

level visits,” and we “forget Cuban NGOs and civil society organizations.” Only humanitarian aid would be consistent with this approach. Rowe did argue, however, that Canada could still do its best to “train subversive youth,” e.g., through economics training.

Between the pro-engagement and anti-engagement perspectives, there was another school of thought present in the room. This school can be called the realists, a group of people who advocated the need for greater realism when thinking about Canada’s long-term impact in Cuba. While still supportive of a strong Canadian presence in Cuba, this school warned that Canada’s ability to influence the Cuban system and its institutions over the long run is fairly minimal. Hence, Canadian policy naively assumes that our assistance can make a genuine impact on softening the eventual Cuban transition. What is needed, in this perspective, is clearer programming targets and ultimately more modest long-term goals.

In the human rights session, Laurie Wiseberg of Human Rights Internet congratulated Canada for its timely decision to engage Cuba in the mid-1990s but complained that, in practice, there had been problems with the implementation of human rights engagement. Her foremost complaint was that Canada had shown an unwillingness to exert sufficient pressure on the Cuban regime for greater freedom of association, expression and assembly. Canada has passed up numerous opportunities to press Cuba in the area of basic civil and political rights, she argued. By agreeing to the Cuban agenda of economic and social rights (e.g., by holding seminars on women’s and children’s rights, and by restricting an NGO gathering in Havana to “friendly” NGOs), Canada sends the wrong signal to the Cuban regime. Wiseberg also faulted Canadian NGOs for not balancing their developmental work with calls for better observation of civil and political rights. Despite these criticisms, Wiseberg concluded that engaging Cuba still offered the best hope for promoting change and that Canada was generally on the right track. These points were echoed by many participants in the ensuing discussion.

The session on Canadian business consisted of a question and answer period with David Allan of York Medical. Allan outlined how the Cuban business climate had changed markedly from the heady and high-spirited days of the mid-1990s. In his company’s case, times had changed to the degree that the word “Cuba” is now buried at the back of his most recent annual report, even though Cuba is at the heart of York Medical’s business plans. This reflects the uncertainty that many investors now carry concerning Cuba. At a broader level, Allan called the Helms-Burton legislation a hugely effective American tool for chilling the business environment, noting that it has turned Cuba into a market that is too volatile for the major multinationals. He also noted that the government’s policy freeze on Cuba had restricted his ability to access senior Cuban officials. Nevertheless, Allan’s optimism and fascination with Cuba was obvious. One of the positive effects of Helms-Burton was that it opened windows for small and medium-sized foreign businesses in Cuba, like his own. While not for everyone, Allan suggested that Cuba’s impressive knowledge capacities and the absence of corruption created good business opportunities for some foreign firms. For those who decide to enter the market, Allan complimented the Canadian diplomatic service, singling out the efforts of Mark Entwistle, Keith Christie, Don Campbell and the Ottawa trade staff.