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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

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● (1305)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Today is March 1, 2011. This is the 47th meeting in the 40th Parliament of the Subcommittee on International Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

In accordance with Standing Order 108, we continue our study of human rights in Venezuela.

[*English*]

Today, from the Canadian Foundation for the Americas, FOCAL, we have two witnesses. Lesley Burns will be speaking first. She's a project manager with them. There will also be John Graham, who is the chair emeritus.

Normally it's our practice to give only ten minutes for one organization. I assume there's no concern about giving each of the two people ten minutes?

Okay. That looks good. I'll just encourage all members and others to be as quiet as possible.

With that said, I'll turn the floor over to our witnesses.

Please feel free to begin.

Ms. Lesley Burns (Project Manager, Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL)): Thank you.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with our organization, FOCAL is an independent, non-partisan think tank dedicated to strengthening Canadian relations with Latin America and the Caribbean through policy dialogue and analysis.

By providing key stakeholders with solution-oriented research on social policy and economic and political issues, we strive to create new partnerships and policy options throughout the western hemisphere. We are the only Canadian organization of this sort dedicated specifically to the western hemisphere.

John Graham is a former chair of FOCAL from 2001 to 2010, and he is now chair emeritus. He was ambassador to Venezuela from 1988 to 1992, and the first head of the unit for the promotion of democracy at the Organization of American States, OAS, from 1992 to 1994. He is also a member of the Friends of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which was set up by former president Jimmy Carter, and he returns to Venezuela most often with the OAS.

I manage the governance, democracy and civil society project at FOCAL. My experience in Venezuela began with my doctoral dissertation for which I conducted over 130 interviews analyzing the relationship between the executive and the judiciary in three time periods. These interviews included individuals, three of whom served as chief justices of the Supreme Court. It also included current and former judges, lawyers, politicians, activists, professors, and human rights practitioners. These included a variety of political perspectives, and I interviewed representatives from all five branches of the Venezuelan government.

Today, John and I will both focus more specifically on democracy because it is the form of government best able to uphold human rights. The link between democracy and human rights is obvious. It is embedded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that the respect for human rights requires certain features such as freedom of speech, access to power, the exercise of power in accordance with the rule of law, the separation of powers, and transparency and accountability in public administration. These features are directly associated with democratic governance, and they are all compromised currently in Venezuela.

When talking about democracy in Venezuela, a caveat is necessary. The current process of reform in Venezuela does not strive to uphold a liberal, Western democracy but rather a Bolivarian or social democracy based on increased and direct citizen participation. What form this new democracy will take has not been parsimoniously articulated, but there is nothing to suggest that it runs contradictory to the fundamental aspects of democracy that I've just mentioned. John will elaborate on this concept, and I'll move on just mentioning that there is room for greater research on this concept.

In Venezuela, power is not exercised in accordance with the rule of law. It is difficult to hold the executive accountable for its actions, and there are few institutional checks on the president's power. Often this is directly attributed to Chavez, but a closer look at executive-judicial relations shows that the executive has historically had great influence over the judicial system.

During Venezuela's pacted democracy, the political arena was dominated by two political parties, and this influence carried into the judiciary. Judges were appointed along party lines. They consulted party leaders prior to making any ruling that had a political impact. Political affiliation was often more important than upholding the rule of law, and this politicization was well known.

In this period the judiciary could not be used as a tool of the executive directly, since the two parties had a power-sharing agreement. That is to say that neither would use the judiciary as a blatant political tool for fear of future retribution. Essentially, the influence of the two parties balanced each other. Although the judiciary could not be conceived as fully independent, it was capable of impeaching President Pérez in 1993.

● (1310)

The level of politicization made judicial reform necessary when Chavez took power, but this reform failed to rectify the polarization and the politicization problem.

The second of the expansions of the Supreme Court was a direct result of a politically unfavourable ruling that resulted from a case in relation to the 2002 removal of Chavez from power. The case was then reheard after the Supreme Court had been expanded, and the ruling was overruled. This is one example of politically motivated reforms that left institutions incapable of impartiality and diluted confidence in the judiciary.

