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Chair

The Honourable Jason Kenney

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● (1105)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Jason Kenney (Calgary Southeast, CPC)): *Bonjour.* Good morning, *mesdames et messieurs*.

Ladies and gentlemen, I call to order this meeting.

[*Translation*]

Today the Subcommittee on National Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development will hear from a number of witnesses as we continue our study of the human rights situation in Cuba.

I would like to begin by thanking His Excellency, Ambassador Pavel Vosalik, of the Czech Republic, who is here with his First Secretary, Karel Hejc.

[*English*]

Your Excellencies, thank you so much for taking the time to join us and provide us with the European perspective on this issue. We'll begin with you.

As eminent parliamentarian and former member of this committee—among other things—Mr. Broadbent knows all too well that we begin with statements. We ask witnesses to keep them to ten minutes, if possible, and then we have rounds of questions by members.

Ambassador, once more, with gratitude for your coming, please proceed.

His Excellency Pavel Vosalik (Ambassador, Embassy of the Czech Republic): Thank you very much, sir.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for the extraordinary privilege to address you on this very important issue of the protection and promotion of human rights.

I would like to remind you that I come from a country that has suffered for over 40 years under the very tough totalitarian regime of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. This is the background of the foreign policy of the Czech Republic as well. I have to say that human rights are the essential principle of the foreign policy of the Czech Republic, which is actually going through the whole new history of my country.

When I'm asked to talk about our policy towards Cuba, I have to say that our policy towards Cuba has nothing to do with the special attention paid by the Czech Republic to this country. It has to do with the fact that the Czech Republic is paying very special attention to the issue of the protection and promotion of human rights and democracy.

I have to say that we've had this topic in our priorities since the very beginning of the new history of my country in 1990. At that time, it was very closely connected with the former President of Czechoslovakia and later on the President of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel. His philosophy in this field was that the Czech Republic of the former Czechoslovakia had the obligation to share our experience of a totalitarian regime in Czechoslovakia with other members of international communities who share the same values of human rights and democracy.

When the Czech government decided to send our military forces to Afghanistan, the decision was based on exactly the same principles of protecting and promoting human rights. The basic principles of our policy were the same with other countries, and I'll mention Belarus or Myanmar in particular. The Czechoslovakian experience with a totalitarian regime, particularly with the transformation of the society from a totalitarian regime to a democracy, is something we bring as our contribution to international discussions on human rights.

The Czech Republic was and still is very actively participating in the work of various international organizations focused on human rights at the regional level, as well as at the global level. At the regional level, we are very active members of the Council of Europe, our organization for safety and cooperation in Europe. At the global level, the Czech Republic very actively participated in UN discussions on the transformation of the Commission on Human Rights into the Human Rights Council of the United Nations.

In terms of our discussion with Cuba, from the very beginning in our policy, I have to say the essential interest of my government was for open dialogue on human rights, the protection of human rights, conflict, or the compatibility of the protection of human rights with a regime connected to Communist ideology.

Our position is that no one country in the world could easily say it doesn't have a problem with human rights. Every country has these problems. This is not the criterion we should use for judging whether a country is or is not a good pupil in terms of the protection of human rights. The criteria should be on how far the country is open to dialogue, how far the country is open to discussions about its problem, and how far the country is committed to its international commitments under international agreements.

If we all share the same values incorporated within the various documents of the United Nations, and I'm talking particularly about protection on a global level, then we have to be sure we are talking in the same language, we are protecting the same values, and we share the same views on the protection of human rights.

● (1110)

In terms of Cuba, I have to say that unfortunately all of our efforts to establish some dialogue—we didn't want to solve the problem, we wanted to talk about the problem—were simply rejected. There is no dialogue, and what we received from the Cuban side was repression against the Czech embassy in Havana.

But I have to say that if we are serious in our efforts to promote human rights, regardless of where human rights could be or are violated, if it's in the territory of the Czech Republic or Belarus or Afghanistan, then we have to use the same measure for all members of the international community.

Ladies and gentlemen, today we are seriously discussing the role of the Human Rights Council of the United Nations. Very often we hear some complaints that the role this body is playing is not as important as it should be. We are listening to some complaints about the low efficiency of these institutions. But these institutions are us and no one else. It is member states. And if member states of this institution of the Human Rights Council—before it was the Committee on Human Rights—reject following the principles made by this organization, and these organizations are bodies accepting it, then we can't be surprised that the prestige of this institution is low.

When the former Commissioner on Human Rights of the United Nations decided to establish the role of the position of special rapporteur for Cuba, Cuba as the member state rejected talking to this special rapporteur and didn't even allow her to enter the country. So what do we expect?

I want to say that the policy of my country on Cuba—and today the Czech Republic is one of the leading UN countries focused on the situation in Cuba—has nothing to do with animosity. It has nothing to do with some problem with the regime in Cuba. We want to talk. We want to talk about the situation. We want to see some progress. We don't expect to solve it right now, but we need to see that there is goodwill in the official bodies of Cuba to solve the situation.

I don't want to talk too long, but I want to remind you of who the bodies are that are protected by all these international agreements for human rights. They are not governments; they are the individuals living in these countries. When we are sending our guys to be ready to offer the highest sacrifice for the protection and promotion of human rights in Afghanistan, at that moment my government feels totally obliged to ask and to force other governments to respect the essential principles of the international community on human rights and democracy.

Cuba has no excuse. The Cuban government has the same commitment to the international community as the others. The Czech Republic, as a country with its dark experience and history, feels not only obliged but totally committed to promoting these values and these principles. What we are offering is our experience. It's our experience of transformation of our society, with our success, with our mistakes, faults, and the wrong steps that we've done. As I've already said, we are not closing doors for any discussion about the human rights situation in the Czech Republic.

● (1115)

We know about the weaknesses. We know about the problems we have to solve, but this is the way we should work together. The role of international organizations is to focus on human rights.

Cuba, for us, is going through the same experience we went through 20 years ago. So we feel we are in a position to talk about this, to offer our experience.

From this point of view, of course, the Czech Republic is cooperating very closely with the opposition inside Cuba. Our embassy in Havana in particular cooperates very closely when various groups—it's difficult to say NGOs—focus on civil society. We cooperate closely with exiles in the United States. That's the role of our ambassador in Washington. We are in contact with various opposition groups in Latin America.

When I was deputy minister for foreign affairs in charge of human rights, I travelled frequently around Latin America, because we wanted to make this problem not a Czech-Cuban problem but a regional problem. Other countries should see the difference and should talk about this.

Of course, there is opposition in Europe as well, which is mostly located in Spain, so this is another group of opposition members.

What I should maybe say as my last remarks is that our former President, Václav Havel, is personally very much involved in various non-governmental organizations and movements focused on promotion and protection of human rights, not only in Cuba, but Cuba as well.

And once again I say our policy toward Cuba is not a particular policy toward one country. This is not a bilateral problem. Our policy is based on respect for these global values and principles.

● (1120)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ambassador. Thank you for your attendance, and I'm sure we can get into more detail on the Cuban policy with questions from members.

I'll now turn to the very distinguished former parliamentarian, who is also the founding and former president of the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, and a former member of this committee of whom we are all very fond.

Thank you, Mr. Broadbent, for taking the time to come before us to talk about an issue about which I recall you have some involvement and knowledge. Thank you very much.

Hon. Ed Broadbent (As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to begin by saying that it's a delight to be back with former colleagues representing all parties. When I was here recently, we had I think a high degree of inter-party cooperation, particularly on human rights, and therefore it's a great pleasure for me to be here on this occasion.

I'll read a brief statement that I've written this morning, and I'm sure it will be within the timeframe, and then later on perhaps there will be some questions.

