

## On Meeting Fidel

Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin berated the news media for having "power without responsibility - the prerogative of the harlot through the ages," a charge that he borrowed from Kipling.

When it comes to the Cuban revolution the news media has followed the guidelines from the Washington Consensus and treated Cuba as a breakaway province of the USA. Not as a sovereign nation which can choose their own leaders and their own social system. And so we in the third world have only been bombarded with one image of Cuba.

In an interview with Jorge Luis Garcia Carneiro, Chief of Defence Staff of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela Rosa Elizalde asked him the following question, to which he responded:

General, many Venezuelan military leaders studied in the United States and had a very prejudiced attitude towards Cuba. Is that still the case, or has it changed?

"Governments prior to Chavez,s fostered a deeply hostile attitude toward the Cuban government. I was lucky enough to go to Cuba a year ago. It was the first time I visited the island and I saw some very nice things, a sense of justice and living conditions which the majority of Venezuelans don't have. I realized it was not the hell that they had spoken about for so many years in Venezuela.

I was able to see, with my own eyes, what a revolution is and how a country with few resources can develop. People live in peace, have a good education system, a good network of hospitals, social justice; things that we really don't have here. You look at Venezuela, with so many resources, so much money, and see the majority of the people living in poverty. Eighty per cent of the population is beneath the poverty line. That has absolutely no justification."

In 1783, soon after the US declaration of independence, a leading Spanish courtier, the Count of Aranda, dispatched an astonishingly prescient memorandum to his monarch, warning against the folly of trying to hold on to the colonies by force, advocating home rule and predicting the eventual rise of the United States:

"Great possessions cannot be held forever. The present situation is rendered more difficult by the enormous distances, which hampers the dispatch of help, by the slowness of the authorities, and the selfishness of government... That pygmy republic (US), which today needs France and Spain to exist at all, will one day grow into a colossus, will forget all the benefits it has received at the hands of both powers, and will dream only of might. The freedom of conscience, the growth of a huge population in that vast territory, the advantages of the new government, will draw workmen and peasants from all countries, for men pursue success, and the time will come when we shall painfully feel the tyranny of the giant. It will then attempt to get Florida and the Gulf of Mexico into its power, will hamper our trade with New Spain and will attempt to conquer it, since the two countries are strong and adjacent, while we shall hardly be able to defend it. These apprehensions, Sire, are only too well founded, unless their realisation is forestalled by other, yet graver changes in our parts of America. Everything will combine to urge our subjects to fight for their independence at the earliest opportunity.

We should therefore give up all our possessions, retaining only Cuba and Puerto Rico in the north and a small part of the south to provide us with ports for our trade."

Simon Bolivar was a little boy when this letter was written. Had the King followed this advice, Latin America would have been the great power it deserves to be.

When Cuba was fighting the South Africans in Angola the Carter administration sent an envoy to Fidel with an offer: If the Cubans withdrew their troops from Angola, the US would lift the embargo. Castro's response was characteristic:

" There should be no mistake - we cannot be pressured, impressed, bribed or bought...Perhaps because the US is a great power, it feels it can do what it wants and what is good for it. It seems to be saying that there are two laws, two sets of rules and two kinds of logic, one for the US and one for other countries. Perhaps it is idealistic of me but I never accepted the universal prerogatives of the US - I never accepted and never will accept the existence of a different law and different rules ... I hope history will bear witness to the shame of the United States which for twenty years has not allowed sales of medicines needed to save lives."

The Cuban presence in Angola broke the back of apartheid and secured the independence of Namibia. Nelson Mandela's first port of call after his release from 28 years of prison in South Africa was an emotional visit to Havana to pay homage to Cuban internationalism: "We come here with a sense of the great debt that is owed the people of Cuba.... What other country can point to a record of greater selflessness than Cuba has displayed in its relations to Africa."

Very few people are so well known by their first names as the two heroes of the Cuban revolution. Any part of the world when you mention the name Fidel most people know that you mean Fidel Castro. The same goes for El "Che", the Argentinean doctor Ernesto Guevara who helped Fidel overthrow the dictator Fulgencio Batista.

I spent my teenage years in a Boystown on Curacao (1955-1960). Those were also the years of political turmoil on Cuba. Radio stations were few and far between in those days.

Curacao had the Dutch Station Curom and the dictator Trujillo had a powerful station in Santo Domingo and the Venezuelan dictator Perez Jimenez had a couple of stations in his country. Those boys were not about to give positive news about a revolution in Cuba. And so we were dependent on the Curom and the Amigoe as well as La Prensa for our news about Cuba.