In Venezuela, access to political office has also been restricted. Although opposition parties boycotted the 2005 parliamentary elections—clearly restricting their access—this boycott of the elections was based on accusations that the state misused its authority, both directly through intimidation and inappropriate use of state funds and indirectly through impunity for the creators of the Tascon and Maisanta lists.

These lists publicized voters and citizens who had signed in favour or against the president in the 2004 recall referendum. Although some claims may have been exaggerated, it did contribute to a climate of uncertainty surrounding voter secrecy. There is also evidence that these lists were used to discriminate against both opposition and government supporters.

In Venezuela, individuals have also been banned from running for election. One high-profile case is that of Leopoldo López; the case actually is being heard today in front of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. He was the very charismatic and supported mayor of Chacao, and he was disqualified from running for political office until 2014.

He's not alone. Prior to the November 2008 state and municipal elections, some 400 people were banned from running. Most of these people were banned based on corruption charges, and they have not yet been tried.

There have also been examples of restricting power once opposition members have taken office. One example of this is Antonio Ledezma, who won the office of mayor for Caracas in 2008. Upon taking office, nearly 90% of his budget was reallocated. This money and the jurisdiction was given over to a newly appointed position based on a law called the capital district law, and the leader of this position was appointed directly by the president.

The opposition gained representation in the national assembly in the September 2010 parliamentary elections, winning 65 of the 165 seats. These opposition members took office in January of this year. This surely will give the opposition a new voice within a formal political institution.

However, in December 2010 the national assembly approved a series of laws. One grants the president enabling powers to pass additional laws without debate in the national assembly; another prohibits human rights groups from receiving foreign funding; and other laws increase the state's control over the Internet and telecommunications, which has heightened concerns that the government can easily limit freedom of speech.

Government supporters argue that these changes have been made to improve the democratic fabric of the country and rectify the exclusionary democratic system that was previously in place. Many of the reforms seem to miss the mark, however, building obstacles for greater debate rather than facilitating compromise and cooperation.

So then the question becomes, what can Canada do? In my opinion, antagonizing Chavez has only provided him with a distraction from domestic concerns. It creates an external enemy and thus builds an enemy from which he can blame problems on. It's more productive to facilitate open space and encourage dialogue, and this includes promoting the participation of civil society organizations from a variety of political spectrums and promoting debate on policy-relevant issues. There's considerable room also for further research on the current challenges of democracy in Venezuela.

● (1315)

Canada's actions are limited, however, based on recent legislation that was passed restricting the use of foreign money to promote human rights. A most recent example of this was a Venezuelan NGO called Citizen's Control, which returned money to the Embassy of Canada. This money was given to them to train journalists who work on security and national defence issues from a human rights perspective.

It's important to remember that fostering participation, inclusion, and dialogue contributes to a greater institutional stability in the long run, and these should be viewed as fundamental components of democracy.

John.

The Chair: Before we go to Mr. Graham, I want to confirm what you said about their returning the money. They were required to return the money to the embassy by the Venezuelan authorities. Is that what happened?

Ms. Lesley Burns: As far as I can read from the information that I've been given, it was the decision of the NGO to return the money rather than face any possible consequences as a result of the law.

The Chair: All right. So it was to avoid some form of prosecution or other sanction. Okay.

Mr. Graham, please.

Mr. John Graham (Chair Emeritus, Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL)): Thank you very much for inviting us both, Mr. Chair, and into this gorgeous and historic chamber.

You have already received a wide spectrum of views on Venezuela: its virtues, its vices, and especially its human rights record. There will be some overlap with others, but I propose a slightly different angle of approach. I will focus primarily on democratic governance, some of which has been touched on by Lesley.

President Chavez has a hemispheric, or, as he would say, Bolivarian vision, and has been exporting that vision of democracy to receptive countries in Latin America and those in the Caribbean that are heavily indebted to him for discounted petroleum.

