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POLITICAL CHANGE IN  
CUBA: BEFORE AND AFTER  
THE EXODUS

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## POLITICAL CHANGE IN CUBA: BEFORE AND AFTER THE EXODUS

Rightly or wrongly, any focus on the political situation in Cuba in 1995 inevitably starts with the extraordinary events of July and August 1994. For a few weeks, the world watched on television as thousands upon thousands of Cubans apparently risked their lives, on all manner of makeshift craft, crossing shark-infested and stormy seas, to escape the tyranny and starvation of a political system allegedly on the brink of collapse.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, for those following the news from Havana, this was no sudden incident, but the culmination of months of growing discontent, expressed through embassy occupations, boat hijackings, street violence and the deaths of escapers and policemen alike. To all intents and purposes, it seemed that the collapse, which many observers had expected in 1989 and then again in 1991, had finally come.<sup>2</sup>

What happened to that crisis and that exodus? And what happened to that collapse? For even more suddenly than the crisis emerged, it disappeared from the media headlines with the relatively low-key signing of the United States-Cuban immigration agreement of 8 September 1994. An episode which had occupied the media's attention so dramatically, and which seemed to augur deep systemic change in an apparently anomalous political system, simply faded away, with little further outside interest in its outcome.

Whatever this might say about media priorities, the outcome must raise two basic questions. Firstly, if the episode did indeed end so suddenly without the expected explosion and collapse, how deep a crisis was it in the first place? Indeed, *whose* crisis was it, Cuba's or the USA's? Secondly, after the event, what conclusions can we actually draw about the system itself? What can the whole drama usefully tell us about the wider crisis and the survival of the Cuban Revolution?

It can be argued that the whole episode was of little direct relevance to the system and was certainly not the deep crisis it seemed. We only have to consider who the *balseros* were, at least in their majority. For, bearing in mind that it is still far too early for any detailed, informed, research-based analysis of the phenomenon,<sup>3</sup> we can nonetheless draw a few tentative conclusions from the little that has emerged.

Clearly, with so many refugees, the exodus obviously included a wide range of individuals and motives; however, early indications seem to point to the most identifiable group amongst the *balseros* as being young Havanans with access to some financial resources.<sup>4</sup> This is borne out, perhaps, by two

apparent effects of the exodus: the fall in the number of black-market money-changers on the Havana streets and the fall in petty crime rates in certain Havana *barrios*. It seems possible, therefore, that at least a significant section of the refugee population came from those groups already somewhat marginal to the Havana political, social and economic system – i.e. those already predisposed to dissent or depart, perhaps incited by the effects of the May 1994 economic measures which sought deliberately to curtail the relatively unrestrained activities of an increasingly resented, but lucrative, black market.<sup>5</sup>

Further proof of the ‘minimalist’ perspective comes from the Cuban government’s remarkably tolerant attitude throughout the crisis, permitting and even encouraging it by leadership speeches and police inactivity. If true, the reasons are relatively easy to identify: the continuing usefulness of emigration as a safety valve for a discontented or exhausted population; the possibility of purging politically dangerous marginal groups; and the attractive possibility of embarrassing the United States. If any or all of these perspectives have any validity, then the ‘crisis’ of July-August 1994 must be seen in retrospect as more of a crisis at government-to-government level than as a deep systemic trauma.

What, then, of the alternative perspective – namely that the whole crisis might have a wider and deeper relevance? The first point to make in this respect is that the exodus must necessarily be seen (regardless of the high number of *marginados* who might or might not have been included in the refugees) as a reflection of the underlying tensions of a system under serious internal and external pressure since at least 1989 – above all of the tensions between a young population increasingly at odds with the older generation’s prolonged hold on power, together with the perceived staleness of the system’s values and with the frustration of their expectations. In that sense, the episode represented a collective protest against and escape from the daily grind of existence in the Cuba of 1994 – against the hardship, boredom and loss of hope, against the pressures created by rising petty crime and a burgeoning black economy into which even the most loyal citizens are obliged to descend in order to survive.

Its wider relevance, however, is in the context of US-Cuban relations. For the crisis seems to have started a process of change, in which those relations are already being totally reshaped and in which Washington’s policy – increasingly one of the central factors in Cuba’s predicament and future – is also being redirected and revised. Behind this perspective lies the reality that, since 1962 (the Cuban missile crisis), the United States’ policy of quarantine and siege has actually exercised little direct effect on events within Cuba; instead it became an ossified pillar of the world system which shaped the

context for the Revolution's survival, leading in particular to dependence on the Soviet bloc and to a permanently high level of nationalist alert.

