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Chair

The Honourable Jason Kenney

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● (1105)

[Translation]

The Chair (Hon. Jason Kenney (Calgary Southeast, CPC)):
Good day.

This is a meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

For the first hour, we will be hearing from witnesses—the last ones, I hope—in connection with our study of human rights in Cuba. We will then move on to other committee business. Among other things, I would like to update you on the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development's report on China.

[English]

We'll begin with our witnesses before us today, Mr. Peter Boyle from the Kingston and District Labour Council, and Mr. Hynd, former District 6 director of the United Steelworkers. They are here to present to us on the issue of human rights in Cuba.

Gentlemen, the standard practice is we have a few minutes for your verbal presentations. We try to limit that to ten minutes, and then we take rounds of questions, beginning with seven-minute rounds of questions from, I suspect in this case, Mr. Silva.

I invite Mr. Boyle to begin. Thank you for coming.

Go ahead, Mr. Boyle.

Mr. Peter J. Boyle (As an Individual): Thank you. I'm very happy to be here.

I just want to make some points about Cuba and unions on this topic.

I'll start out with the fact that Kingston is the only city in Canada that's twinned with a Cuban city, and that's Cienfuegos. That happened in November 2004, with an exchange of mayors and a group that went down from Kingston to Cuba to do that.

On that occasion four representatives from our labour council visited Havana and Cienfuegos in Cuba. We held discussions with local union leaders from the Cienfuegos area. Our Kingston and District Labour Council sponsored, in 2006, two labour leaders to Kingston to attend the twinning conference we co-sponsored. We had discussions in a labour forum that was held there and was well attended. Amarilis Perez Santans, secretary general of the CTC in

Cienfuegos province, attended, as did the president of the artists' and writers' union from the city of Trinidad, which is nearby.

In February 2007 I led an exchange with 15 labour council presidents and labour representatives from around Ontario to the Cienfuegos area. We spent a week there, but three full days touring and in discussions with many union leaders and workers around the Cienfuegos area. We toured many workplaces, including an organic farm complex, sugar cane factory, cigar factory, a hospital, a centre for children with speech impediments, which we were very impressed with, with 31 students and 29 instructors for them, and met with about 40 union presidents of the sectors represented by the CTC in the Cienfuegos area.

Based on those and other trips I've taken to Cuba, I'd just like to make some points between what I've heard from the workers down there and what I've read and other things.

The push for this hearing I believe comes from Cuban Canadians, a small group who are aligned with the Cuban-American National Foundation, headquartered in Miami. Workers in Cuba are upset that the U.S. government continually tries to coax Cubans to risk their lives, by any means possible, to get to Florida, where they're given housing, money, and jobs and are held up as a symbol of the American ideals. This is interference, as Cubans are the only people in the world who can enter the U.S. without a passport. I find that information, from Cuban workers, a bit disturbing.

The second point is Cuba is a sovereign country and has a right to defend itself against any aggression. As such, it has laws to protect itself against anyone who is paid by a foreign power to assist and facilitate the overthrow of the Cuban government. The so-called dissidents that we've heard about were paid agents and were tried and found guilty in the Cuban court of law.

The third point is a number of points on unions that I've learned from talking to workers down there. The union structure in Cuba is similar to the one in Canada, with the CTC uniting all unions, much like the Canadian Labour Congress here. The Cuban union movement encompasses more than 98% of Cuban workers through 19 national unions. Workers are not compelled to join a union; however, most choose to do so.

The unions are autonomous, the requirements are prescribed by law, and they are completely self-financed through monthly dues. These union dues are voluntary. Each union will hold their own congress, and the CTC organizes a national congress every five years.

I think there are 15 labour leaders from different provinces in Cuba who are elected and serve in a congress in Havana. One of the people I've dealt with, who I mentioned earlier, Amarilis, who was the general secretary of the CTC in Cienfuegos, was elected to that position in Havana last September and is now in Havana.

Thus, while the unions work closely with the government, unions are independent. Indeed, unions exercise considerable influence in the National Assembly, their Parliament, where there is a significant representation from unions and working people.

• (1110)

The functions of the unions in Cuba are twofold: to further the economic, political, and social interests of the country as a whole and to protect the rights and advance the standards of living of the Cuban workers.

The government must consult the unions on all matters involving labour policy. The workers conduct meetings among themselves, debate the proposals by government, and then decide whether they are amenable to the proposed changes. Among examples of that, in 1995 proposed alterations to social security were rejected by the Cuban Workers' Central, the CTC, resulting in the legislation being sent back to be reworked.