It's almost 50 years since Fidel Castro came to power. His situation at the time was a real revolution, supported at that time by most democrats, I add, throughout the world. Unlike my friends from Czechoslovakia, or the Poles or the Baltic states, who had so-called real socialism imposed on them or maintained by the presence of the Red Army, the revolution in Cuba originally was, I would contend, an authentic revolution against a very repressive regime. In the intervening period, seen through the lens of the United Nations system of rights—that is to say, civil, political, economic, and social—the results have been mixed.

On the one hand, significant and ongoing progress in some social rights—for example, in health and literacy—has been real in Cuba; in fact, remarkable progress compared with the vast majority of Latin American countries. At one point recently, according to UN data—if I remember correctly, and I think I do—the infant mortality rate in Cuba was in fact better than that in the United States.

On the other hand, for the vast majority of the intervening decades since that revolution, there has been a gross denial of political and civil rights, particularly of but not restricted to freedom of expression, freedom of association, and freedom of assembly. Neither are there free and independent parties, except for the Communist Party, nor are there free and independent unions.

As reported by Amnesty International, Reporters Without Borders, and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, among many others, in the past few years political and civil rights, if anything, have deteriorated in Cuba. Along with China, the Cuban government has the dubious record of being one of the most repressive regimes for journalists and access to the Internet. I give those as modern examples.

A variety of reasons have been given in an attempt to justify this repression. Most notably, throughout the decades the United States economic embargo has been seen by some to warrant denial of rights in Cuba. While I believe this U.S. policy has rightly been opposed by Canada, and I believe by virtually all members of the European Union, it cannot justify the ongoing denial of rights by the Cuban government. On the contrary, I believe a free Cuba in every sense of the implementation of the whole family of UN rights, would provide a robustly democratic and popular defence against the U.S. embargo and in defence of the Cuban nation.

The reality is that the harmful and unwarranted aggression aimed at Cuba by a succession of U.S. governments has provided President Castro with a propaganda weapon he uses to justify his demands for the virtual total obedience he expects of the Cuban people and total submission to his political priorities. As many observers, including Americans, have pointed out, the removal of the U.S. embargo and the establishment of the free flow of goods and people between the United States and Cuba would be one of the most democratic and effective pressures to put on Fidel Castro to establish the whole range of freedoms within his own country.

As a social democrat, I praise the Cuban government for its emphasis on certain social and economic rights, not only for its own people but also, I add, for assistance to others in Latin America. However, equally as a social democrat, I deplore the denial of political and civil rights.

Soon after the Second World War, the distinguished and courageous Albert Camus, winner of the Nobel Prize in literature, spoke to a group of workers outside Paris. I want, Mr. Chairman, to quote what Camus had to say. He was, I emphasize, speaking in a war that was against one form of totalitarianism and increasingly aware of the totalitarian nature of the Soviet Union.

● (1125)

What Albert Camus had to say then is I think directly relevant to the world today, and in particular because we're talking about the Cuba of today. Here's what he said, and I emphasize again that he was speaking to a group of workers outside of Paris. I quote:

> If someone takes away your bread, he suppresses your freedom at the same time. But if someone takes away your freedom, you may be sure that your bread is threatened, for it depends no longer on you and your struggle but on the whim of a master.

Someone should mail that, perhaps every day.... I understand that someone has been mailing the Prime Minister books. Someone should mail this quote, perhaps, to Fidel Castro once a week. I don't want to be facetious, though. I'll continue.

I want to be able to have time later to respond, as well as your other guests, to questions. Therefore, I want to conclude with a brief story.

As the president of Rights and Democracy in 1991, I met with Fidel Castro to discuss the question of rights and democracy within Cuba. I brought to him a proposition, supported at that time by many social democratic leaders of governments, including Felipe González of Spain, Carlos Andrés Pérez of Venezuela, Michael Manley in Jamaica, and a number of others. In 1992 there was to be scheduled a meeting in Madrid of all the heads of Latin American governments, as well, of course, as the host country, being Spain itself, with the host being Felipe González.

The Americans, not being Latinos, were not invited. Therefore, the proposal that was made, which I discussed with Mr. Castro, was in fact to present him with a challenge. The challenge was that he should announce an opening of the political process in Cuba, including the extension of political and civil rights, while he was at Madrid. If he did so, a whole group of leaders and heads of government in western Europe at that time—and some, as I've already indicated, here in the Americas—were quite prepared to take economic and social matters that would more than compensate for the negative effects of the American embargo.

Well, after three and a half hours of argument with Mr. Castro, the conclusion, which became clear early in the conversation, was that there was no way Mr. Castro was going to respond. Illustrative of his own attitude towards political and civil rights, I regret to say, was a case of one Elizardo Sanchez, who was a member of the social democratic movement, and exiled then in Cuba, a man I knew well. What was going on in Havana not long before I went was that because of the political opposition that Mr. Sanchez had raised—by the way, I add that he was not critical at all of most of what Castro had done in social and economic matters, obviously—in calling for political and civil rights, one of the defensive neighbourhood committees that are set up for the so-called defence of the revolution, day after day, 24 hours a day, were beating pots and pans outside the residence of Mr. Sanchez' elderly mother, who was quite elderly, in her home in Havana. A total state of harassment; unpardonable, unacceptable harassment.

When I raised this instance with Mr. Castro as an illustration of a man, Mr. Sanchez, who in fact supported much of what Mr. Castro had achieved—I repeat, in social and economic rights but was quite critical of the failure up to that point to open up in terms of political and civil rights—Mr. Castro said, and I quote, “He is a worm”, end of quote. That was illustrative of his attitude, I regret to say again, towards political and civil rights.

I want to conclude with this anecdote. I will be very happy to discuss with members of the committee perhaps some policy options that should be taken to encourage the flourishing, at some point, of political and civil rights in Cuba.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

● (1130)

The Chair: Thank you for that compelling testimony. I think you're the only person we've had at the committee who's spent several hours in the company of Mr. Castro. So I think you bring a particular insightful perspective, Mr. Broadbent. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

I will now give the floor to Mr. Guillermo Sambra Ferrandiz, who, I believe, has had some personal experience with the regime.

Mr. Ferrandiz.

[*English*]

Mr. Guillermo Sambra Ferrandiz (As an Individual): First of all, thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to be here. I'm Cuban, and what happened to me in Cuba was really bad. So I'm really happy right now that we're talking about Cuba, about the situation we have in Cuba right now.

In 1990, I was only 20 years old, and based on the situation within my country I felt it was my duty to protest. But I knew that protesting against the government was like putting myself in jail right away, so I decided to go and start distributing propaganda against the regime, against the government propaganda, papers and things that we.... I say “we” because I belonged to a group, and we decided to fight for democracy in Cuba, to change the political system, to try to change the economic system.

The economic system is brutal in Cuba. It's a blockade that we have. The Cubans have a blockade from the government. The government is blockading the whole country. So nobody can do business. Nobody can have anything. Castro says the embargo is killing the Cuban people, but no, it's the government. It's the government that is blockading the people.

If you want to do business, you can't. It's absolutely out of the question. You can go to jail for that, even for selling pizzas on the street.

So I decided on that matter and I took action. I started distributing propaganda around the city against Castro, things that said “Vote for democracy”, “Vote for liberty”, “Don't vote for Castro”.

I started in 1992, in that period of time. There was the election in Cuba. It was an election for only one party. Just imagine, only one party, only one leader. What kind of election is that? What choice do you have? You don't have choice.

I said, “Okay, my choice is democracy, freedom.” I remember that one of the papers said, “No, Castro; yes, democracy.” That was my choice, democracy.

Finally they caught me. It was 5 o'clock in the morning. The secret police came into my house. My wife, Miriam, was 17 or 19 at the time. My daughter was five months old. They didn't even charge me with anything. They just took me and put me in a cell. I had interrogation, interrogation, and interrogation for almost three months. There was no charge, nothing. After that they sent me to jail, with no charge either.