But first, it may be useful for me to declare which side of the Venezuelan divide I stand on. I'm sure you are familiar with the reports on Venezuela by the OAS's Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. They have taken what I regard as a critical, but not wholly critical, position, and I'm with them. They recognize achievements: the virtual eradication of illiteracy, the reduction of poverty, the narrowing of the gap between the very wealthy and the impoverished, and the increased access by the most vulnerable sectors to health care.

Whether the dark side overwhelms this positive side depends on where you place your values. But the dark side is dark and getting worse. The human rights commission rightly highlights the removal of checks and balances from the exercise of power, the loss of separation of powers, and the draining of independence from the courts. It states unequivocally that Venezuela has enormously diminished political and human freedoms. The police, secret police, and the courts are engaged, as Lesley has pointed out, in denying basic human and civil rights to individuals and groups, whether independent trade unions, indigenous peoples, or the media.

Elections still take place in accordance with a constitutionally approved schedule. So far, what happens in the secrecy of the voting booth appears to remain secret, and the results of voting have been fairly presented; for example, an increased number of opposition seats in the last slate of elections, which has, again as Lesley pointed out, increased the number of opposition and removed the two-thirds government majority that had allowed President Chavez to bulldoze measures through congress.

While one key part of the electoral system still works, that does not validate the whole process. The election playing field is not remotely even. There is no limit on government resources, including transport and the use of controlled media. Key electoral tribunals are controlled by government appointees. With alarming frequency, opposition candidates are jailed or otherwise disqualified.

In other words, Venezuela is not a full-blown dictatorship, but with its many dictatorial trappings it has become an increasingly authoritarian state.

There is also a culture of violence. Caracas is one of the most violent cities in Latin America. The government suffers from incompetence and widespread corruption. In its 2010 report, Transparency International ranks Venezuela as one of the most corrupt nations on the globe, placing it 164th out of a total of 178 contenders.

Non-petroleum sectors of the economy are deteriorating, including electrical energy, manufacturing, and agriculture. For the past two years, even the oil sector registered contraction. Inflation is the highest in Latin America. The economy is a mess.

These negatives touch primarily on the lives of Venezuelan people. However, President Chavez's Bolivarian vision has given some elements of this vision, such as democracy, a regional impact.

So what does Chavez mean by democracy? The best answer that I have seen was given in a paper last month by Joaquim Villalobos, a former Salvadorian guerrilla leader and now one of Central America's most respected intellectual moderates.

● (1320)

Over the past half century, Latin American revolutionaries, especially those shaped by the Cuban model, have looked to health and education as the transformative issues. As Villalobos puts it, western democracy was considered a bourgeois value; if social needs are met, democratic freedoms are not important.

But if not the substance, the label “democracy” is regarded by even the most totalitarian governments as desirable, as conferring legitimacy by resonance; for example, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Chavez has given the term his own spin. When the Inter-American Democratic Charter was being negotiated, he attempted to replace “representative democracy” with “participatory democracy”, which means, as you know, government by plebiscite or by other fora in which only the compliant participate.

This charter was the project undertaken by OAS countries to advance and codify the standards of democratic governance. Attempts to dilute the charter were finally defeated on the last day of the conference, which was September 11, 2001, with the Twin Towers rather literally falling down while Colin Powell delivered a dramatic and very effective speech.

Building on the democracy clause agreed at the Quebec City summit, the democratic charter sought to promote democracy and preserve it not only from military *coups d'état* but from the “constitutional alteration of the democratic order”, which has become the route by which some governments override the democratic process. These governments, and indeed the OAS itself in the case of Honduras, cherry-pick only those parts of the charter that they wish to see enforced. For presidents Chavez and Ortega and some others in the region, these are the articles that refer to *coups d'état*. They ignore the articles that refer to separation of powers, checks and balances, and freedom of expression. Missing from the charter are teeth for enforcement and attention to abuses that take place within the constitutional framework.