Also in 1995, a provision of the Foreign Investment Act would have allowed joint ventures with foreign investors to directly hire Cuban workers. This was abandoned in the face of opposition from the CTC.

The union also effectively challenged the 1994 proposal to tax workers' wages. Here the government wanted to start something that was similar to income tax, but the workers fought it off. They suggested the government charge small fees for cultural events, such as baseball and theatre, which they did.

By law, workers meet in their work centres twice yearly to participate in discussions on the economic plan of their company or enterprise. Workers have the option of rejecting the proposals offered by management and the administrators. Workers also determine the production norms, the rates, and the work pace.

Unions advocate for workers within a framework of a cooperative relationship with the government. Consequently, there's no antagonism between workers and government, as the government is made up of workers and others who are elected to represent the particular sectors of the Cuban society.

We can say that the simplest indication of the nature of the Cuban state is that the economic crisis of the nineties was not resolved at the expense of workers, their families, or their children. The workers told us of meetings held in every workplace and of a national day of meetings amongst workers when the special period began with the collapse of the Soviet bloc that supported their economy in the face of the U.S. embargo.

I believe unions in Cuba are independent, and the leaders I talk to take pride that this is the case. They take a lot of pride in it. The workers I have talked to on my visits to Cuba all have one common thread: they are a proud, resilient, and friendly people; they are proud that they have been able to endure hardships imposed on them and still have their own democratic government.

I note that some were not born or were very young at the time of the revolution. The economic terrorism, as I call it, that is imposed on the Cuban people by U.S. government policies is where this committee should be exerting its efforts—towards real human rights abuses.

I recommend that this committee recommend increased support for Cuba and petition the U.S. to end the economic embargo. Their policy to inflict pain on the Cuban people is intolerable.

Many thought Cuba would crumble when Fidel left power recently. Even some of the people who came on the tour with us in February were asked by family and friends, should you really go? I saw no mention or talk of any change. The workers are happy with their government, more so than our labour movement at times is with our Canadian government.

I believe many critics are part of a U.S. attempt to create unrest in Cuba in hopes that their 48 years of interference with the Cuban people will be successful. I saw or heard no such movement among the workers.

Thank you.

• (1115)

The Chair: We'll now hear from Mr. Hynd. Please go ahead, sir.

Mr. Henry Hynd (As an Individual): My name is Henry Hynd. My wife Margaret and I went to Cuba in 1976 to Varadero. It was the beginning of tourism from Canada. There were 26 Canadians at Villa Cuba, mostly from Ontario and Montreal.

Villa Cuba was no five-star hotel. The complex of homes was formerly owned by rich Americans and Cubans. It was located on the former DuPont estate. Hot running water was in short supply and the food was of poor quality. The staff were as curious about us as we were about them. Few spoke English, and we did not speak Spanish. However, the beach was beautiful, warm, buoyant, and amazingly calm. Fish swam around us, and beautiful shells were left on the shoreline. It was like paradise.

We have a photo that was taken on the beach. In both directions along the shoreline, there is nobody in the picture. We were the only people on the beach, 17 kilometres long.

We visited Matanzas, Havana, and the town of Varadero. We found them interesting and inviting.

We have gone to Cuba every year since our first trip. We returned to Villa Cuba many times. We now stay at Villa Morelos, which is next door to Villa Cuba.

But our reasons for visiting Cuba are not only to lay on the beach and swim in the ocean. We have developed lasting friendships with several families in Cuba who live in Santa Marta, Cardenas, and Caibarien. We have visited Cuba every year since 1976, mostly twice a year. We have taken our children and our grandchildren many times to Cuba. It is an extremely safe place, especially for tourists.

I believe the level of education in Cuba—most Cubans are university educated—is amazing. A great many Cubans speak several languages, mostly English, German, and French, as well as their native Spanish.

In all my time in Cuba, I have never heard of any tourists being robbed, assaulted, or even harassed. Cuba is an extremely safe place.

Cubans are a handsome people, mostly fit, healthy, and helpful. They appreciate those who visit their country.

While the system of one-party rule in Cuba may be important to some Canadians, there must be an appreciation of Cuba's history of democratic elections in previous years and what corrupt governments that produced, with gambling, prostitution, live sex acts, and drugs. Those in government were extremely rich, while the mass of the population were poor and in ill health, uneducated and overworked.

Today in Cuba, people are much better off. They are well educated and healthy. Most are in good physical condition. They have decent housing. For those who become ill, doctors and medicine and hospitals are free. The Cuban people, mostly university educated, are polite, and engage with tourists.

