

## THE CUBA MOMENT IS FINALLY RIPE, AND OTTAWA ISN'T SEIZING IT

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As I write these words, the television in my home in Havana is broadcasting images of U.S. President Barack Obama emerging from Air Force One and stepping onto Cuban soil. The symbolism is enormous. This is a historic moment for the Cuban government, for Mr. Obama's foreign-policy legacy and for the people of Cuba and the United States. But the visit should also serve as a wake-up call for Canada.

Mr. Obama's arrival in Havana does not mean the sudden end of the Cold War's longest standoff. The U.S. embargo still needs to be lifted by Congress, and the Cuban government needs to continue to move forward in its economic reform process and political evolution on its own terms and without foreign meddling. A great deal still needs to be done, and this will take time. Still, most people who "kind of" understand Cuba (nobody really understands Cuba, not even the Cubans themselves) recognize that a new relationship between the United States and Cuba can now be clearly seen on the horizon. Catalyzed by this new relationship, an economically more prosperous Cuba will emerge during our lifetimes and dominate the Caribbean.

This is also a historic opportunity for Canada. More than any industrialized Western country, Canada has established a long-term special relationship with Cuba. Under the visionary leadership of Conservative prime minister John Diefenbaker, Canada refused to isolate Cuba, as the United States pressured us to do. Liberal prime minister Pierre Trudeau deepened Canada's relationship with Cuba, through his passionate defence of Canadian sovereignty, his belief in multilateral diplomacy and his courageous visit to Cuba in the 1970s. We should not forget the significance of Fidel Castro being an honorary pallbearer at Mr. Trudeau's funeral in Montreal.

From Day 1, Canada has maintained an open economic engagement and a respectful and

pragmatic relationship with the Communist island. Cuba has deeply appreciated Canada's position. More than any other North Atlantic Treaty Organization country, Canada has won the trust of Cuba's government and the warmth of its people.

And here is where the paradox lies. At the precise moment that incredible business opportunities will be emerging in Cuba at an accelerating pace, Canada is not taking advantage of its unique relationship and the political and social capital it has built.

As U.S. companies stand frustrated on the sidelines, Chinese, Russian, Brazilian and European companies are eagerly negotiating deals to build hotels, expand airports, produce medicines and manufacture goods in Cuba's special economic zone of Mariel. These companies have the political and financial backing of their respective governments and the luxury of being able to establish themselves in Cuba before U.S. competition is allowed in.

Unfortunately, Canadian companies cannot currently count on the same political support. Of course, many Canadian companies are already in Cuba and doing well. But, as a Havana-based business consultant for Gowling WLG, I have heard many Canadian businesspeople lament the fact that, without Ottawa's backing, it's tough for Canadian enterprises to compete against other countries. Canadian companies have complained that our export-development corporation has been overcautious and hesitant about Cuba. They are frustrated that a bilateral investment treaty has not yet been negotiated.

Let's be clear: Canadian companies are not looking for government handouts or even financing; they simply need a level playing field. Access to guarantees and country risk insurance, for instance, would open the door to additional sources of funding from Canadian banks and other institutions.

Although former prime minister Stephen Harper never stopped Canadian investment in Cuba, neither did he actively facilitate it. Now, Canada has a new government, undertaking bold initiatives around the world. One would expect Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to take a fresh look at Cuba. Now is the time for our new government to ensure it is aggressively and solidly behind Canadian companies that want to trade and invest in one of the world's most promising emerging markets.

For more than 70 years, Canada has been at the front of the line, ready to engage with Cuba, and more than any other country, Canada deserves to benefit from its prosperous economic future. It would be a pity if we allowed other countries, including the United States, to push in line in front of us, right when the moment is ripe for investing and trading with Cuba. Mr. Obama's visit underscores the urgent need for Ottawa to act quickly and

decisively in support of Canadian businesses looking to succeed in the Cuban market.

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