I will conclude, as Lesley did, with a question: what can Canada do? The answer: at the moment, not very much. Bilaterally, we have zero influence with President Chavez. We have more influence at the OAS, but that organization has been inhibited from addressing the abuses of the charter by Venezuela and its ALBA allies. Brazil, which has a robust democracy and increasing influence in the region, might help to support the very tentative expressions of concern recently expressed by Mr. Insulza, the OAS Secretary General, but has remained on the sidelines of this debate.

So what do we have left? In good company, we should try to shine a spotlight on these abuses, but to attempt to do so by ourselves or with the United States would in my opinion be counterproductive. We should not burn bridges unnecessarily. Internal disarray and dysfunction are tarnishing the Chavez image, and there are a few signs that his popularity in the region may be in decline. We should talk quietly to our Latin American and Caribbean friends and be patient.

Thank you.

● (1325)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Graham.

Before I turn to questions, I want to run through an administrative matter for the benefit of members of the subcommittee. Next Thursday, two days from now, we were supposed to have a witness on the subject of Venezuela who is unfortunately not able to attend. So we find ourselves with free time.

I propose that we devote that time to an in camera meeting to deal with administrative matters. We have, I think, three very important items of business that need to be sorted out. We need to see whether we have a direction in which the committee wants to go.

One item involves Venezuela itself. We have an overview of evidence that has been produced by our analysts. I think you all have copies of that. We need to figure out what we're going to do with that, what kind of report we are going to turn it into or whether we're going to turn it into a report at all.

Secondly, we have the Uganda matter. We have collected quite a bit of information, but there are some very noticeable lapses or absences from the evidence.

Thirdly, there is the question of sexual violence, an enormous topic that we have to get our heads around to find some way of turning it into a topic that is manageable so that we can find some way of producing a useful outcome.

Those are the three items that we'll be addressing Thursday. I'm just going to confirm that people are okay with that.

Okay? Good.

We turn, then, to the questions.

The first question will come from Professor Cotler. We have time, I believe, for eight minutes for each round, including questions and answers.

Professor Cotler.

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

I also want to welcome our two witnesses today, Lesley Burns and John Graham. I had the good fortune in my previous life to host and welcome John Graham when he came and delivered a major human rights lecture at the faculty of law at McGill University.

I have several questions. I'll try to be brief in posing them so as to allow time for the answers.

First, Lesley, you mentioned the case of Leopoldo López and that, as we meet, the matter is before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. How effective have the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights been in the oversight of human rights abuses in Venezuela? That's the first question.

On my second question, I made mention, as well, about the enactment of legislation in effect interdicting any support for human rights organizations or civil society within Venezuela by foreign governments and that this will have an impact on the Canadian role in that regard. In other countries where that has been attempted, such legislation has been challenged as being a violation of freedom of assembly and association. Is there a role for such a challenge and also within the frameworks of the Inter-American Commission for that purpose?

My last question, if there's time for a response, has to do with the Venezuelan-Iranian connection. I bring that up because Venezuela did not support the United Nations Security Council resolution respecting the application of sanctions against Iran, in the matters of both its nuclear threat and its human rights threat. On the contrary, it has actually been in breach of that resolution in its increase of trade and investment with Iran. As well, there have been reports of an increasing Hezbollah influence in Venezuela. So if there's time, please comment on that as well.

Thank you.

● (1330)

Ms. Lesley Burns: In relation to your first question on how effective the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has been, the government has spoken out and stated that the Inter-American Commission does not have the jurisdiction to overrule any previous rulings that have been made in the Venezuelan court system. In that effect I would say it may not be able to have a direct impact, but I think that the increased pressure and attention brought to issues of human rights in Venezuela through courts such as this are very important.

In terms of enacting legislation, and have there been challenges, there have been challenges within Venezuela from opposition parties and those opposed. Chavez, in fact, did state that he was willing to limit the period that he could have that enabling act from 18 months to between five and six months. But that was a statement that he made, and as far as I'm aware there has not been any court decision in regard to that.

In terms of Venezuelan-Iranian relations, they're very public that Venezuela and Iran trade. Venezuela and Iran have been trading for many years with ebbs and flows, and increases and decreases in trade.