After one month in jail, I received the papers from the judges. The judges asked for a sentence of eight years in jail. Just like that, one day in jail, in prison, they said, “You're going to trial now.” That day I went to trial. It was for a couple of hours, and that's it: eight years. I was thinking the whole time it was my duty to do that, because I knew something about human rights. It's difficult in Cuba to know about human rights. There isn't that kind of information in Cuba.

Imagine. You can go anywhere and find something that talks about human rights—not everywhere.

I knew something, and I knew what I was doing was my right. So they sentenced me to eight years in jail. In jail I got all kinds of threats. They were threats like, “You will never get out of here alive. You will die here.”

● (1135)

Every day they were trying to make me change my mind, maybe because I was young. They conditioned my beliefs with visits with my family. For example, “If you don't think this way, you won't see your family anymore.” And I said “Okay”, but I wouldn't negotiate on that. My principles are what I believe. So I ended up for more than two years without seeing my daughter and my wife. Basically, I met my daughter when I came to Canada, because this beautiful government fought for my release. They came one day to my cell and they said, “Okay, you're free, you're going to Canada.”

So I asked if I had any choice, and they said, no, I had no choice, I had to go to Canada or stay in jail. So that day I said, okay, and I decided to come here, and it has been good for me, because I learned more about democracy, about how things should work.

So that day, basically, I met my daughter at the airport. Then after that, I had to get my daughter back day by day. That's only one of the traumas I suffered. I suffered in prison—torture, beatings. They beat me up sometimes to try to change my mind, to make me think the way they think. Day by day I realized that I was more right, I was on the right path, I was doing the right thing. And I think that was the thing that kept me alive in jail and kept me on the verge of not being crazy.

I spent five years and four months in jail—of those eight years. They sentenced me to eight years, so I spent five years and four months in prison. Most of that time I didn't see my wife and I didn't see my daughter. I was reading books, just learning about democracy, learning about the way things should be done, learning about the economy. I'm not an economist. I never studied that, but I know some things about the right.... If you blockade your own country, your own people, to not do business, what kind of economy can you build based on that?

That's why I believe that the embargo is doing something. For example, if countries have business with Cuba, with Castro, that money will never go to the people. There is never any infrastructure built there. That money will never be used for the people. For example, if you want to start a business, will the government give you some money? No. The money absolutely disappears. Billions of dollars have disappeared. We don't have anything. There are not even beds available in the hospitals, in the hospitals that were built before Castro. That revolution built only one hospital in those 48 years, almost 50 years, and the population has doubled. So where is the money going? He says people trade with him, but it is never in our hands. That's one thing I learned later.

That's my experience in Cuba. That's what I suffered to defend freedom, to fight for freedom, to fight for what I believed was my right and my duty. It was terrible. Those years were horrible. Finally, I'm here, and this is a beautiful country with this democracy. I'm lucky to be here talking freely. Sometimes I feel I don't have to say this or that. But I say, no, use yourself, because here you can say it. I was there 28 years just thinking that it is no good saying anything, until I went to jail. When I went to jail, I said, no, that's it, that's stopped, I will say what is on my mind. Before, and when I went to jail, I said what was on my mind. I learned in the end that's the way it should be done.

● (1140)

Yes, we all should work to get Cuba back on the track of democracy, on the track of civil rights. That's very important. And economically, that will come after. But first, democracy. We should fight for democracy. We should fight to bring back the civil rights in Cuba, no matter what.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Ferrandiz. I'm sure I speak for all members of the committee in saying we applaud your witness.

All right. We'll move now to Mr. Alberto Aguilera, who I believe is here with a translator.

Mr. Alberto Aguilera (As an Individual) (Interpretation): Good morning. My name is Alberto Aguilera.

I would like to thank you for this opportunity to speak about the clear and factual violation of human rights in Cuba.

I was in Cuba. I didn't kill anybody, I didn't steal anything from anybody, I didn't cause any harm or damage to anyone; however, I was incarcerated with my girlfriend and six friends just because we were expressing our opinion. I am living factual proof of the violation of rights in Cuba. I was in prison for seven years for no reason. I was condemned to ten years in prison. We all were, me and my friends.

What I want to do here is to speak about the true Cuba, the Cuba people don't know. Many people think of Fidel Castro as an angel, as someone good, as someone who has done a lot of good for Cuba, but this is not true. In Cuba, nothing works. Nothing is good.

People speak about education, and they say Fidel brought a lot of education to Cuba. In Cuba, you can become a doctor, but once you become a doctor, what? You start making $9 a month. What can you do with that?

You go to see a doctor. All right, the doctor is a good doctor, but there's no technology; there are no machines. He checks you out, and then he's sweating, he's tired, he has seen so many people in a single day. Then he gives you a prescription for aspirin, but when you go to the pharmacy they have no aspirin. There are some pharmacies that have not had an aspirin for two years. When they have them, you're allowed to have only two—two per person.

I don't have the time here to express everything I would like to say and to tell you everything about this system. I think it's the cruelest system that Cuba has ever faced. It is so cruel and so inhumane.

● (1145)

I could speak about many things. Everything is so horrible. I can speak, for example, about torture. I went to seven different prisons in these five years, even the Camaguey prison, which is the worst prison of all, only because I spoke up, because I expressed my own opinion. I suffered a lot, thinking that this could happen to other people, that no one can express their opinion.

I don't know if you can picture what happened to us. There is no justice there. We were young people. There were eight of us. We were just talking, talking about what we dreamt for Cuba. We thought we needed more freedom, that we needed democracy. Then we were detained, and we were taken to the high-security jail in Santiago de Cuba, to one of the cells there. We were held there for 75 days, with no attorneys, no legal counsel whatsoever, and without the right to see our family. I was tortured physically, biologically, and psychologically.

When I say “biologically”, I refer to the fact that in the late afternoon there are many mosquitoes, many insects, because there are water drains in the back part of the cells. They allow them to come in, and you start being bitten by these mosquitoes. It is real torture. We had very thin sheets, and we tried to protect ourselves with our fingers, covering our faces, trying to cover all our bodies. But it was so terrible. It was real torture, all night like this. You try to fall asleep, and once you have fallen asleep, they come back again, and then you cannot sleep all night. In the morning, they wake you up and say they're taking you to a shower.

● (1150)

You come to what they call “instruction”, and what is that? That's psychological torture. They told me, for example, that my mother had fallen. She fell and broke a rib, so they said she would not be taken care of unless I changed my mind, unless I would say what they wanted me to say. Maybe my brothers and sisters would also suffer because I wouldn't change my mind and because of the opinions I expressed.

There were so many things. This involved so many things that I could spend days telling you how horrible it was.

There are too many things, and I just can't help thinking about the Cuban people who are suffering this agony that I lived every day. In Cuba, no one loves Castro, not even people who are by his side. He is the cruelest man that Cuba has ever had. He has no regrets for anybody. He doesn't feel sorry for anything, and he's always intimidating the Cuban people.

He uses even me as part of his intimidation. He says, “See what happened to Alberto Aguilera. See how he was imprisoned. Why? Because he was against our regime, against our thinking.”

They have installed a Russian KGB-style mechanism in Cuba, and they export this to other countries just to preserve communism, not only in part of Africa, as you know, but also in America.

This is where the money goes, the money you were talking about. You were wondering why it never gets to the Cuban people. This is how they spend this money; they export terror. This is how they use the money. They have their houses and their cars and we get nothing.

● (1155)

The Chair: I have to say to, Mr. Aguilera, that we may have to hold it there, unless you have one last brief statement, because we have to move to questions.

We've given Mr. Aguilera more time than usual because of translation, but we should wrap up.

Mr. Alberto Aguilera (Interpretation): My last remark is that we had nine jails before Castro; today we have over 272. They have been counted by the Cuban people. We have one single road that goes through the island, and it was constructed before Castro. No new roads have been built. No new hospitals have been built. All he has done is build new jails so he can put many people in them. Anything you do, any kind of business you try to embark on, is considered a crime. Even if you sell orange juice you go to jail for that. It's forbidden. You cannot do it. People are fearful. They all fear going to jail.

