

REPORT FROM THE ROUNDTABLE ON CANADA-CUBA RELATIONS

January 18, 2000
Ottawa

On January 18, 2000, the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development held a roundtable on Canada-Cuba relations. The roundtable brought together experts, academics, NGOs, labour, business and government officials to assess current Canadian foreign policy in Cuba and to look toward future initiatives. We are most grateful to Senator Lois Wilson who hosted the meeting at the Senate and to Justin Robertson from the Cuba Desk at the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade for contributing to the report and helping with the roundtable organisation.

1. Executive Summary

The day was structured around four topics: human rights, economic reform, Canadian business and NGOs and civil society. Although most participants expressed fundamental agreement with constructive engagement, there was, perhaps surprisingly, a tough undercurrent to the discussion with a common refrain being that Canada too often capitulates to Cuban pressure. Given this mood, Professor John Kirk's, Dalhousie University, protestations that new ideas could get us back on track (e.g., an eminent persons group visit to Cuba led by Trudeau or Broadbent, or the formation of a Canada-Cuba bilateral commission of diplomats and civil society representatives) fell on deaf ears. Rather, most participants demanded an engagement policy that is tough and hard-nosed when it needs to be while keeping the general contours as they are. It would appear that government actions toward Cuba since February 1999 are in line with the views of many Canadian experts on Cuba.

The critics of Canadian policy were headed by Professor Yvon Grenier, St. Francis Xavier University. Grenier argued that constructive engagement is really a domestically-driven foreign policy issue where successive Canadian governments have sought easy political points by demonstrating independence from the USA on Cuba. Grenier claimed that Cuba is the only country in the world where Canada expends significant time and energy to influence an authoritarian regime. He went to lengths to describe Castro's Cuba as a police state and wondered why so many Canadians avoid discussing the nature of Cuban politics. Nick Rowe, Carleton University, added that Canadian engagement, more often than not, feeds a Cuban sense of self-importance and strengthens Castro's allure. Both recommended that Canada downgrade its relations to a basic form where we "don't provide massive publicity for the regime through high-