How then did, or might, the exodus reshape Washington's perspective on Cuba? In the first place, it pushed Cuba further up the active agenda. For, since 1962, Cuba has been on the 'back burner' of policy concerns, brought to the front only to respond to periodic domestic political pressures or in single moments of crisis (such as the Mariel exodus in 1980). In such cases, the resulting 'Cuba policy' has tended to mean a restatement of rhetoric with little real action; the establishment of Radio Martí and TV Martí in the mid-1980s and even the Cuba Democracy Act (CDA) of 1992<sup>6</sup> can be seen in this light. The reason is that Cuba has been relatively unimportant for Washington's foreign policy, controlled by the coexisting superpower and safely isolated, *vis à vis* the region, in the category of 'East-West problems'. The result has been a policy stagnation, with the contours and realisation of that policy being shaped by the strength of exile groups and the variable effects of the economic embargo.

With the election of President Clinton in 1992, there were early signs of a shift in attitudes. On the Cuban side, there was evident relief at an event which seemed to offer some prospect of reprieve and which certainly was of symbolic importance, since a Bush re-election would have constituted a serious blow to the morale and the future of the Cuban system, indicating a continuation of the hostility. Havana therefore responded with several broad hints of a willingness to shift policy (with possible arms reductions and compensation for expropriated property), and, most intriguingly, with Castro's public offer to stand down in exchange for the lifting of the embargo.

Superficially, US policy did not, however, change at all; the CDA was confirmed by the incoming administration and an early speech to the exile lobby (the CANF)<sup>7</sup> by Alex Watson, the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, confirmed the embargo as immovable until democratic change should come in Cuba. However, beneath the surface, significant shifts were discernible. The most immediate were the haggling over the selection of Watson,<sup>8</sup> and the nomination as Ambassador to the Organisation of American States of Harriet Babbit, the wife of the openly pro-dialogue Bruce Babbitt. The messages to both Havana and Miami seemed clear.

Equally, a number of other moves were made which could be seen as a deliberate easing of the tensions: suspension of the funding of TV Martí in July 1993; the increases in permissions to US citizens to visit Cuba; the compromise of paying Havana the Cuban share on telephone cable profits; discussions of new immigration, deportation and hijacking agreements (with

cooperation on the latter, and on drug offenders, being quietly increased). Small straws in the wind these may have been, but in the context of past relations, in an area of foreign policy where previously any shift would have been unthinkable and politically impossible, they suggested a change in the relationship.

By summer 1994, therefore, the anomalous Cuba policy was already being undermined and was ripe for updating, if not total revision. In the event, of course, the policy shifts that did come about were only provoked by the fact that the exodus presented a crisis to the United States rather than to Cuba: the pressures on Florida of thousands of refugees seeking asylum, housing, jobs and food was indeed a crisis (echoing previous fears of the direct effects on Florida of a flood of Haitian immigrants if the Haiti problem was not solved), and an outbreak of unrest in Cuba could easily have had, and could still have, a seriously destabilising effect on the whole Caribbean region. The Clinton administration therefore had to act, which it did in two ways.

First came the standard rhetoric (but this time, in the post-Cold War era, with greater immediate effect in Cuba): the embargo was again tightened, flights from Miami were restricted, cash remittances from émigré Cubans were cut back and media broadcasts were increased. Nothing, it seemed, had changed.

Alongside this old pattern, however, emerged a new one, the effective reopening of political and academic debate on the whole Cuba policy. For a start, the US government took a step of fundamental symbolic significance, ending the special status of Cuban political refugees, who had hitherto been able to enjoy immediate acceptance on the mainland if they escaped illegally (while, contradictorily, would-be legal migrants were obliged to wait interminably and found obstacles continually put in their path, by Washington rather than Havana). Now, in a severe blow to the CANF, Cuban refugees were to be treated no differently from other illegal migrants; in one fell swoop, a major part of the traditional policy, three decades old, had been swept away.

More significantly, however, there were clear signs that, although denials have poured forth from Washington, the immigration agreement in September 1994<sup>9</sup> was likely to be followed by secret discussions on the wider issues of relations between the two countries, not least on the embargo itself. Given that the Cuban government at least partly allowed the refugee crisis to develop, it must be concluded that in these secret discussions Washington's hand has been forced by Havana.

These policy shifts reflect a recognition by the Clinton administration, and Washington policymakers, of a number of realities. First, that there had

already long been a growing lobby within the United States to end the outdated policy on Cuba and lift the embargo. Business groups (including many Florida-based émigré entrepreneurs) have been pressing for an opening to a market starved of consumer goods and flooded with surplus pesos. Democratic politicians, before the November Congressional election shake-up, have been arguing openly for a change (including the then two Chairs of the Congressional Foreign Relations Committees), while even certain right-wing political advisors have argued that the lifting of the blockade would accelerate the fall of the Cuban system.

This latter point was related to a second recognition by the administration, namely that the embargo was increasingly the direct cause of the hardship in Cuba which had produced the exodus.