On one of our early visits to Havana, my wife and I spotted two young boys staring at us. They were about 15 years old. I assumed they would come asking for candy, gum, or something like that. However, when they approached us, they wanted to learn some words in English. We spent some time with them. As they were leaving, I offered them some money. They declined but thanked us for spending time with them.

On a later visit to Havana, I left my car lights on; when driving from Varadero into Havana, you enter through a tunnel, requiring the turning on of your lights. I drove to a parking lot, but when I returned in the evening, the battery was dead.

My Cuban friend Rego asked a Cuban man if he could help. He responded positively. I assumed he had cables. However, I was wrong. He took the battery out of my car and replaced it with his own battery. He started my car, then reversed the procedure. I was impressed. My friend Rego thanked him. However, I wanted to pay him for his trouble. He refused. I asked Rego to convince him to take \$20 U.S. The man declined, but after some haggling accepted \$10. Another positive experience.

I have a third story. My wife and I were driving to Caibarien in a rental car. We were in the country. Our car died near a house. An old man came down to our car. I tried to communicate to him that I had mechanical problems. However, he did not speak any English, and I don't speak any Spanish. He just walked away.

Shortly after this, a young man appeared. He was a mechanic. He checked the car and told me that the solenoid was gone and that it would have to be replaced.

● (1120)

I asked if there was a telephone nearby, and he took us to a house with a phone. I called the rental company, and the young man spoke with them and said it would be at least an hour before they could arrive with our replacement car. The young man told them exactly where we were. Again I tried to give him some money, and he also declined. After some discussion, he accepted when I convinced him that he could buy a gift for his two young sons: again, in my view, another example of how generous Cubans are. As we waited for the car, the lady of the house brought us drinks of homemade lemonade. We have often stopped outside the house on our way past to wave and wish them well.

Those are a few examples of Cuban hospitality and how kind Cubans are. Cuba is a beautiful country, safe, hospitable, and drug-free. The penalty for bringing illegal drugs is harsh, as it should be. Tourists who try to enter with illegal drugs are not allowed in the country and are banned from future entry.

Cuba in many ways is a miracle, bombarded by the most powerful country in the world. Cuba's major export was sugar. Sugar is no longer a desirable product, and yet Cuba survives. The small island can still provide university education for free, and when one finishes university they work in their field for two years at reduced wages.

Canada as a country has historically helped Cuba. I don't know to what degree we still trade and assist with fishing and farming. I know that one businessman, Ian Delaney, is not only in the nickel business, he has helped Cubans fund and develop organic vegetables throughout the country. He has also expanded his business interests to cobalt, coal, and real estate. He describes Cuba as a terrific place to do business.

I describe Cuba as a great place to visit, and I know that Canadians will continue to visit Cuba. I hope that Canada will continue to work with Cuba to help Cuba in mutual ventures. My wife Margaret and I carry medicines to doctors and local hospitals when we visit Cuba. We are supporters of Not Just Tourists in Toronto.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Hynd.

Who from the official opposition would like to begin? Mr. Silva? Seven minutes, Mr. Silva.

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Thank you very much for your presentation.

I want to hear from either one of you or both of you on the whole issue of whether Cuba is complying with international treaties of civil and political rights, specifically when it deals with issues of freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, the right to choose your own government, and other civil and political rights, which are very fundamental principles.

Mr. Peter J. Boyle: The comment I have to make on that is that in talking to the workers and forwarding issues up from the workplace around issues in Cuba, the workers themselves feel pretty empowered. That's the impression I get from them: they feel fairly empowered.

When I look at it, I look at it in the sense of in Canada the unions protest against government decisions—we come to Parliament Hill, we try to influence governments on labour laws and other different things—whereas down there protest is more “pro” than “test”. They feel that the government is something they own, and it's working for them. It's similar to what we are in Canada. Workers don't agree with everything the government does, and neither do workers there, but they have a system, I found from them, that they work within for change.

• (1125)

Mr. Mario Silva: Mr. Hynd, did you want to comment or no?

Mr. Henry Hynd: I thought I addressed that in my opening remarks. I spoke about Cuba's history with elected governments, and their history, as opposed to ours, is much different. It led to the life in Cuba being more harsh, more corruption, more drugs, more sex, more tourists for sex, and Cuba wasn't the same kind of country as it is today. It's a much better place to live today, and Cubans know that.

Mr. Mario Silva: Thank you for those comments.

There have been several incidents of arrests of dissidents. One of them that has been reported was in 2003, where 75 dissidents, predominantly independent journalists, human rights defenders, and even labour union people, were arrested by the government of Castro. Both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International—which I don't believe are puppets of the U.S.—have also condemned these arrests and shown that in fact they are very repressive measures by the government.

