August 2021.

United Nations (2006) *General Assembly Overwhelmingly Supports End To United States Embargo On Cuba; Cuba's Foreign Minister Calls Blockade 'Longest And Cruellest' In History* (Press Release, Author unknown) <https://www.un.org/press/en/2006/ga10529.doc.htm>, accessed 1 August, 2021