The Boniato jail was built for 2,000 people and it has 6,000 people. The prisons are overcrowded and there are terrible conditions for the people who live there. They built one hospital in Havana and some clinics, but that's all. Everything else has been devoted to putting people in jail...and for them to enjoy.

If they learned that I was here talking to you, my family would surely be in danger in Cuba. Some repressive measures would be taken against them.

● (1200)

The Chair: We certainly hope that won't be the case, and we appreciate your courage in coming here.

Thank you to all of our witnesses.

Mr. Cotler.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I'll address my questions to Ambassador Vosalik and to Ed Broadbent, and in the second round to the other two. That will be more effective.

Ambassador Vosalik, I'll be visiting your country at the beginning of June for a conference that former President Václav Havel is holding on the promotion of human rights and democracy. I'm very much looking forward to that.

You mentioned that the human rights criterion for all countries, arising from your own experience that you seek to share, is how far a country is open to dialogue. You mentioned that Cuba has not been open to dialogue. What could a country like Canada do, after the experience of Czechoslovakia, to assist Czechoslovakia and other like-minded countries in opening up that dialogue? What initiatives can we take? That's the same thing I would ask Mr. Broadbent. What specifically can Canada do, what initiatives can we take, to promote political and civil rights in Cuba?

I used to notice the statement of Albert Camus every day at the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development when you headed it. With the inspiration of Camus, what can we do?

Mr. Pavel Vosalik: Thank you very much, sir. I am very happy to hear that you will visit the most beautiful country in Europe. You are most welcome there.

Allow me to give one small example from the time before the Velvet Revolution in my country.

There was a very symbolic gesture made by the former President of France, who was visiting Czechoslovakia at that time, when he decided to host a very unofficial breakfast at the French embassy with the representatives of dissidents in Czechoslovakia. Of course, to say the Communist Party and the Communist government weren't happy would be quite a big euphemism, because they were furious when he did it. But the support, the symbolic support, was extremely important, and it started a new era, a new chapter, in the way of thinking of the whole population. It was easy to do, and it was maybe more important for Czechoslovakia than just for dissidents, because suddenly the visit of the French President to Czechoslovakia was not a triumph of the Communist Party and the Communist government but actually a terrible disaster for them. They couldn't use it as part of their propaganda about how they are treated by the democratic world, that they weren't treated as partners.

This is the way to support the Cuban people, the Cuban population, to talk to them, to talk to the opposition. That doesn't mean we have to necessarily agree with everything they are saying, but they have to be our partners.

Talking about dialogue, it's connected as well to economic cooperation. I agree with my colleague that the economic embargo is not the way to go, and definitely not what we should use for promoting democracy and human rights, simply because the people who will be affected by this embargo are not the political establishment of the country. It will be the people on the street.

But on the other hand, when we decide to do business with Cuba, we should answer the question, “Who are we doing business with? Are we really doing business in favour of the people, or are we helping the Communist Party to finance their propaganda in the third world?” If we do business, we have to be responsible for that business. We can't simply say, “You see, we're just doing business.” We have to see where the finances, the investments we're bringing into the country, are going. It's the same when we talk about tourism, and so on.

I think the dialogue is not just dialogue between the Czech Republic and Cuba. It's dialogue between Cuba and the democratic world.

Canada could help in your communication with Cuba, which is very open and, from our point of view, very friendly. It should really force the issue of human rights, not just discussions for friendly conversation but discussions on the issue of human rights, closely connected with other activities by Canada in Cuba. Interlink your business activities with promoting these essential principles—which are actually maybe more important and more essential principles for Canada, because you have a longer history in human rights and democracy protection than we have. So that's one thing.

The third thing is dialogue between Cuba and international organizations. I really think Canada, with the respect it has all over the globe, should use all mechanisms to force the Cuban government to accept Mrs. Chanet as the personal representative of the UN High Commission for Human Rights and really start the real dialogue between Cuba and this organization.

● (1205)

Of course, it's going to be very tough because of what we could hear. This dialogue is not just going to be about the UN impact on political rights, but maybe also about the international agreement against torturing people. But this mechanism has already been established. It was established by a body in which Canada is playing a leading role, the UN Commission on Human Rights, or, today, the UN Council on Human Rights.

I'm sorry, I may not be very diplomatic, but I don't feel this is a task for Canada; I feel it is a Canadian commitment, because Canada plays the leading role in international human rights protection. So from this point of view, it's not your right; it's your commitment to this body to do it.

I would like to even offer the possibility of cooperating with Canada in terms of sharing with you our experience of the transformation of Czechoslovakian society, from a totalitarian regime to democracy. I can understand, and I really do understand, the bitterness that the Cuban government obviously feels toward the Czech Republic, because from their point of view we left the communist regime, we left the communist ideology, so we betrayed this ideal. So for the Cuban government, we could be the betrayer.

But still there is a way to use Canadian influence in Cuba, for Canada to be the intermediary, maybe, to bring our experience to Cuban civic society and to talk to them about this. When it is not possible for direct dialogue between the Czech Republic and, say, the post-communist countries and Cuba, maybe Canada could be the channel through which to share with the Cuban people our experiences.

So there are two things. One is to better the dialogue, Canada-Cuba, but I would see the biggest role, a much bigger role, for Canada in the international community. The first thing I would like to suggest to you is to work towards acceptance of Mrs. Chanet, the representative of the High Commission for Human Rights, by the Government of Cuba, and to start real, substantial, and constructive dialogue between Cuba and the UN.

Thank you.

● (1210)

The Chair: Mr. Cotler, we're short on your round, but did you have a quick thing for Mr. Broadbent?

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Yes, it's essentially the same, a similar question, as to what Canada can do arising from Mr. Broadbent's experience and expertise.

Hon. Ed Broadbent: I'd like to begin immediately by agreeing with one suggestion that Mr. Vosalik has made; namely, the use of our diplomats in Havana to encourage meetings with so-called dissidents, as described by the Cuban government, to make it clear not only to those courageous activists who are trying to push for more freedom in Cuba that there are sympathetic voices.... That's important for their sake, but it's also important to indicate clearly to the Castro regime that these kinds of universal rights are something we care about.

It's my general view—and I stand to be corrected, but I think I'm right in this—that we've had a remarkably good opportunity ever since the government of Mr. Diefenbaker did not do what the Americans did at the time of the Cuban revolution. We maintained our diplomatic relationships with the Cuban government, which I think was absolutely the right thing to do, and we have done so since, of course. But we haven't, in my judgment anyway, matched that kind of reasonable gesture, if I can put it that way, vis-à-vis the new regime with efforts on our part to put pressure on democratization within Cuba itself.

I think we've been too passive. We've accepted the benefits of trade, such as they've been, partly due, of course, to Cuba's inability to trade with the United States. So we've had certain real economic advantages, but I don't think we've matched our advantages with enough pressure in Cuba to improve the situation.

And let me add, in addition to this, if you like, direct bilateral engagement. We've done that recently, as members of this committee well know, in Africa. We did it in South Africa by meeting with dissident people and making it very clear where we stood on human rights issues. So this is not a unique policy towards Cuba. We did it with some efficacy in past African regimes and in certain current situations in Africa too.

The second point I would make is that one of the things that struck me as a very important breakthrough that has not, to my knowledge, got out much in Canadian news is that at the end of last week in the United States there was an agreement between the Bush executive branch of the U.S. government and the U.S. Congress leadership, the Democratic leadership, to now link, for the first time, trade deals with human rights considerations. This is a decisive shift in American policy.

For those who have followed this issue in the last 15 or 20 years—and it was something I was very intimately involved in as president of the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development in Montreal—this is an important development.

I'm now going by a PBS newscast I saw on Friday that listed the sort of conditionality the Americans are now going to be insisting on in all trade deals, including some that are being discussed right now—and it has to be written into the deals: the existence of a verifiable right to an independent union, absence of torture, certain UN protocols on the environment, the absence of child labour, and there was another right as well, which I forget.