How do you see these arrests? Do you see them as in fact that they are living to the obligations of these important fundamental human rights treaties that we all participate in for civil and political rights?

Mr. Henry Hynd: I don't know of that set of circumstances. I don't know what they did, I have no idea, so I can't really make a comment on it.

Mr. Mario Silva: Mr. Boyle?

Mr. Henry Hynd: It won't be the first time that innocent people have been charged by governments in many places throughout the world.

Mr. Peter J. Boyle: The only comment I'll make is that in 2004 I was on a Governor General's leadership conference in the Northwest Territories, and a group of 14 of us met with lots of aboriginal and first nations leaders in the Northwest Territories who have a lot of complaints. As a matter of fact, they didn't even want to. There were a couple of government people with us, one from the military and one from a parliamentary secretary, who they were quite suspicious of.

When I look in retrospect at what happened then and what we heard from aboriginal leaders in the Northwest Territories—and we did talk to lots of them—one could make the same point that there's a history of oppression and everything else against the first nations and

aboriginal people up north. I don't know of the specific incident you talked about, but I align it with those particular types of views.

Mr. Mario Silva: You're willing to quite easily admit that there are human rights violations in Canada. Are you not prepared to even mention one human rights violation in Cuba?

Mr. Peter J. Boyle: I didn't admit there were any; I said I align them as being similar. And they're your words, asking me if there were human rights violations. I don't think there are in Canada. I don't know, there probably are somewhere. However—

The Chair: The subject here is Cuba, not Canada.

A voice: Well, that was the question.

Mr. Mario Silva: I just wanted to know, because he was prepared to talk about human rights in Canada, and I just wanted to know if there were any in Cuba that he was prepared to in fact—

The Chair: No, but he was still talking about Canada. I'm sorry, carry on. It's your time.

Will you answer his question, then, please, Mr. Boyle?

Mr. Peter J. Boyle: Will you repeat it, please?

Mr. Mario Silva: You alluded to the issue of Canada, and I thought what I was interpreting from you was that you are prepared to speak about human rights concerns you have in Canada, but I have yet to hear of any human rights concerns you have in Cuba. So I'm wondering, are there are human rights concerns you might have that you would like to speak to at this committee?

Mr. Peter J. Boyle: There are no human rights concerns that I have from talking to workers and meeting with workers both in Cuba and workers that have come to Canada. The analogy I used was just to set the stage for that.

Mr. Mario Silva: Thank you. No more questions.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. St-Hilaire.

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

Good day, gentlemen.

First of all, thank you for your presentations. I want you to understand how committee members feel after hearing your testimony. We have heard many different accounts, including a more personal story and another about workers.

You spoke about Canada. Like any other world country, Canada is not perfect, but we are interested in the human rights situation in Cuba. Both of you seem to be saying that based on your experience, the situation is not that bad. Please correct me if I have misunderstood you. However, you need to understand that organizations like Amnesty International and other NGOs have told us that problems likely do exist, particularly with respect to prisoners of conscience.

I realize that you have not encountered problems of this nature, but we have heard testimony to that effect. Based on what you are saying, the problem, as Mr. Boyle pointed out, is likely the embargo against Cuba.

Have I understood you correctly?

• (1130)

[English]

Mr. Peter J. Boyle: Yes, the embargo is one of the main problems. It's actually, in my opinion and a lot of the workers' opinions down there, the biggest problem. I understand it's to the point where they tell me if a ship comes into a Cuban port, it can't go into an American port for six months.

If Canada, for instance, sells wheelbarrows to the U.S. and they ship wheelbarrow tires down to Cuba, then they can't sell to the American companies. It's this type of thing. They do get American goods eventually, I think some drugs and things like that. We take down a lot with us, but they're not very far away, and it's very expensive when they have to ship them halfway around the world to get them.

One of the biggest problems is transportation in Cuba. Just recently when we went there, they had 200 brand-new buses from China, and it's very expensive to bring them in from there. Transportation is probably one of the major problems in Cuba that we noticed and that the workers told us about.

[Translation]

Ms. Caroline St-Hilaire: Mr. Boyle, for clarification purposes, can you tell us again who exactly you work with?