It was very exciting for us to follow the news in the last weeks before the overthrow of Batista and the aftermath. I guess it is from that time that I drank from the waters of confrontation.

To a third world emerging from centuries of slavery and colonialism Fidel and Che were considered heroes because they challenged "The Man". They stamped on his foot and gave him a sore toe at least.

While living on St.Maarten people assumed that I knew Fidel and had been to Cuba. In those days I was always dressed like a Cuban revolutionary. I remember once criticizing a trip which then Union Leader Rene Richardson had made to Cuba. Rene did not forget me.

He was on television the next day telling people:" Lord, of all people Will Johnson to say this. Every other weekend this man is down in Cuba with his friend Fidel."

Not so, but nobody knew. In 1976, in Jamaica I got a visa to go to Cuba. I learned to appreciate genealogy then. This was before Alex Haley's "Roots" I believe. To get the visa a telegram had to be sent to England, then to Cuba, back to England and back to

Jamaica.. All four of my grandparents names, dates of birth and death had to filled in on the form. The Counsel was quite impressed that I knew all of that. We became friends and later on he was a Member of the Cuban Assembly. I met him in different countries when I was a member of Parlatino. Brazil, Argentina, Peru etc. My colleagues from Curacao were always quite impressed when my firend from Cuba would rush and give me a big abrazo and say: Ola mi gran amigo Johnson, como esta?"

I also got Papa Godet in trouble on that trip. He was Minister at the time and leading our delegation to Carifesta in Jamaica. He was sitting in the lobby of the Pegasus Hotel where we were staying. He and Moenchin Soleana asked to come along when they heard I was headed down to the Cuban embassy to pick up my visa. The ambassador offerd Papa to send a Cuban band to Curacao which he did the following year.

The Democrats used this against Papa and he had a huge setback in the elections. Anyway I was Commissioner then. The Curacao press in Jamaica had gotten wind of my intentions. "Papie" Jesurun advised me not to go. Michael Manley provided a good excuse as we were invited to lunch at the Prime Minister's residence the next day. The Ambassador was upset but accepted my excuse as he too was at the same lunch. I promised him I would visit Cuba on another occasion.

The problem is not Fidel. It is Cuba. If Fidel had pulled off the same stunt in an African country or Haiti or Pakistan, very few people in the USA would have cared. What Wayne S. Smith wrote in "Portrait of Cuba" is a fact. He wrote: "Cuba seems to have the same effect on American Administrations that the full moon used to have on werewolves."

Cuba from Columbus on down has been described as the most beautiful country human eyes have ever beheld. One of my uncles sailed for over forty years to all parts of the world. He was on a supply ship in the Sea of Japan when the Japanese mainland was bombed shortly after Pearl Harbour. He had seen all parts of the world. Sitting with him on the airport in St.Maarten once I asked him of all the countries he had visited which was to him the most beautiful. Without hesitation he replied:"Cuba."

I would like to quote from a few famous visitors to Cuba:

Richard Henry Dana, Jr. Havana 1859: " Have I ever seen a city so grand? The view of Quebec from the foot of the Montmorenci Falls may rival, but does not excel it. My preference is for this."

John Muir, Havana, 1868: " Havana abounds in public squares, which in all my random strolls throughout the big town I found to be well watered, well cared for, well planted, and full of exceedingly showy and interesting plants, rare even amid the exhaustless luxuriance of Cuba."

Anais Nin, Havana, 1922;" I have been transported to Fairyland, I now live in an Enchanted Palace! All my sadness and apprehension fled the moment I caught sight of Havana."

When I stayed at the Riveiera Hotel, all hours of the night I would see people below sitting on the seawall along the Malecon. I wanted to join them. Pico Iyer, 1992 wrote: "Sometimes, when I go out at night and sit on the seawall alone, feeling the spray of the salt, the faint strumming of acoustic guitars, carried on the wind, and the broad empty boulevards sweeping along the lovely curve of Havana Bay, I feel that I could never know a greater happiness."

When I did go to Cuba in 1997 I confounded the immigration. I had a diplomatic passport but was on a private trip. All the generals of immigration were called in to assist the young immigration officer. Much consultation went on. No one asked me a question. Finally my passport was handed back and I was told "Welcome to Cuba."