Mr. John Graham: Very briefly, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has had its wings clipped. It is not able to function as it should because the Venezuelan government will not permit it to undertake investigations on Venezuelan soil. But obviously it continues to operate. It has a real impact, but not as much as we would hope.

On the Iranian question, just very briefly, there is a very active trading and investment relationship that has developed between Venezuela and Iran. I think part of the motivation for the emphasis that President Chavez gives to Iran is simply part of his tweaking the eagle's tail feathers. It's a popular approach to hemispheric politics, and it has a wide appeal in some parts of the Americas.

The Chair: Mr. Oliphant.

Mr. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

You may not know about this, or you may have some information, but I have heard of an increasing number of either verbal or other attacks on Jewish Venezuelan citizens. I'm wondering if the incidence of anti-Semitism is being recorded, if it's being followed or monitored, or if you have any information or knowledge at all about that.

● (1335)

Mr. John Graham: I can't add anything to what the witness you had some months ago said who spoke directly to this issue. So unless Lesley has something, I don't think I can be helpful on this one.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: That's fine. I wasn't on the committee; I'll go back and look at that. It will be helpful for me as an MP.

Focusing on Canada and bilateral relationships, do you have suggestions for Canada's economic, social, or cultural involvement with Venezuela? What should we be doing?

Mr. John Graham: We should keep our powder dry, try to avoid responding to some of the conflicted things President Chavez says. As I indicated at the end of my testimony, we have practically no influence with him. The access to him by our own people is pretty much non-existent.

But the embassy still can reach into other parts of society. It can do a number of things. You mentioned culture. It can promote Canadian universities, Canadian schools, which are still very popular with Venezuelans. Although resources to do this are very limited, it can help to disseminate some Canadian culture. There's a Canadian studies program, which is active in several Venezuelan universities.

There are many Canadian companies involved, still, in the petroleum sector, not as owners or investors but rather as companies involved in the operations in the petroleum. And the embassy, the government, helps, tries, when it can, to facilitate their work.

The Chair: That uses up your available time.

Madame Deschamps, s'il vous plaît.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will be speaking in my own language. Like Mr. Cotler, I too would like to welcome you to the committee. Thank you for joining us today.

You focused a great deal on governance and democracy in your presentations. We have heard testimony from other witnesses about the situation in Venezuela.

Today, we touched on social and economic considerations. For instance, you stated that Venezuela is one of the most corrupt countries in the world. I could present a different picture to you and say that according to the statistics, President Chavez has reduced poverty by 34% over the past 11 years. In addition, according to the United Nations Human Development Index, Venezuela ranked 75th in 2005, whereas in 2009, it had improved to 58th position.

Without actually drawing any comparisons, I'd like us to also consider other countries in Latin America, for example, Colombia, or countries that share borders with Venezuela. Is the situation in those countries worse, or comparable? Can we say that Venezuela is the worst country in Latin America, socially as well as economically? While you did focus on governance and democracy, I'd like to hear your opinion on this aspect of the issue.

[*English*]

Mr. John Graham: Thank you very much for your question. It is very relevant. Putting everything in context is something we should do.

I think at the outset I did say something about achievements. These are real achievements: reduction in poverty, access to health care. The Venezuelans have used their oil wealth to subsidize Cuban medicine, Cuban doctors. That's been very successful.

As you pointed out, the indicators are showing that the incidence of poverty is less.

One way of looking at this is in a comparative way. Let's say you had an adopted child, and you could put that child in any country in Latin America, with the qualification that the child had to be placed in, and grow up in, the worst economic area—in a slum zone of that country. Where would you put the child? Well, Venezuela wouldn't be such a bad place. It would be a lot better than Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, Paraguay, Jamaica, and several others. You could apply this same measurement to Cuba. The ladder from extreme poverty exists in Cuba in a way that does not exist in any of the other countries. That's something that is necessary to view to get the full picture.