I would encourage the Canadian government, and I would encourage this committee, to look at this as a potentially—I won't put it more strongly than that—significant breakthrough. As members of this committee will know, western democratic governments have been very reluctant to make a linkage between trade and human rights in the past. I've systematically opposed that policy myself, but I recognize how difficult it is to impose that policy on a bilateral basis, especially with a big country like China. This is hard to do on a bilateral basis.

But it is entirely possible to do it, in my view, on a multilateral basis. If this became part of the new WTO rules, for example, there are mechanisms that are set up for enforcement, for monitoring. So this could be applicable, just as our Czech ambassador has pointed out. This is not a policy unique to Cuba that I'm talking about. It could be effective with Cuba but as a condition for pressuring an opening up and using our trade regime rules with Cuba and being in a position to talk about these conditions as being part and parcel of a "free trade arrangement".

● (1215)

So that's a multilateral proposal I would make, in addition to the kinds of bilateral activities that our friend the ambassador has talked about.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that, Mr. Broadbent.

Madame St-Hilaire.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Caroline St-Hilaire (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, gentlemen, for joining us this morning. And Mr. Broadbent, thank you for your quote. I am sure that the committee will make good use of it.

The committee was asked to review the democratic aspect, in other words, we were asked to see whether or not Canada could encourage Cuba to allow the participation of more political parties. I take it that is not one of your recommendations. Do you think it would be desirable? That is my first question.

My second question also includes a comment. From time to time, the committee has heard witnesses who have told us that things were not all that bad in Cuba, that there were really no political prisoners, that there was not as great a threat to human rights as we were led to believe.

We have two interesting witnesses with us this morning. I would like to hear what you have to say about this. Your experience clearly demonstrates that there have indeed been political prisoners there, but I would like to hear your response to those who have claimed that to be false, that there are no political prisoners, that they are probably prisoners who have been paid or encouraged by other countries. I don't want you to feel ill at ease, but that is what we were told, and I would very much like to hear what you have to say about it.

My third question relates to official development assistance. It was also suggested that we suspend all aid to Cuba as long as there are political prisoners in that country. Is that something that we should consider doing?

Once again, thank you.

[*English*]

Hon. Ed Broadbent: I'll respond to the political party question, if I understood it correctly.

I think the appropriate diplomatic route has to be pursued with care. On the one hand, you don't want to take what we would call, in a free and developed democratic society like Canada, a partisan role of indicating that we favour, in one sense, one political party over another. But that should not be used as an excuse to not work for freedom of association. In principle, I think we should be supporting the formation of political parties because the freedom of association is one of the UN's system of rights.

We should not accept the argument that this is, if you like, a partisan position or even, I would be prepared to argue, not a legitimate argument coming from the Cuban government saying this is an interference in the internal affairs of another country. I don't think it is. Why do I say that? I think any country that is helping to foster or promote a right that's part of the international system of human rights, not our charter of rights or the American charter of rights, but part of the UN system, in particular, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and, say, the covenant on political and civil rights...the Cuban regime is committed to both. I don't know if they're signatories to the covenant. Does anyone know? I suspect they would be, but I don't know. But they are committed, as a member of the UN, to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which includes freedom of association.

That was one of the justifications, if I may say so, by an earlier Government of Canada in creating the international centre. We were given a mandate, not to promote Canadian parliamentary democracy or American, but the UN system of rights. And when I met the heads of government, including Fidel Castro...I told him I was not there to promote a Canadian or American or European agenda, but the UN agenda of human rights, which his government is committed to as a member of the UN, because they're obligated to act according to the UN declaration of rights.

I'm taking time to answer the question about political parties because it is a serious issue, and I support the idea of helping to respond to initiatives coming from within, to respond to issues coming from courageous people, two of whom we have here. But for those people within the society, who have demonstrated courage, who want assistance, who want to meet with our ambassador, who even want to meet with parliamentary delegations, representatives of our parties, to talk about how they would organize political parties, I think that is consistent with the UN framework and not interference in internal affairs, as I would define it, out of respect for Cuban citizens to have the right of freedom of association like anyone else.

So I've taken time to answer that, but I would hope the committee would address this issue, and I think that's a useful framework to put it in, to act according to what Cuba is already obligated to in the UN system of rights.

Maybe I should pass some of your questions to other people.

● (1220)

Mr. Guillermo Sambra Ferrandiz: I have something to say about political prisoners in Cuba. From what I know, a political prisoner could be anybody. If you try to make a coup against the government, you fall in that category of political prisoners. I don't think we have too many political prisoners in Cuba.

What we have in Cuba is prisoners of conscience. That's quite different. We are sent to prison for what we believe, not for what we physically have done. It is because of what we believe. If we had democracy, nothing like that would happen. People wouldn't go to jail for what they believe, for their conscience, if we had democracy. We don't have democracy, obviously. That's why we're here today.

As I understood it with my English, Mr. Vosalik and Mr. Broadbent are saying, try to go across to the regime of Castro in Cuba to trade. That's what I heard. But how many years have we been trying to do that with Castro? You, not me, are dealing with a guy who will take everything for himself, for his purposes—everything, all the money for propaganda all around the world. This is a democratic country. Cuba is not, so how can this country have good relations with Cuba when Cuba is like a cancer? The government of my country is like a cancer; you are supporting a cancer because it is far away, and maybe to do business in. But think about whether the cancer one day could come here, because you are helping that cancer grow or to stay alive there.

More than talking, we have to do something concrete, like, I don't know, conditioning: “Castro, if you don't have democracy, we are not doing things with you. We're not talking to you.” Democracy is what I want, through the party that's in. I don't care if you are a communist, an anarchist; I don't care. I just want everybody to have a place in the country without being sent to jail.

The Conservatives are in power. Imagine the Conservatives trying to kill all the Liberals, or trying to put all the Liberals in jail.

A voice: That would be a little extreme.

Mr. Guillermo Sambra Ferrandiz: There could be something like that in Cuba.

For myself, I was born under communism. I breathed communism; I ate communism. I don't think it's even communism. It is a dictatorship, tyranny. It is even more than communism. For me, I don't care who you are or what you are or what your ideas are; I respect you. If you get into power, just do it for me too, because we are all the same. Not only in Cuba, not only in Canada, but globally we are all human beings, and we have to fight for democracy all around the world, not only in Cuba.

● (1225)

The Chair: Mr. Broadbent, I know you'd like to respond, but we're well over time on that round, so hold your response until...you know how this goes. Both of you can come back in on response to other questions.

Mr. Sorenson.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson (Crowfoot, CPC): I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll just throw that right open for Mr. Broadbent to respond to that now, and that can come out of my time. I think the ambassador also had something to say.

I do have some questions I want to ask, but, Mr. Broadbent, please go ahead.

Hon. Ed Broadbent: I just want to use this opportunity. There was one idea I forgot to mention, a practical proposal.

One of the things that almost happened when I was at the centre in Montreal in 1990 was a joint public conference on political, civil, social, and economic rights, with half the participants coming from Cuba and half coming from Canada.

The Chair: It almost happened, but it didn't.

Hon. Ed Broadbent: It almost happened, but it was cancelled on Cuba's part at the last moment. There were a number of good people in reasonably senior positions, I know, in the Cuban government at the time who were in fact encouraging this, but it didn't happen.

It seems to me something, again, that maybe the Government of Canada could promote. The political idea behind it, if I can put it that way, is that it would enable the Cubans to talk frankly. As the ambassador said, no country, including Canada, is free from human rights concerns—the socio-economic rights of our first nations people, or a number of other people in our urban cores. No democratic society has a perfect record, but it would enable the Cubans. Part of this was that they like to say they have solved all the problems. On the economic and social rights, I don't think they've solved all the problems, but compared to most Latin American countries they've made a lot of progress.