I was there when the remains of Ernesto "Che" Guevara were returned from Bolivia to be interred in a monument in Santa Clara.

I did not meet Fidel on that trip either. I met him in the year 2002 at a Unesco conference on education. The conference was nearly over. My wife and I were intending to go downtown Havana to take one last look around.

The Minister of Education Mr. Gomez must have seen on my face that I was on my way out and said to me: "Johnson, I would advise you to stay for the ceremonial closing of the conference." By the look on his face, I said to myself; "Fidel himself is going to close off the conference."

There are those who don't like to hear what is obvious. Fidel Castro, love him or hate him, is one of the towering personalities of the 20th century. I concluded that downtown Havana could wait till tomorrow. I wanted to see Fidel.

I could see from the excitement of the delegates and the reporters that somehow they too knew that Fidel was going to be there.

And then as we were all seated again, he entered through a side door without being recognized by the person speaking. Fidel is a tall man. An impressive man even if he was not Fidel. He moved down the side behind people already sitting there. People were already snapping photo's. When he sat down you could sense that he was surveying the people in the room.

When he finally got up to speak, Roy Smith said to me: "Man he sounding weak." I answered;"Roy when he catches his breath, you will have lost your lunch," It was twelve o'clock and we had been invited by the Minister to have lunch at one of the beautiful villa's formerly belonging to the Mafia. Four hours later, after rattling off all statistics on each and every school in Cuba, Fidel finally allowed us to leave for lunch at 4pm. But not before a photo session. Ms. Marcella Hazel's camera was the only one with film. I had used up mine already. Fidel was stormed by especially the Latin American delegates. The young red head Brazilian Minister threw herself in his arms lying back as if she had fainted. Fidel ate it all up. The Brazilian photographers went crazy.

Finally our turn came. When Fidel put his arms around my wife Lynne, I said to him: "Commandante, es una gringa. Es mucha tiempo que usted no abraza una gringa verdad? He looked at me perplexed and said: "Es una gringa de berdad? " And then we both laughed and he looked amused. So many photo's were taken, but only Marcella's survived.

After that he left. Lynne and I passed at the Hotel National the following night to see a huge rally in front of the interests building of the USA. We went down on the Malecon among the 250.000 strong crowd. There was Fidel walking among the people while the young people on the podium were blasting US policies on powerful microphones. No one tried to shoot him. People were excited to see him and talk to him one on one. I asked myself how many leaders of Western countries could walk among a crowd like that and socialize as if they were all aunts, uncles, and cousins?

Cuba gets cold fronts at times. We were staying at the Hemingway Yacht club. He is the third hero of communist Cuba and everywhere you go you are reminded of Hemingway.

I was surprised at how cold it was. The final day of our stay while walking around in downtown Havana. Lynne and I took a horse and carriage ride, and the guide knew the history of every important building we passed. As we left the Prado and came on to the Malecon, the wind was blowing hard and I held on to my hat. I fancied that I heard people shouting out my name. I said to myself; " My imagination is running away with me. Who would know me in Cuba?" So I did not say anything to my wife.

A week later Roy was coming up the stairs to my office, laughing, while shouting out at me;" General, you did not hear me and Franklin shouting out at you?" Turns out it was he and Franklin Wilson walking on the Malecon. When I turned on to the Malecon from the Prado, holding on to my hat, Franklin said" Man that could only be Will Johnson." The next day they too tried the horse and buggy ride.

And so that is how I met Fidel.

I could end the story here but there are other tales connected to this story which cannot remain untold.

Once when I was a bachelor I had a checkbook from Nova Scotia Bank, I think. I had won five hundred guilders and got a checkbook. It was depleted the same day. A bachelor mind you in St. Maarten at that time. I decided to put the remaining blank checks to good use. Bill Hunter had told people that he knew for a fact that I was financed by Castro. And so I wrote out a check to myself for eleven thousand dollars. I gave it to Allan Busby who worked at Hunter House at the time. Allan told Hunter that I had asked him to hold the check until I got back from Antigua. Hunter must have looked at Fidel's signature on the check for over an hour, and was totally convinced. So much so that he could not wait to pass on the news to Claude and the boys about the check. He made some flimsy excuse about going to town to buy supplies and rushed to Claude's office to tell about the check.

So you see you cannot believe everything you hear or read. I must say though that I got closer to Fidel than many have.