[English]

Mr. Peter J. Boyle: With the twinning with Kingston and Cienfuegos, we set up a relationship with the labour council and the labour movement and are encouraging this with other labour councils across Ontario. We meet with labour unions. In 2004 I met with the local labour council president. And because I'm a steelworker working in an aluminum plant in Kingston, I also met with the steelworker president of the local plant down there and a number of other workers. At that time we were on a tour for three days with the union on our bus. We had a bus and toured all over. We sat at night and talked. We had our own interpreters with us, people from the labour movement who could speak Spanish. We had a lot of discussions at night, and in the daytime I talked to workers wherever I could find them, especially about the special period, because that is the debate I like raising with them, whether they think they are still in it or out of it and how they felt about it.

There is a resilience, a real sense of pride from everyone I talked to about being able to endure throughout the embargo with very little. I saw an old car one time and it was running like a top. The fellow showed it to me and I looked at the carburetor and it looked like the worst contraption you could ever see. That old '48 or '49 car was running perfectly. They are very ingenious. They have very little to work with, but they make the most of it.

A lot of the labour leaders in Cuba, unlike myself or a lot of others, are highly educated, a lot more educated than most people in Canada. They have a very good education system, a very good health care system.

On the last trip down, we actually talked to some Venezuelan doctors at the provincial hospital in Cienfuegos and watched a live cataract surgery and talked afterwards to the doctors who were doing

the surgery. That is part of their need to get around the issue of the embargo by getting oil from South America.

[Translation]

Ms. Caroline St-Hilaire: I have one last question for you, Mr. Boyle. I do not know how long you have been doing this. Perhaps I misunderstood you again. I don't think the Cubans have a problem with becoming unionized. To your knowledge and based on your experience, has any union leader or worker ever been jailed for union-related reasons?

• (1135)

[English]

Mr. Peter J. Boyle: No, I have never heard, never talked.... As a matter of fact, the current general secretary of the provincial union in Cienfuegos province—I can't remember his name and I didn't write it down—was very proud to tell us, in this latest venture we had down there, about how independent they were. We noticed that we were free to go wherever we wanted to, free to talk, free to sit around at night with a bottle of rum and a cigar and talk about worker-to-worker issues. I have not heard or seen any restrictions while I have been there, nor have I heard it from the workers.

[Translation]

Ms. Caroline St-Hilaire: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame St-Hilaire.

Mr. Sorenson.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson (Crowfoot, CPC): Thank you for being here today.

I must say that your testimony today is much different from what we have heard from others who have been here, many former Cuban residents who have spoken about human rights violations and I would even say atrocities.

Mr. Silva brought up the 75 dissidents who were arrested. Many of them were arrested for having opinions that varied from those of the government of Cuba. They were arrested for stating those opinions verbally—a group of university students talking about freedoms that they should have and enjoy—and some of them were imprisoned for up to eight years, I think it was, in the case of one of the individuals who sat here at this table. They spoke with passion and came close to breaking down almost when they talked about the atrocities happening in Cuba. That's why we're studying Cuba. We're looking at Cuba because it's been recognized as a country where human rights violations are very prevalent, and people are willing to speak of these. But your testimony today has given no indication of any violations at all.

Some of them were arrested for communicating with groups who are concerned about human rights. Even that was suppressed, and they were put in prison. They were imprisoned for possessing a radio, a battery charger. Perhaps that's why they just replaced the battery, because some of them were in possession of a battery charger, video equipment or publications, so they were imprisoned.

Canada is one of the largest donors of aid to Cuba. It's not much, a little over \$10 million a year, but that \$10 million goes towards helping with good governance by exposing them to our Canadian values and helping them to build democratic institutions and to succeed in the world economy.

If that is the mandate of how we give our aid, should we suspend that aid?

Mr. Henry Hynd: Well, in my opinion, I think Canada should continue to have a close relationship with Cuba. I think that any aid we give them would be a beneficial thing.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Why? I mean—

Mr. Henry Hynd: Well, my experience—

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: The workers are working—

Mr. Henry Hynd: If you let me answer, I can—

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: No, it's my time, and I'll ask the questions.

Your testimony is that the workers are happy, the economy has been hurt by the embargo by the United States, but generally speaking, everyone is happy. There are no basic human rights violations.

The aid that we have is targeted towards some of that. If that's why we're targeting the aid, and if there are no violations, then in your opinion maybe we should stop that aid.

Mr. Henry Hynd: Let me answer.

I didn't suggest any of the things you just said. I talked about my personal experiences in Cuba, the many people I've met, the many people I've engaged in discussions with. I've never heard of many of the things you're saying. I've talked to Cubans who live in Canada and I've never heard them claim the reason they came to Canada was that they were being put in prison or being denied rights, or anything like that.

