

Goodbye Comrade Castro

A personal reflection

David John Douglass



It is with some sadness that I note the passing of Comrade Fidel Castro, a great and dedicated revolutionary socialist. Fidel's political direction was uncertain at the beginning, he and his band of compañeros were composed of many mixed opinions, anarchists, Marxists, nationalist democrats all united in trying to overthrow the fascistic dictator and mafia gangster Batista . Batista had made Cuba the playground of the US tax dodgers, a floating brothel for the rich and famous , while the people of Cuba lived in literally medieval conditions of chronic poverty and exploitation. The US state seen Cuba as its political and social backyard and had interfered in Cuban political history on a number of key junctures and not for the better, but to stop any real independence movement. The history of Cuban independence movements was linked cheek by jowl to ideas of socialism and anarchism or some form of social democratic movement, and had produced some outstanding hero's. Fidel's movement was at first given the green light by the CIA who wished to see Batista and the Mafiosi overthrown with Cuba coming closer into the embrace of the US state.

The struggle of the Cuban working class was of course not overall being waged romantically in the mountains but in the cities and in the unions and the agrarian movement. However logic soon pushed the two movements together and in the process Fidel nearer to the Marxist politics of his chief of staff Che . After the Fidelista's by force of arms and the general strike across the island forced Batista to flee to his cousins across in Miami a provisional government was established and by popular will a socialist system was called for. The Cuban Communist Party which had played no part in the struggle was refounded with a starkly radical vision. Cuba could never construct socialism on its own, it was too small, non-industrial, totally dependent on tobacco and sugar, and now the US state was dedicated to its overthrow and threw an iron trade blockade around the island. The Cuban revolution announced Fidel begins on the beach of Cuba and ends at the tip of Africa. The Cuban revolution is the revolution of Asia, Africa and Latin America. For Cuba to work then socialist and liberation struggles had to spread all over the world beginning with the Tricontinental , Cuba brought together liberation movements from across Africa, Latin America and Asia, reached new understandings, sparked popular communist movements of this generation. Cuban forces volunteered en masse for service fighting across the world, and at home made brave attempts at constructing the national health service and education programme which eliminated illiteracy in a

decade. 'The New Man' was being born and Cuba worked hard to eliminate 'machismo' sexist attitudes with armed women's detachments and popular assemblies of working class women.

Contrasted to the chilling poverty and ill health of the rest of Latin America Cuba was a shining light. For the leaders of the Black Panther Party Cuba WAS Black Power! two thirds of the population were black, they were not being lynched, they were not being disenfranchised or beaten with billy clubs or shot down in the streets. The life expectancy, and health standards of black people in Cuba contrasted starkly with the poor life and ill health and gross poverty of Black people living in the USA. Dietary standards in Cuba soon matched and bettered many European inner cities.

At times the US state moved to the final confrontation with socialist ideas, multiple assassination attempts on Fidel, sabotage, counter-revolutionary guerrillas parachuted into the mountains, and a sea born invasion (the Bay of Pigs) all of which ended in disasters for the USA and their Mafia backers. In 1962 we came the closest yet to all out nuclear war, and people of my generation (I was 14) trembled as the nuclear war closed in at a rate of knots. Fidel would have went all the way, comrade Khrushchev perhaps sensibly blinked first and withdrew the missiles and the soviet fleet turned round.

Despite the vision, and the passion and the super-human commitment of the Cuban people, and the almost love affair with the youth of the world who seen Cuba as *our* revolution not a revolution of grey men, in great coats in furry hats and sour faces, but of music, and tee-shirts long hair, beards , drums and cigars, of what we thought was a *free* socialism and real and sincere attempt at winning the communist world revolution for the impoverished and disposed of the planet. Despite all that, Cuba lived by the generosity of the Russian state aid and subsidies and being 80% of cuba's export market and sole supplier of its oil. Cuba's attempts at industrialisation and self-sufficiency failed, Cuba could only live and survive in a big world, especially with the other islands and countries of the region who in all ways complimented it. Cuba for all the slogans and flags and music was NOT a worker's democracy, it was a party and presidential dictatorship. The Committee's in Defence of the Revolution which many European socialists seen as 'soviet' were all in important matters simply consultative and advisory, power lay with the party and the party president.