However, the quality of life is in trouble in Venezuela. Corruption is a serious problem, as is the dysfunction and incompetence of the government. Inflation bears on everybody, but it bears most heavily on the most impoverished. They have the highest inflation rate in the entire region.

I can't give you exact figures, but while economically Venezuela is increasingly in trouble in some of these vital sectors, Colombia is beginning to march upward. This is not to say it has entirely vanquished illiteracy and extreme poverty, but the Colombian indicators are beginning to climb.

● (1340)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Would you care to add to that, Ms. Burns?

[*English*]

Ms. Lesley Burns: I would, actually.

I think it's very important not to look at the debate as either you can have social and economic gains or you can have governance. Without the establishment of systems, of a foundation of governing institutions that will continue beyond one government, any of the gains that Chavez has seen in the social arena are likely to be lost—that is to say, they won't be continued.

That's why it's very important, and I cannot stress enough, that the debate should not be dichotomized in that way. There are certainly some social gains that are important, and those shouldn't be discounted.

Also, in comparing Venezuela with Colombia, as you were suggesting, Colombia has also welcomed in the international community. It has invited in the UN. It has invited international organizations. It has opened its doors. What is occurring in Colombia is far more transparent, and we end up getting more and more unbiased news reports on what is going on there.

As I'm sure you're well aware, even when it comes to statistics on the literacy rate, for something that basic you see a lot of conflicting numbers coming out of Venezuela. It is hard to be certain of exactly how much progress has been made.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: You have a minute and a half remaining, Ms. Deschamps.

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: I would like to quote Mr. James Rochlin, a professor of political science at the University of British Columbia. He testified before our committee and recommended, among other things, that Canadian foreign policy be oriented toward conflict resolution rather than entrenchment of polarization. He stated that we needed to stop focusing only on negative aspects. Here is what he had to say: "[...] they're not going to give Canada meetings with Venezuela, and we are going to be perceived as part of the problem." That is why he stressed that an even-handed approach should be taken.

I'd like to hear your views on that.

● (1345)

[*English*]

Ms. Lesley Burns: I agree about the need for balance. You said we should not refuse to meet with the Venezuelans, and I don't know whether that has occurred in the past. I worked at the Embassy of Canada in Caracas on a nine-month contract while I was in Venezuela. I know from my experience that there is great effort to try to work with the Venezuelans.

Mr. John Graham: The balanced approach in talking to people is always important. Concentrating on conflict resolution is a worthy goal if it's a viable one, if it's workable. To be a player in conflict resolution, you have to have leverage with some of the parties. We've done this in the past, but at the moment our leverage with Venezuela is not sufficient for us to be agreed upon as a mediator in that process.

The Chair: Mr. Marston.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to welcome our two guests here today.

I'm pleased to have this perspective. We've listened to a number of people before our committee. I was struck by the reports of people carrying around their constitutions and actually talking about them. There was a kind of engagement, and I would suggest that it was those people who ultimately gained the most, the ones who were living in poverty and gained access to health care. But they were talking about the value of that discussion.

I'm not so sure whether they don't see the corruption or are not directly affected by it, but they were certainly speaking highly of the change. I'd like to look at the context of their lives in that country before Chavez, and I'd like a comment on the initial euphoric change that they saw.

Ms. Lesley Burns: Yes, people do carry around their constitutions and people regularly refer to their constitutional rights. It's quite impressive. People seem to be well informed about those rights, and I agree that a number of people who were living in poverty now have greater access. They have greater access to education. There have been a number of government programs to give basic literacy all the way up to university education to people who did not previously have that access.

There's great value in educating a population and giving them their rights. I have seen less often situations where individuals who have tried to express these rights in disagreement with the government come out having their rights given to them, unfortunately. That's not to say it never happens. It's just to say that it doesn't happen as often as we would like to see as analysts.

It's true as well that many of these people living in poverty prior to the Chavez era did not have access to many of the political rights that they now enjoy. In fact, I think 15, 20, 50, 100 years down the road, people will still be referring to the changes that came about in Venezuela in the Chavez era. However, the cautionary note is that if a government is not speaking to the vast majority of the population, if it is not including the perspectives and coming to a compromise in light of what the population wants, you end up having a pendulum government.