I can only talk about my experience—and it's long. From 1976, at least twice a year, until today, I've been in Cuba and I've engaged people every time I went—not the same people, but different people, and some of the same people. Cubans are healthy, they're happy, they're well educated, and those are three things that I think are very important.

I don't know about the issues you're talking about, but I intend to inquire about them on my next visit to Cuba.

• (1140)

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: I would encourage you to also maybe get the—

Mr. Henry Hynd: I would encourage you to have a trip to Cuba, where you'll have a wonderful time. Engage in some discussion with the people you meet, because most of the Cubans I've met are very hospitable. They're very direct; if they've got problems, they'll tell you about them. And there are problems in Cuba. It's like our society: it's imperfect.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Thank you.

Mr. Peter J. Boyle: It's funny you raised the issue about somebody going to jail for a radio. On the most recent trip, I actually went out and bought some gifts for the union folks down there, and one of them was a wind-up—not battery-powered—radio, like those

lights. I took a number of those too, and gave them to the union there.

They're building a new union centre in Cienfuegos, and they were very happy to receive it. They said it was great to have something that doesn't need batteries, because they're hard to get down there, and you can crank it up. They said they'd use it to get news around when there are disasters like hurricanes and other things.

I'm surprised to hear.... They accepted my gift of a batteryless crank-up radio with the weather channels on it and everything as being a really nice gift to get, along with flashlights and other things—things that are in short supply because of the embargo, things that they need in cases of emergency.

I ask this committee to maintain the support. I have not heard of any human rights complaints from the workers. We've been to workers' training centres. I've talked to individual workers out on the street, people sweeping and things like that, and engaged them in conversation everywhere I go when I go down there, whether it's vacation or whatever, and I haven't heard of any complaints of these sorts. The complaints are really that they don't have what they need to move forward in their economy, because of the embargo. I hope this committee takes that into account and continues their help to Cuba.

When they're restricted from getting it from the rest of the world, Canada needs to play an important role there and help out, as they've been doing for a number of years.

Thank you.

Mr. Henry Hynd: I would just add that in any Cuban home I've been in, they have television, they have radio, they have music centres, and some people have computers, so I'm surprised that somebody in Cuba got put in jail because they had a radio; I'm very surprised about that.

An hon. member: We'll note your surprise.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll pass now to Mr. Marston.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Certainly we've got a divergence of testimony here, and I'm not overly surprised. Part of the reason I suggested these two witnesses is that I've known both of these gentlemen in excess of 20 years and I knew they had a perspective on Cuba that we hadn't heard and that I thought was important to hear.

Testimony said earlier that the rate of unemployment in Cuba is 1.7%, and the rest of Latin America runs 20% to 60%. You were speaking of the health of Cubans. How would you see the general welfare, compared to the rest of Latin America? Have you travelled elsewhere?

Mr. Peter J. Boyle: I travelled to Brazil a number of years ago with the union, in 1999. There's no country in the world without problems.

One thing I did notice about Cuba was the unique perspective they take toward workers. They don't lay off workers there. They may not have enough material or enough work to go around, but everybody goes to work every day, and there's a sense of pride for workers, whereas here you'd get laid off. I've been laid off, been without a job, and had to go to an unemployment line. That doesn't happen there; if there's work for an hour, they go and work for an hour, and then they go home.

I talked to a fellow who was an economist at a cement factory in Cienfuegos. He worked for four hours in the morning, from seven until eleven, because that's all the work they had to do. I found it to be quite amazing and quite unique that nobody gets laid off from work because of a shortage of materials or anything. They'll go to work and work for an hour or eight hours or six hours or two hours—whatever work's available—and maintain their job. It maintains their dignity when they maintain their job, and that's unique to Cuba. I've never seen it anywhere else.

• (1145)

Mr. Wayne Marston: Just a further—

Mr. Henry Hynd: I would just like to say that if one compares Haiti with Cuba, it's night and day. Canada is trying to help Haiti, and I'm glad they are. I haven't been in Haiti; I've read a lot about it.

I've been in Mexico several times. I was robbed in a hotel lobby by five bandits with guns. While I was there, a newspaper story described how the wife of an army officer had been accused of stealing merchandise at a store and had been arrested by the police and taken to their jail. The army attacked the jail, and they had a big shootout among the Mexican police and the Mexican army.

I think there are abuses that we can look at all over the world, and I don't know that Cuba is abuse-free. I don't know that, but all my experiences have been good—very good. As I say, I've always felt totally safe in Cuba.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, how much time do I have left?

The Chair: You have three and a half minutes.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Great. Thank you.

