1959: Canada, Cuba and the Cuban Revolution

The year 2009 marked the 50th anniversary of Cuba’s revolution. The seizing of power by Fidel Castro challenged the American hegemony in the region. The Government of Canada of the time chose to set its own policy in regards to Cuba, instead of following the United States. How this policy was developed and the elements that influenced its development are the subject of a recent article by Raul Rodriguez Rodriguez, Associate Professor at the Centre for Hemispheric and United States Studies, University of Havana. Titled “Canada and the Cuban Revolution: Defining the Rules of Engagement 1959-1962”, this article examines the development of the Canada-Cuba relations, through the study of original communications between Canadians and Cubans actors of the time and the decisions taken by Canada in regards to the Cuban Government.

According to Professor Rodriguez, Canada intended since the end of World War Two, to define its own original foreign policy. For its part, Cuba was seeking economic partners able to supply goods and services that until then were coming from the United States, thus mitigating the effects of sanctions taken by the American Government against Cuba. Canada was chosen because of its geographical proximity, similarity in technologies and above all because Canada and Cuba had ongoing economic relations which began approximately 50 years before. In fact, two Canadian banks – the Royal Band and the Bank of Nova Scotia – were solidly established in Cuba.

In Canada, the Canadian government intended to develop its own foreign policy towards Cuba, but also had to take into account the uncompromising attitude of the United States towards Cuba and its own obligations as required by its participation to NATO and NORAD. It is within this framework that the Canadian government recognized the new government in Cuba, a day later than the United States, supported the American government in the Bay of Pigs incident and agreed to participate, under NATO's umbrella and with some reluctance, to the naval blockade of Cuba during the missile crisis of 1961. Canada was nonetheless reluctant to approve the sanctions decreed by the United States, believing that these measures would achieve nothing but push Cuba towards the Soviets. Moreover, Prime Minister Diefenbaker clearly defined Canada’s position regarding economic relations with Cuba, which allowed trade between the two countries as long as the intended goods had no military or strategic value.

The Cuban government for its part tried from the start to reassure Canada and promote better relations between the two countries. As such, the governmental decrees of November 13th, 1960 – a set of measures taken as part of the Moncada Program that placed almost all businesses in Cuba under state ownership - had little effect on Canadian banks established in Cuba. These banks were in fact the only foreign financial institutions allowed to pursue their operations on the island. Nonetheless, the Cuban government representatives were saddened by Canada's reluctance to further relations with Cuba because of the ensuing tensions that may have arisen with the United States.

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