So the next government that comes to power is at risk of eliminating all the institutions that were put in place. That is the good and the bad. That is why when Chavez came to power and sought to promote judicial reform in a system where there was not previously peer judicial independence, he had great support. There was support for change, but he lost that pivotal moment. When he was first elected in 1998, people really wanted this change. They backed this constitution. Now there are a lot of people who still think that the word of the constitution is good but that it's not being implemented the way it was intended to be.

● (1350)

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you.

I'd like to just speak to the dark side that you were referring to, Mr. Graham, if I may. Police corruption in this country is not a new thing. The relationships were there, the dysfunction in governmental lines—all of that was there, and horrifically.

I guess, if anything, I may agree with Ms. Burns that we've missed an opportunity that could have been glorious compared with where it is today.

I understood your message, to just sit and wait and there'll be further change. But that begs the question, who is the heir apparent; which organization?

We talk about that pendulum swing. Do we have hope that there is a democratically directed group that's prepared to step in when Chavez does move off? I'm very concerned about that, because the changes that are there originally were quite good until they started limiting them.

I question, too, on the corruption of the police, if anybody could control that, at least in the short term.

Mr. John Graham: The corruption of the police and the levels of corruption in Venezuela reveal a lack of discipline at the top. Other countries in the region, other countries with far fewer resources than Venezuela, have managed to have less corrupt police forces.

An interesting example is Nicaragua. Nicaragua has a government that is ideologically on the same wavelength as Venezuela, but one of its great virtues is that it has an apolitical, relatively independent armed forces and a relatively independent, apolitical police force. They function reasonably well. The American DEA, for example, cooperates extremely well with Nicaraguan police; they don't cooperate at other levels, though.

I think that's a fault that can be laid at the Chavez door. And something else very often happens. It happened with Cuba, and it certainly happens with Chavez. He has painted his changes, the changes to Venezuelan life under his administration, and contrasted them with what life was like before. I was there before, and he paints these changes in too-bright colours. There was a lot wrong, but it was not as desperately dark and wrong as he is describing it. There was a much more balanced economy. The court system worked not exceedingly well—there was corruption—but it worked a lot better than it does now.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Again, in the testimony here regarding the military, the people were saying how close they felt to their military. I think the inference—what you were saying—is that Chavez and the military are very close, as opposed to Chavez and the police forces and that. They indicated here that the police force corruption was a separate thing from the Chavez government.

Would you agree with that?

Mr. John Graham: I don't see how you can.... In an increasingly centralized government, where the power resides in the presidential palace, I think that's difficult to argue.

● (1355)

Mr. Wayne Marston: Okay. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Marston.

I will turn now to Mr. Sweet, who is dividing his time with Mr. Hiebert.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Mr. Chair, I only have the opening question, and then my colleague Mr. Hiebert will take the rest of the time.

I'm very grateful to Mr. Graham and Madam Burns for being here and for their testimony.

I have to admit—and Mr. Marston referred to some of the testimony—that we had an organization called Hands Off Venezuela. I understand that there are 30 chapters around the world.

You used the term "painting" a portrait of what the reality is today. It seems to me....

This is a question; I don't want to put words in your mouth.

It seems to me there was some initial movement on social programs and on health care. It was short-lived, and now what the people are paying for that, at least from your description, is a complete erosion as far as any type of separation between the judiciary and the executive. There's a complete erosion as far as any type of independence for municipal authorities. The mayor of Caracas losing 95% of his budget is, I would say, a gross manipulation.

So is this the case, that you have a government here who's trying to paint a picture that they're moving forward but in fact, as you said, they have a real issue with incompetence; and that the only notion to them, in this Bolivian democracy, of being democratic is simply for those people who support the regime?

Ms. Lesley Burns: There is no reason that social programs cannot be promoted alongside changes within the governance system to solidify governance. In fact, if that process is not undertaken, I don't think many of the social programs will be sustained. It could be that a government that comes into power following Chavez sees the benefit of these programs, because I do think many of these programs have benefited the people.