We've had testimony here as well that there's a two-tiered health system, and if you're a guest of the country you'll get far better health care than the average Cuban would. Have you seen any evidence of that?

Mr. Boyle, have you ever attended an open public union meeting?

Finally, on the engagement Canada has with Cuba, do you see that as being constructive? Is it something we should continue or discontinue?

Mr. Peter J. Boyle: On the first question, about medicine, in 2004 when we went down, one of the 25 people had a cut and went to the hospital and got it fixed up.

I've been to medical centres, hospitals, and some community-style health centres. One was for pregnant women with high-risk pregnancies. They bring them in from around the countryside so they're looked after.

Although some of the centres don't have the equipment you would find in a medical centre today, they do quite well with what they have. As Harry mentioned and I've seen, the people there are very healthy and don't seem to be suffering from a lack of health. The latest numbers we got from the union showed there was one doctor for every 168 people in Cuba. That's pretty impressive. I wish we had it here in Canada.

On the issue of union meetings, there was a centre of innovation in Cienfuegos where the sugar cane workers and tourism workers waited for us for a couple of hours because our bus was late getting there. We engaged in discussions with them for about an hour. Then out came the beer and we sat around and talked with the workers. None of these issues came up with any of the workers I talked to, and I've been down there a number of times since 2000. I think that pretty well answers it.

Mr. Henry Hynd: My experience in Cuba has been different from Peter's. The only workers I really engaged with were people in the hospitality industry—people in the hotels and people who drive taxis. So I don't really have a great deal of experience in meeting with people who are attached to the union. I've met people in Canada from Cuba who were active in the union there.

My whole experience is one of being a Canadian and being a visitor to Cuba, hoping that Canada will continue to support Cuba financially with any aid we can give them and work cooperatively with them. I spoke in my opening remarks about Ian Delaney. He is a businessman in Canada with extensive businesses in Cuba, and speaks highly of the relationships he has there with the workers and the government.

I think it's very important that Canada continue to support Cuba, work with Cuba, and try to engage in trade with Cuba. There are some mutually beneficial trading issues.

• (1150)

The Chair: You're out of time.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I thought that might be the case.

The Chair: You both spoke at length about your trips to Cuba. Have either of you ever visited a Cuban prison where there were political prisoners? Have either of you ever spoken to people who have spent time in Cuban jails as a consequence of political activities?

Mr. Peter J. Boyle: No.

Mr. Henry Hynd: No.

The Chair: Have either of you ever—

Mr. Henry Hynd: Let me just respond to that.

I've visited many countries and I've never spoken to any prisoners. I've never gone to a prison to speak to prisoners. Even in Canada I haven't done that.

The Chair: Are either of you familiar with the Varela project in Cuba? It is a project on the part of civil society to collect signatures to demand electoral reform and a real choice in elections.

You haven't heard about that.

Have either of you read any reports from organizations like Freedom House, Human Rights First, Human Rights Watch, or Amnesty International about the human rights situation in Cuba?

Mr. Peter J. Boyle: No.

Mr. Henry Hynd: No.

The Chair: Mr. Boyle, I think you testified that those so-called dissidents were “paid agents”. Is that what you said? And they were convicted as such.

Mr. Peter J. Boyle: My exact words were that in my opinion, Cuban Canadians...a small group who are aligned with the Cuban-American National Foundation, headquartered in Miami.... Sorry, it was the point I made about Cuba being a sovereign country. I said:

It has laws to protect itself against anyone who is paid by a foreign power to assist and facilitate the overthrow of the Cuban government. The so-called dissidents were paid agents and tried and found guilty by the Cuban court of law.

The Chair: So you take at face value the convictions of dissidents by the Cuban court system as legitimate convictions against paid agents—i.e., spies. Do you accept that on face value?

Mr. Peter J. Boyle: I've talked to the workers down there and this is what they've told me.

The Chair: So that's what you believe.

Mr. Peter J. Boyle: Yes.

The Chair: You're putting that in your own words. Okay.

So the fact that virtually every major international human rights organization and the United Nations special rapporteur on human rights in Cuba, Madam Christine Chanut, have all found that there are systemic and repeated violations of basic civil and political rights is of no concern to you?

Mr. Peter J. Boyle: I think I made the analogy earlier that you can look at any country in the world, including Canada, and get the same types of responses.

The Chair: I'm talking about Cuba in this instance, sir. That doesn't faze you at all?

Mr. Peter J. Boyle: I talked to the workers there, and they didn't have the concerns that you have. And I'll just say that those concerns could be probably put on any country in the world.

The Chair: Are you aware that to operate as a legitimate labour union in Cuba, the union must be approved by and affiliated with the Communist Party?