Cuba may be a problem for some, but it has provided good health care, and education for its people. While there we visited a teachers training college. There were 4500 students and 450 professors. And what a group of wonderful young people we met there. Cuba also helps the world with doctors.

The Latin American School of Medicine established in 1999 is situated in a stunning location on the sea. This medical university -there are twenty-one others on the island - is for foreign students only. There are 12,000 students from 83 countries studying medicine in Cuba, including South America (5,500), Central America (3,244), Mexico (489), the United States (65) and Puerto Rico (2). The Caribbean, with (1,039 students, and sub-Saharan Africa (777) are also represented, while 42 students come from Northern Africa and the Middle East, 261 from Asia and two from Europe. In Venezuela 17,000 medical students are being trained by Cuban doctors. Out of a population of 12 million, between 800,000 and 1 million graduates are produced by Cuban universities every year. (source Tariq Ali, Pirates of the Caribbean, Axis of Hope);

On that same trip we went on a private tour up into the hills about an hour from Havana. We visited an old coffee plantation which was owned by a French planter who had fled the revolution in Haiti two hundred years ago. We were touring the tropical fruit

trees below the old plantation house. Suddenly we heard the piano being played. I said to our driver, "Whoever is playing that piano surely knows what they are doing." When we got back inside there was a man playing the piano while his wife and small children stood next to it looking on. Our driver got very excited and told us it was Polo Montanez - Cuba's most famous singer. He obliged us and allowed us to have our driver take several photographs with him. We also bought one of his CD's from a fruit stand on our way back to Havana.

My nephew Dan saw the CD at my office a few days later. He said that Montanez was the top singer in Colombia at the moment and was surprised that I had met him. When Dan left the office and the Daily Herald had been delivered I saw a photo of Polo Montanez and started reading the article. Sad to say that within twenty four hours from when we had met him he had been killed in a traffic accident. Really in the midst of life we are in death.

This is not an endorsement of anything. My driver said his father hated Fidel because he had business ambitions, but that his mother and grandmother would kill for him because they appreciated the educational and health care benefits the revolution had brought to them. Nicolas Guillen (1902-1989) the renown Cuban poet put his own touch to the Cuban revolution in the poem "I have" 1964:

When I see and touch myself,  
I, Juan with Nothing only yesterday,  
and Juan with Everything today,  
and today with everything,  
I turn my eyes and look,  
I see and touch myself,  
and ask myself, how this could have been.

I have, let's see,  
I have the pleasure of going about my country,  
owner of all there is in it,  
looking closely at what  
I did not or could not have before.  
I can say cane,  
I can say mountain,  
I can say city,  
say army.  
now forever mine and yours, ours,  
and the vast splendor of  
the sunbeam, star, flower.

I have, let's see,  
I have the pleasure of going,  
me, a farmer, a worker, a simple man,  
I have the pleasure of going  
(just an example)  
to a bank and speak to the manager,  
not in English,

not in 'Sir', But in companero as we say in Spanish.

I have, let's see,  
that being Black  
no one can stop me at the door of a dance hall or bar.  
Or even on the rug of a hotel  
scream at me that there are no rooms,  
a small room and not a colossal one,  
a tiny room where I can rest.

I have, let's see,  
that there are no rural police  
to seize me and lock me in a precinct jail,  
or tear me from my land and cast me  
in the middle of the highway.

I have that having the land I have the sea,  
no country clubs.  
no high life,  
no tennis and no yachts,  
but, from beach to beach and wave to wave,  
gigantic but open democratic:  
in short the sea.

I have let's see,  
that I have learned to read,  
to count,  
I have that I have learned to write,  
and to think,  
and to laugh,  
I have....that now I have  
a place to work  
and earn  
what I have to eat.  
I have, let's see,  
I have what I had to have.

When Great Britain and Argentina were fighting over the Falkland islands the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges was asked what he thought about it. He loved both countries and answered that it reminded him of two bald men fighting over a comb.

When the Soviet Union and the USA were about to go to war over Cuba it would have been more than two bald men fighting over a comb. Cuba as Columbus said is the most lovely island human eyes have ever beheld.

And finally with tourism back as the mainstay of the economy certain traditions have returned. What Langston Hughes said of Havana in 1930, with the right connections of course, may still happen to you today.

" A group of young business and professional men of Havana once gave a rumba party in my honor. It was not unlike an American fraternity or lodge smoker - except that women were present. The women were not, however, wives or sweethearts of the gentlemen giving the rumba. Far from it."

Will Johnson