I don't see any value in focusing exclusively on that as a trade-off to strengthening governance institutions. I think that too often when people are focusing on the benefits that Chavez has brought, they look at that and perhaps have a tendency to believe the short-term sacrifices are worth the long-term gain.

Of course, we can't see into the future, so we don't know if at this time fifty years down the road, or five years down the road, we're going to have a perfect model, or if we'll be able to say that some of the process of change that people questioned could have been worthwhile. I tend to err on the side of believing that unless you are making change based on inclusion, based on consultation, and based on dialogue, you are probably not going to end up with a system that is sustainable for all people.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): Thank you. That was very interesting.

Based on the testimony we've heard, it sounds as if there's a trade-off. You can have health care, education, and reduced poverty or you can have the rule of law, judicial independence, democracy, integrity in government and the police, human rights, a competent government, or a stable economy.

I don't think there has to be that trade-off. I think it's reasonable to expect that you could have everything that's on the table on both sides of those columns. On one side, we're certainly getting a picture that it is lacking in large quantities.

You've both made the case that...and you've used certain phrases: keep your powder dry; we don't have a lot of influence; we have limited leverage. You're not giving us a lot of angles in terms of what we can do.

You did make the comment that we should shine the spotlight on abuses without burning bridges. And maybe that's what we're trying to do here.

Can you elaborate on that? How do we encourage change and dialogue without burning bridges?

● (1400)

Mr. John Graham: It's difficult.

One route, one of the organizations I work with, is the Friends of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which was set up about seven years ago by President Jimmy Carter. Most of the people who belong to this are a good deal more exalted than I am. There are several Canadians, including Mr. Manley, Mr. Clark, and Barbara McDougall.

One of the ideas they are looking at is trying to establish, ideally within the inter-American system, something like a special rapporteur on democracy and democratic governance. If you went to the Permanent Council, the legislative body of the OAS, and put this in front of them, Venezuela and its allies would say, “Nothing doing”. And as the Permanent Council runs by consensus, it would get nowhere.

However, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which we've been referring to this afternoon, doesn't operate in quite the same way, and it in fact has folded under its umbrella a number of special rapporteurs since it was established to do human rights. It has labour, status of women, freedom of information. So maybe there's a possibility of fitting in another rapporteur, a small unit that would focus on democracy. Its mandate would have to be hemisphere-wide. It would not be just Venezuela. It would look at what's going on in Guatemala, what's going in Nicaragua, what's going on in other countries, and the reports would be made and circulated.

Now, that would have the effect of giving greater public attention to these issues. Such a body would not have any sanctions to apply, but making more people—not just decision-makers, but a wider spectrum of opinion in the Americas—aware of these issues and aware of the unnecessary abuses that are taking place would be desirable.

So that's perhaps one route to take, but I'm not exaggerating when I say it's not easy to find a clear path to addressing the problems that all of you have been addressing now for several months.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Ms. Burns, would you add anything to that? You had made a comment about promoting civil society and debate. How would you do that?

Ms. Lesley Burns: To add very briefly to John's suggestions, I think there is a vibrant civil society within Venezuela and within the entire hemisphere. FOCAL works with a network of different organizations, including some Venezuelan organizations, but these are the issues we deal with on a daily basis, in all of the countries, not just in Venezuela.

I think sharing information between these organizations, building a dialogue, leads to these organizations being better informed and being in a position in which they can make proposals to their own domestic governments. I think that's important, as is, above all, opening space for dialogue. Canada is a country that has both a social network and a market economy. This can be a model in some instances for Venezuela and for people who say that it has to be one or the other. I can't stress enough that it does not have to be social programs or a rule of law. You can have both.

The Chair: All right. That uses up all the available time.

I thank all the members for allowing us to go a little bit over our normal time.

I thank our witnesses for coming here and providing very informative testimony.

With that, we are adjourned. Thank you.

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