In the opening days and years of the revolution political factions and tendencies were tolerated, the Trotskyist Revolutionary Workers Party ran a legal paper and had an open address until the late 60's and then went through a series of repressions in and out of jail, with the paper legal and then banned. The Anarchist Syndicalist union had been popular in Havana and some small cities and it continued largely supportive of the revolution it campaigned for real workers control, until the axe came down, some were jailed, some disappeared many fled.

Morality in Cuba was in first flush of the revolution in line with the prevailing trends of youth in the 60's around the world and sensible attitudes prevailed toward sex and teenagers, although contraception was NOT freely available or so far as I could tell (I worked there as a volunteer in construction) promoted. Cuba had despite its strong Catholic influence and traditional Voodoo variants always been sexually liberal, homosexuality had not been illegal, until ironically support from the crumbling 'Soviet Union' started to dry up and they looked to China. China made the quid quo pro for assistance the imposition of repressive sexual codes the age of sexual consent was raised to three years older than the rest of Latin America and homosexuality for the first time became illegal.

After the collapse of the USSR Cuba could have curled into a ball and died, but didn't, it entered a 'new period' where it tried without throwing the baby out with the bath water to adapt, to move toward tourism as a major source of foreign currency. It introduced visionary oil discovery schemes with BP and other major oil companies who did the discovery and development for free in exchange for a percentage of the oil production. Some small scale capitalism was being allowed, internal house sales, taxi businesses, professional services. Fidel hated this imposition which had been forced upon him. Wealth ownership in Cuba had been strictly regulated at 1/5 so there were no super rich and no super poor. Now the \$ economy the tourist tip the backhander the chancer started to shift for all time the way in which labour was undertaken. Why should workers volunteer to work extra shifts for no money to build the country, while waiters and bar staff were earning more money in tips than surgeons earned in the hospitals and engineers earned in the oil field or copper

mine?

As Fidel declined in health and one by one the old revolutionaries and revolutionary vision died and became distorted more pragmatic voices began to emerge. Raul a pragmatic man let us say (anyone who has read my book The Wheel's Still In Spin will know me and him had severe crossed political words, to the extent I feared I would never be allowed back into the country, a mistaken fear I am pleased to say as we (me and my family) love the country and the people) told Obama everything was open to discussion and everything was on the table. When I spoke to Cuban people more recently I got the same sort of feedback I was getting near the end of the 84/5 strike from diehard miners here. It had been worth a go, worth risking all for, but we had fought to a standstill, they had nothing, they needed change, the bottom line none negotiable items were a) Independence, they do not wish to be part of the USA or a puppet state b) Their free public health care system c) Free public education system. Anything else is open for at least discussion although I doubt anyone in the streets of Havana or anywhere else will be waiting for the Mafia, and the gangsters to return.

So farewell comrade Fidel, a brave and sincere revolutionary who held out as the tide of world revolution changed and the multinational imperialism of the west returned to dominate us all, despite brave attempts to dint it Venezuela and Peru and elsewhere. As I say in my book, the wheel was indeed still in spin, but it didn't stop in the high tide years of the 60's and 70's when the revolution was pushing all before it, it spun on and arrived further back than we had been in the 50's.

Where will the next vision come from which new flash point which new brave attempt at constructing a different way of living with humanitarian and egalitarian and communist values?

I don't know, but what I do know is it WILL turn again, and next time we must learn the lessons, revolutions must always belong to the people themselves, authority and control must stay with the people en-mass themselves, even the most colourful and charismatic leader must never be allowed to usurp that principle.

Venceremos! Comrade Castro

The Fire lit on that Cuban beach by Fidel Castro

It shines all the way to Terra-Del-Fuego

The sparks are flying in the breeze

Men rise up from off their knees when they see the night is burning

And it lights up in Venezuela
Bolivia and Guatemala
Marks the way that men should go in order to free
On Companero's Americano's
For a peoples free America Fidel has marked the way with Che Guevara
(Ewan MacColl)