An idea I put forward is that the Government of Canada, as part of its dialogue, could ask for such a conference and ask the Cubans to participate. Have three days in Havana and three days in Ottawa over a one-week period. The conference could begin in one city with the participants and then continue in the other city with the same participants, and with local people in the two countries encouraged to take part.

Again, I stress that it would be within the UN framework of rights, that in principle, it seems to me anyway, the Government of Cuba should not oppose.

That's one particular idea, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: I think, Mr. Ambassador, you had something, quickly, and then I have some questions.

Mr. Pavel Vosalik: I still feel that the previous question wasn't answered totally, because there is as well the part about the possibility of using offshore development assistance as a tool in promoting human rights and democracy.

Yes, I agree with Mr. Broadbent that it's quite difficult on a bilateral basis to interlink business and economic cooperation with human rights and democracy, but the official development assistance is the best tool, where we not only can, but when we have to, interlink these two fields. This may be exactly the way to help in countries such as Cuba in fields where really it's necessary to help deliver the financial support or other support directly to the population, not to the regime.

So I would like to encourage you to think as well about maybe extending the official development assistance to Cuba, but designed according to you, designed in accordance with the protection of human rights and to focus it on the people in need in Cuba.

What I would maybe discuss is, if the elimination or some restriction of the official development assistance is the way to promote human rights, I would say, in the opposite way, extend this cooperation with the country and deliver this assistance more to the people directly, to the local communities, and to support the civil society in the fields where the civil society feels the need to be supported.

● (1230)

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Thank you, Mr. Ambassador.

It's good to have the ambassador here. I certainly enjoyed the meeting we had a number of weeks ago.

As well as Mr. Broadbent.... Welcome back.

I have about four questions, and I realize now, because of the time, that I'm going to ask them all together, and then maybe you can reflect on them. Then I want to go back to something Mr. Broadbent said.

This is to our two guests here.

I commend you for being here. To be quite honest, there are a few memories I have as a child—and I'm not that old. One of the things I was always brought up with in my home was to fear communism. They had been through the war—my father—and they were always very afraid of communism. They were very afraid when the conflict in the sixties...with Cuba playing a role in it, and I remember a fear in my home of that. It's something that's very profound and it's had a lasting memory. I have that memory.

My question to you is this. Do you know of any one thing that Canada is doing in Cuba? You mentioned that it was because of Canada that you were able to be brought here. On the different programs that are going on, do you understand any one being Canadian, with a Canadian role there? Yes, this is a United Nations initiative. Are you aware of any initiative that is specific to Canada? Is there one key initiative that Canada could do?

Mr. Broadbent has come with this idea now of some type of symposium or conference, where we could bring these people together. I think that may be a positive thing, although our friend over here, Mr. Aguilera, had a few opinions, and then all of a sudden he found himself in jail for eight years. Is there going to be this hold-back from anyone participating in such a symposium or in such a conference? Would it make us feel good, but would it have little impact in Cuba? What impact do you think that would have?

Mr. Guillermo Sambra Ferrandiz: Something that would be very important—that's why Mr. Broadbent mentioned it right now—is to try to help the people of Cuba, try to help their position, for example. The people who are fighting there, with their ideas—not with weapons, with their ideas—have no support.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Are they well recognized? You were thrown in jail because you voiced opinions. Are those political parties? Are those people highly recognized that we can send resources to them?

Mr. Guillermo Sambra Ferrandiz: Highly recognized in what sense? We are there.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: We're talking about freedom of association. Is there a network of people that we could say, yes, we—

Mr. Guillermo Sambra Ferrandiz: There are.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: There are?

Mr. Guillermo Sambra Ferrandiz: Yes. Right now the civil society of Cuba is growing, which is one thing that has made me very happy. It's something that no Castro, no dictatorship, can hold forever. We have right now independent *periodistas* who are thrown in jail for that. So that body exists.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Canada does not give a lot of aid money to Cuba, about $10 million a year, I believe.

Mr. Guillermo Sambra Ferrandiz: To Castro?

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Well, yes. To Cuba.

Mr. Guillermo Sambra Ferrandiz: To Castro.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: It doesn't sound like a lot of money, yet Canada is one of the biggest contributors there. One of the things they tried to do is promote programs that lead to good governance, so maybe they are already networking with the civil society. The other things they do are initiatives to expose Cubans to Canadian values, and again, that's a fairly broad.... I don't know exactly where they are sending money to, to expose Cubans to Canadian values. Yet you don't really recognize this as being Canadian. Maybe Canada is already supporting this type of civil movement. Is that what Canada is supporting?

Mr. Guillermo Sambra Ferrandiz: I don't think so.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Where's the support coming from?

Mr. Guillermo Sambra Ferrandiz: The support for this movement? Nowhere. We don't have support at all.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: So it's just something that's....

Mr. Guillermo Sambra Ferrandiz: Moral support; we have moral support.

● (1235)

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: What's the population of Cuba? About 10 million, 11 million?

Mr. Marcus Pistor (Committee Researcher): Eleven million.

Mr. Guillermo Sambra Ferrandiz: We have moral support. I know we have moral support, but more support than that, more than moral support, we don't have.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Let me ask you this question. There are maybe things we could be doing right now, but is there any one thing we should do right at the time Fidel passes on?

Mr. Guillermo Sambra Ferrandiz: What do you mean "passes on"?

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Dies.

Others have said that the window right now is fairly foggy, but there will be a definite window of opportunity at the death of Fidel Castro. Even Raoul...maybe we should be influencing him. Only last week we had someone say he's five years younger. He may not be that far behind Fidel. Maybe we have to wait until the end of Raoul. But is there any one thing at that time...?

There are things we should be doing now, yes—supporting civil society, supporting certain NGOs—but is there any one thing, when we know this transition will take place, that the west, the United Nations, and Canada should do?

Mr. Guillermo Sambra Ferrandiz: Oh, when the transition takes place. Yes, help us in any way financially. When the transition takes place, we will need a lot of money. Cuba will need it to develop everything. We don't have development in Cuba, not at all, nothing—no highways, no roads, nothing. So we will have to rebuild the country again.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Is there someone there who could...? As far as governance is concerned, is there a group there that could step in if that opportunity ever...?

In Haiti, to be quite honest, there are a lot of people elected as parliamentarians who have no idea what the role of a parliamentarian is.

Are there people with good governance practices?

Mr. Guillermo Sambra Ferrandiz: Yes. You are asking for something that is impossible right now. What we are doing right now is fighting the dictatorship. Right now we don't have an opposition party in waiting for what you say.

Do you understand that?

The Chair: That's fine. Thank you.

We'll pass now to Mr. Marston.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): This is kind of a wide-ranging discussion, and all of my questions actually got eaten up along the way in I think a very constructive fashion.

When I was listening, and especially in the beginning, the Mark Twain saying occurred to me, that people have a face they show their family, a face they show their friends, and a face they don't show anybody. To some degree, we're getting some enlightenment on the latter in this conversation.

Again, when we talk about communism...I was recently in China, and without going into too much detail, I raised the issue of Falun Gong at a meeting. I had a person suddenly say, "Well, it's not in the media". Since it's not in the media, it can't exist in a state-controlled media. So it made for an interesting discussion—a very brief one.

We have the *The National Corporate Social Responsibility Report* that has recently been completed. We've just received that report. To my mind, that's one of the ways of influencing Canadian companies and how they function relative to Cuba, and this group will be looking at that. Another one...I have an embarrassment here because we talk about the system of UN rights and obligations, and Canada hasn't even signed onto the optional protocol against torture. So before we point fingers, we'd better wrap that one up and carry on.

The civil society in Cuba.... I've been there a number of times. I've walked freely in Havana without someone around me. But you can sense, even when you talk to people, they're looking over their shoulder. So I'm really encouraged to hear the discussion around how we can support civil society.