Mr. Peter J. Boyle: They have their own rules in the constitution, as I said earlier.

The Chair: Have you ever heard of the *Consejo Unitario de Trabajadores Cubanos*? This is the United Council of Cuban Workers. Have you ever heard of that organization?

Mr. Peter J. Boyle: No.

The Chair: That's an independent labour union, nine of whose members were arrested and sentenced in 2003. They're still in jail. Those are labour union organizers who were not members of a government-approved labour union.

Are you concerned about your brothers in solidarity who are in jail for organizing an independent union?

• (1155)

Mr. Peter J. Boyle: I don't know anything about this.

The Chair: Okay. Would you perhaps look into it?

Mr. Peter J. Boyle: The next time I'm down, possibly, yes.

The Chair: Ed Broadbent is the former leader of the NDP. I'm sure you know who Mr. Broadbent is. Do you have respect for Mr. Broadbent and, generally speaking, in his judgment?

Mr. Henry Hynd: I have respect for him. He's a good man.

The Chair: Let me cite what he has said about this:

There is a complete absence of civil and political rights in Cuba, including the freedom of association for an independent trade union. There are also serious cases of abuse within the prison system, which is a denial of other rights. There's a consensus on these points, and I would add that it's a consensus that I share.

He went on to say:

...I was the head of an international rights centre for six years.... I met with Mr. Castro in 1992. I met with him on a number of occasions.... I had a three-and-a-half-hour argument with him about the lack of civil and political rights in his country. I can confirm that his response was not the least bit encouraging, in terms of his acting to correct this deficiency.

So from the highest Cuban authority, I can say to members of this committee...that I share completely, from a human rights perspective, their concerns about the absence of those rights in that country.

Aren't you the least bit troubled by what Mr. Broadbent, former leader of the NDP, has to say about this?

Mr. Henry Hynd: That's Mr. Broadbent's experience. I can talk only about my experience in Cuba, and my experience has been good. The fact that the Cuban people don't have elections is foreign to me, because I come from Britain. We have elections there; we have them in Canada. That's foreign to me. However, my experience is that the people are healthy, happy, and well educated, and that's a big plus. I've been in Cuba many times and never been threatened, never been in any difficult position, which obviously Mr. Broadbent has been in.

The Chair: Are either of you familiar with the organization FOCAL, which is an independent NGO dealing with issues in the Americas?

Christina Warren testified to this committee, speaking about trade unions, which is, I think, your particular background and point of emphasis. She said:

The rights of workers in Cuba, which we're obviously very concerned about as well, are also not recognized. Independent trade unions are simply not allowed. In fact, Amnesty International has suggested that any independent organizations apart from those sponsored by the state are barred from having legal status. We are very concerned about that.

Do you share her concern?

Mr. Peter J. Boyle: I don't share that concern because what I've learned has come from workers down there. They're very proud of the organizations they have and are in. I heard no complaints from any of the workers. Whether I was talking to them one-on-one or in a group situation, I never heard any of those complaints.

As a matter of fact, I've heard the opposite. They feel very proud about the autonomy they have and the ability they have to work with their people in the workplace, much like we do in Canada in labour unions, free from that type of thing. So what you're saying to me is all foreign. I haven't heard it from the workers.

Mr. Henry Hynd: In all my conversations with people who work in Cuba, none raised any concerns.

The Chair: I can tell you, gentlemen, that when Edward R. Murrow spent five years in the Soviet Union in the 1930s reporting on the situation he never heard any complaints about the Stalinist famines or purges, so sometimes it requires looking a little beyond the Potemkin village.

Thank you. That concludes my round.

Mr. Cotler.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Mr. Chairman, you've asked all the questions I would have put. Having heard the answers, I have no other questions.

The Chair: Mr. Khan.

Mr. Wajid Khan (Mississauga—Streetsville, CPC): The testimony here has been quite amazing. These are the only two witnesses I've heard who categorically deny everything that all those other witnesses have said. Perhaps their vision or contact is very

narrow and they have not explored the possibilities we are questioning here. Therefore I'll excuse the witnesses.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Do you have any questions, Ms. St-Hilaire?

Ms. Caroline St-Hilaire: No, but I would beg to differ with my colleague. In the past, we have heard other accounts similar to the ones given this morning. Perhaps they were not as convincing, but we have heard similar testimony.

The Chair: Thank you.

● (1200)

[*English*]

We'll thank Mr. Boyle and Mr. Hynd, if there are no further questions. Thank you very much for your time in coming here.

We're now going to suspend to go in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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