Again, I was going to speak about CIDA, which you raised a few minutes ago, but it strikes my mind that the dollars Canada offers via CIDA are too small to have a tremendous impact. But Mr. Broadbent's suggestion of this dialogue or conference I think is a significant step Canada could take.

Beyond that, I really don't have questions to ask, because you've communicated it so well, the passion we heard across the way from the individuals who were detained. As I say, I'll leave it at this point to go to the second round.

The Chair: Are you opening the floor to any commentary?

● (1240)

Mr. Wayne Marston: Sure, if anybody wants to comment, absolutely.

Hon. Ed Broadbent: To pick up on one point, about the problematic aspect of such a conference giving advantage to the Cubans, I think the advantage of such a conference, if they agreed to do it, is that it enables Canada not only to talk about our own rights problems internally—we need some improvement, and so on—but obviously it enables us to talk about the Cuban rights problems, as we understand them, as we've heard from witnesses, as we've seen from Amnesty reports or the Committee to Protect Journalists.

It provides a forum for public discussion. The advantage would be the agreement that was almost reached. Of course, this would be in Havana as well as in Ottawa, and you would be able to say all these things in Havana. Now, of course, how much you would see in the Cuban press or media is another question, but the very fact that it is taking place and there's open discussion both there and here is an extension I think, in tough-minded terms, of the principle of having dialogue with the regimes and putting on pressure in terms of rights.

So yes, they may get a certain propagandistic advantage out of having such a conference, and I would say that's great, let them get that bit of advantage, and then you use that to put on more pressure for the implementation of more rights. If they say no to it, then that should be a public part of our diplomacy too, in the sense that if we're calling for this and there's a proposal—the foreign minister is involved in this or our ambassadors—then it becomes knowledge that they said no to it. Anyway, I think from the point of view of people who are concerned about rights and freedom of association, as well as other freedoms in Cuba...I don't want to exaggerate its importance, but it's a real plus to further certain developments.

This was going on in the early 1990s too, the opening up of civil society, and then there was a repression again. This would I think be a plus in helping to encourage that.

Mr. Pavel Vosalik: I certainly support you, Mr. Broadbent, in terms of this conference. Definitely, it's quite interesting too. It depends on the content of this conference and the fact that the offer is coming from Canada to Havana to organize something like that. It could be quite interesting to see the reaction coming from the Cuban government, how far they are open to talk to Canada, not just about friendship and economic cooperation, but about sensitive things as well. My personal opinion would be that your government will not receive any positive response.

The other comment about the money going through CIDA to Cuba...at this time, what I see as very important, and maybe not such expensive help, is the fact that the advantage to the Cuban government is that the government controls information. So what my embassy is trying to do is open public access to the Internet for Cuban citizens. Unfortunately, because of the repression coming from the Cuban government, we are still not very successful at this.

Maybe Canada has the advantage to open some cultural information centres, or whatever we want to call them, not just in Havana but maybe outside Havana, as a source of information coming from the free world to the Cuban population. This is maybe the easiest and quickest way for your government to open places where the people from Cuba could come and receive information other than information coming to them via the propaganda television, newspapers, etc. To make free access to information is the easiest way to support a civil society right now that's still in the process of creating the structures, but maybe this could help.

To support and talk to the newly born or stillborn political parties, I think definitely this is what we have to do to talk to these structures. Political parties represent the backbone of civil society. I don't say that we have to talk just to the political parties, but it would definitely be the biggest mistake to exclude these structures from our dialogue with the Cuban population.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now move to Mr. Khan. But before doing so, Mr. Broadbent had earlier asked whether or not Cuba was a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Our research analyst has been able to ascertain that they are not a signatory, nor have they made any efforts to sign the covenant.

● (1245)

Hon. Ed Broadbent: What about the other one, on economic and social development?

Mr. Marcus Pistor: They have not done so, according to the information I received.

The Chair: Apparently not. Christine Chanet addresses their failure to be a signatory in her report to the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights.

Mr. Khan.

Mr. Wajid Khan (Mississauga—Streetsville, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Broadbent, I wholeheartedly agree with your suggestion. I'll come back to it in a second.

What is the possibility of a government-to-government dialogue between Canada and Cuba, and at the same time between the United States and Cuba?

I think the United States is becoming a little more pragmatic in many areas. They tried to support the dissidents in Iran and failed miserably. They also had some other failures in that kind of effort. But now they're talking openly of the Iraq situation to Iran. They're not poking fingers in their eyes anymore. Also, some of these latest successes, as far as Mullah Dadullah and others are concerned, have been because of a certain time for dialogue. Embargos and restrictions and sanctions have not helped against Iran in the past either.

I'd like to receive your comments, sir. Even against Korea they're talking through multilateral channels. Do you think that kind of approach or rapprochement with Cuba would be beneficial?

Second, how do you see both Castro and Cuba evolving?

Coming back to the democracies, democracy has a price in some of the developing countries. I'm sure most people here are not strangers to that. The international community cannot be successful or helpful until and unless you see people on the street—mass demonstrations, those kinds of things. That sends a signal that change needs to happen. If you have 75 people or 200 people in jail for speaking up, I don't think a lot of the world is going to be interested, really. We can talk all we want about human rights; they will probably take another century.

I would like to receive your comment, Mr. Broadbent.

Hon. Ed Broadbent: Concerning a multilateral approach, I think politically it would not be wise for us to do this in conjunction with the U.S. The quickest way to get a no from Castro and the Cubans I think would be to involve the Americans. It's entirely a tactical question here, because they have always used U.S. policy towards Cuba—including an invasion of Cuba in the past, of course—as something that's just anathema.

So I think it could be counterproductive. Any efforts we make should be on a bilateral basis, or with our democratic friends in the European Union. I would just avoid the linkage, for this kind of conference that we're talking about particularly, with the U.S.

On the other question, to understate it considerably, if I heard you correctly—"What about a post-Castro Cuba?"—part of the very long discussion that, as I mentioned, I had with him in 1990 or 1991, a three-and-a-half hour discussion, focused exactly on that, in a way: on what had been going on in Europe in the previous two years after Mr. Gorbachev took his really significant leadership on the then-Soviet side.

My view was that in Cuba there could be some reasonable chance —could be, and may be, but I would think with all the intervening years it's less likely—of preserving.... I've heard what our other guests here have had to say, but compared with some of the progress that has been made in other Latin American countries, the sooner the Cuban authorities, the Communist Party of Cuba, opens itself to reform within, the greater the opportunity, it seems to me, they have of preserving some of the gains that in one sense they have made.

But the longer they delay this, the greater the likelihood, in my view—and I don't think it takes a political genius to see this—to have the most extreme, and I choose my words with care here, of the Cubans who have "gone to Miami", to put it that way.... I'm not saying all the Cubans who have gone there are extreme; I want to be clear on that. But there is a strong—and I use my words with care—right-wing element there, and the longer Castro waits on reform, the greater the likelihood, it seems to me, that you will get if not anti-democratic, then extreme right people coming in from Florida, joining with those in Cuba itself, for understandable reasons, to overthrow all the good with the bad.

He wasn't open to this argumentation at all. He did not want to provide any internal freedom at all to set the stage for a peaceful transition of the kind you had in Czechoslovakia. It had a democratic tradition, though, in a way that Cuba never had.

So to say the least, it's very complex and very uncertain, but the longer there's a delay from the regime itself in making more space for political and civil rights, the greater the likelihood I think that we're going to get an extremist government of another kind there.

● (1250)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Khan. We're over time on that.

Mr. Cotler.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: I have just a brief question. I think we've learned from our inquiry into China and the Canada-China bilateral dialogue on human rights that things are not always what they may seem to be. We have frameworks, but they may serve more to shield problems than to in fact unmask them.

This particularly is to you, Ed, because of your experience in this particular aspect of our work.

Much of our involvement in Cuba is through CIDA, and that involvement, as has been mentioned, in CIDA is through development assistance programs. I looked at some. We support Cuban NGOs in local development initiatives. We had a conference recently, a round table on the Cuban economy. We have a project to improve transparency, to train 6,000 Cuban auditors and trade experts in free trade negotiations. We're supporting initiatives regarding innovative government capacity issues. These are a lot of buzzwords that I've become familiar with over the years, "capacity building", "transparency", "governance", and all that.

Are we really using that whole approach there to in fact do something about the protection of civil and political rights, or are we just indulging that part in Cuba that, as you mentioned, is not the place where rights are being deprived, the socio-economic area, but we're not really focusing on the nerve centres where we should be?

Hon. Ed Broadbent: My impression, and I want to stress "impression", is that it's the latter, and we can play games with ourselves. It certainly was my experience from the centre in Montreal, looking at most of what we were then doing in China, too. We have these wonderful conferences, people go over, and it can be, on our part, a gross act of self-deception. It can be.

Similarly, all the kinds of projects, it seems to me, Irwin, you mentioned, in Cuba, could have just a nice focus on economic and social rights and we ignore the political and civil rights dimensions of them and think we're doing something useful. The only way I think of answering your question is, are these projects pushing the envelope more towards political and civil rights as actually an empirical study?

I don't know well enough in there, but if we could get in...and that's the other big problem. As you will know, having been on the board at the centre, when the centre did projects in Latin America, even with bad regimes we could get in as a human rights organization and see what was happening on the ground. There was enough space for that. Well, we don't have that space in Cuba. We don't. We can't send human rights activists in there to verify if some of these projects we're doing are really pushing the envelope or not.

So my answer is that I tend to be a bit skeptical about them, that they can provide us with an excuse, saying we're looking at economic and social rights, carrying on our trade at the same time, but avoiding pushing the envelope on political and civil rights.

If they do the latter, then they're worthwhile, but as I say, I find it kind of hard to answer the question as a generalization: would I favour doing these things or not? I would favour doing them, but only on the condition that they're a foundation for pushing for other rights. As I say, the only way we find that out is to keep an eye on CIDA and get the best kinds of reports from them, and so on.

The Chair: I'd like to take some of our last minutes to ask a couple of questions.

Mr. Aguilera, you were in prison for seven years? What was the charge formally entered against you?

● (1255)

Mr. Alberto Aguilera: Propaganda.

The Chair: You said that, effectively, all you did was share some opinions with friends. Did you hand out any information?

Mr. Alberto Aguilera (Interpretation): No, we only talked among ourselves, that was all, but we were speaking out loud. I mean, anybody could hear us.

The Chair: So you were friends who had met at university and you were just talking about democratic ideas.

Mr. Alberto Aguilera (Interpretation): That's correct.

The Chair: When were you first put in jail?

Mr. Alberto Aguilera (Interpretation): In 1991.

The Chair: When did you come to Canada?

Mr. Alberto Aguilera (Interpretation): On April 4, 1998.

The Chair: All of your friends who were put in jail with you, they're now out of jail?

Mr. Alberto Aguilera (Interpretation): They were released gradually. After their term in prison, after six years or so, they were released.

The Chair: To you and to Mr. Ferrandiz, we've had a number of witnesses come before us and say that there are no political prisoners or prisoners of conscience in Cuba, that any of those who claim to be are effectively agents of the Americans and the CIA.

Would you care to comment on that?

Mr. Alberto Aguilera (Interpretation): Many hundreds of thousands of Cubans are in prison for that reason, just for expressing their opinions.

The Chair: Did you ever receive American money or have contact with American agents or the CIA before you were imprisoned, or since then?

Mr. Guillermo Sambra Ferrandiz: I have never seen an American in my life.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Guillermo Sambra Ferrandiz: I'm serious. I'm serious. Americans can't go to Cuba. I've never met an American in my life.

Mr. Alberto Aguilera (Interpretation): If you go to Cuba, you will see how evident it is that people cannot speak. All Cubans know that if we speak up, we will be put in prison. All Cubans go to see Fidel speak in a big square, because we know that if we don't go there, we will lose our jobs.

The Communist Party of Cuba hires you. If you don't go and hear what Castro has to say, you will lose your job. People in other countries watch TV and see that many people go to hear Castro. They think people in Cuba love Castro very much.

The Chair: I want to ask you another question. I have only a bit of time left.

As I indicated, we had a number of witnesses who testified either that there were not political prisoners or prisoners of conscience in Cuba or that there were only very modest violations of human, civil, or political rights. Essentially, they characterized these dissidents and opposition as being fronts for the United States.

I'm wondering if any of these people have ever contacted you, as men who have spent time in Cuban prisons. Have you ever heard from the Table de concertation de solidarité Québec-Cuba or the Caravane d'amitié Québec-Cuba? Have you ever heard from a researcher at the University of Montreal named Dulce-Maria Cruz-Herrera? Have any of these people or the Communist Party of Canada ever contacted you to discuss your experience in the Cuban prison system?

Mr. Alberto Aguilera (Interpretation): No, never.

The Chair: Mr. Ferrandiz?

● (1300)

Mr. Guillermo Sambra Ferrandiz: No.

The Chair: Okay. I just wanted to—

Mr. Alberto Aguilera: Excuse me, but it's easy for people to go to Cuba and be convinced. They can go to the prisons and go to the population, but many families will show no political expression. There are many people who are maybe too hungry to express themselves now. And this is all the time.

Mr. Guillermo Sambra Ferrandiz: Yes, so people come out, and they could put more people in jail. They send them to different countries, and then they put more people in. They're more dangerous.

The Chair: Obviously.

I want to thank all of our witnesses, and in particular Mr. Aguilera. You indicated that this may have repercussions for your friends and family in Cuba. If anything were ever to happen in that respect, I hope that you would let our committee and the Government of Canada know, so that we could respond accordingly. We would not want anyone to fall into harm's way because of their testimony before this Parliament of a free and democratic country. I'm sure that we would all be very concerned if that were to happen. I'd like that to be clearly on the record.

Thank you to all of our witnesses.

Thank you to one of our most highly esteemed former parliamentarians, Mr. Broadbent.

Thank you, Ambassador, for taking the time. With your busy schedule, it's very generous of you to appear before us.

To our witnesses, we are suspended in terms of the hearing.

We don't have committee business, but I think we'll have to flag the issue of the report in the *Globe and Mail* on May 10 for our next meeting.

Thank you.

Mr. Marston, what do you want to talk about?

Mr. Wayne Marston: I've had two people approach me who would like to be witnesses here. They were unexpected, or I'd have had it in by last Thursday.

One of them is Peter Boyle, president of the Kingston and District Labour Council. His community is twinned with a Cuban community, and he's spent time down there. He's knowledgeable about the labour issues and some of the concerns, and he has some knowledge of the social programs down there.

The other one is Harry Hynd. If you know the name at all, Mr. Hynd was the former director of District 6 of the United Steelworkers. Again, he's travelled extensively in Cuba and has a good knowledge of the health and education sectors.

One of the things I found very informative today was hearing from the people on the ground.

If it's possible to take a look at them, I would appreciate it. I have contact information, if the committee does decide that they'd like to do that.

The Chair: I'm in a bit of a spot because we didn't have consideration of future business on the agenda. But we'll take those names under consideration. Please submit them to the clerk.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Mr. Chairman, I'm wondering if it's in order to speak about the leak, naming names, and doing things out of an in camera setting.

With committee business, you very seldom go in camera anyway, but—

The Chair: Because we're over time and it wasn't on the agenda, what I suggest we do is put it on the agenda for the week after next. We'll deal with it in camera, as per your suggestion, Mr. Sorenson.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Unless you want to do it now.

The Chair: Is it the committee's will for us to address that now?

I don't hear a resounding cry for that. Mr. Khan has already left, so why don't we reserve it for two weeks from now?

This meeting is adjourned.

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