Thirdly, domestic political considerations led many policy advisors to perceive that the traditionally united and strong émigré lobby was now weaker, divided by generations and by arguments as to the effects of the hardship and the newly imposed restrictions on the relatives of émigré families. Lastly, there was something of a recognition that there were indeed signs in Cuba of an impulse towards and willingness to consider political reform, and that perhaps moves to acknowledge this might hasten such shifts. The recent success in Haiti of a Clinton administration seeking policy victories seemed to argue for mediation.

What, then, were these signs of an internal movement for reform? To understand this, and the significance of such shifts, we should first place the issue within a clear context – the need to understand the particular conjuncture in Cuba of deep economic crisis and deep, thoroughgoing economic change, all within a unique system best understood apart from other paradigms of regime transition. For the original Cuban ‘model’, and its post-1989 manifestation, must necessarily be seen as atypical – a point which needs to be emphasised precisely because much of the recent media treatment, and not a little of the academic debate, has inevitably tended to be phrased within one of two paradigms, neither of which is particularly helpful to such analysis.

The first is the framework created by the collapse of the various Eastern European Communist systems from 1989, in which Cuba’s crisis has been typically presented as the next, or last, domino in the chain; the second is the debate among Latin Americanists about the nature of the post-1980 experience of democratisation, in which context the Cuban case has tended to be seen as the next, inevitable, regime to fall. While both perspectives certainly do have something to offer, they also tend to mislead and to pose perhaps inappropriate questions. For the reality is that the Cuban political system since 1959 has been best understood within its own specific historical

context. It is as unhelpful today to judge the Revolution as some sort of Caribbean version of Eastern Europe as it has always been, whatever the obvious similarities with the collapsed Bloc; equally, previous comparisons with Latin American political phenomena, while probably more accurate and useful than any Eastern European comparisons, have tended to miss the factors unique to the island's experience.

What, then, is the reality of Cuba in 1994? At one level, it is simple: that the system is currently, and has been for at least four years, in the throes of a crisis so deep that it still seriously threatens the basis and the survival of a political system which is now in its thirty-sixth year of existence. That this is the Revolution's deepest crisis is beyond question, and many have no doubt that it is also terminal. Yet already we are faced with two significant differences from the two paradigms mentioned above: first, no Latin American economy has, in recent years, experienced a downturn of such dramatic scale in such a short time as has the Cuban economy; secondly, that crisis has already continued, and deepened, for five years without the system collapsing in the face of popular pressure, as was patently the case in post-1989 Eastern Europe.

That brings us immediately to the causes of the crisis itself. Most obviously, the immediate cause was the precipitate collapse of the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon) from 1989 onwards and of the Soviet Union from 1991; given the increased dependence of Cuban trade on that trading bloc (which, between 1959 and 1989 accounted for about 75% of Cuba's foreign trade), the immediate and predictable effect on the Cuban economy was disastrous. To that, of course, should be added the tightening of the US embargo since the late 1980s. Until 1991, that embargo had been a costly irritant,<sup>10</sup> inflating costs, perpetuating inefficiencies and cementing the dependence on the USSR; from 1991, however, it became the fundamental, or at least the most critical, problem, strangling the economy's attempts to revive. This fact is understandable when one considers the extraordinary breadth of the embargo.<sup>11</sup>

These immediate causes, therefore, have conspired to make the underlying Cuban crisis both exceptionally traumatic and unique in either a 'Communist' or a Latin American context. A glance at some of the figures makes that all too clear. Economic growth, for example, went from zero between 1985 and 1989 to -4% in 1990, -25% in 1991, -15% in 1992, recovering slightly in 1993 to -10% (the latter figure aggravated by the heavy losses sustained during the tropical storm of March 1993). Between 1989 and 1992, imports from Comecon (accounting for 84% of the total in 1989) fell by some 90%, with oil supplies from the USSR falling from 13.3 million tonnes (mt) to 1.8 mt, fertiliser from 1.3 mt to 0.25 mt and animal feed from 1.6 mt to 0.45 mt; simultaneously, the prices of imported oil and food rose by up to 40%, while



sugar and nickel export prices fell by 20% and 28% respectively. There followed two disastrous sugar harvests in 1993 and 1994 of only 4.3 mt and 3.8 mt (following a respectable 1991 harvest of 8.4 mt and a decline in 1992 to 6.2 mt), leading to a further fall in export earnings (of some \$500 million) and the suspension of recently agreed contracts. The consequences have been the collapse of economic activity within Cuba, inflationary pressures, rapidly growing shortages and, overall, the picture of a partly oxen-driven agriculture, a bicycle-based transport system, regular power-cuts, severe underemployment, plummeting living standards and falling levels of nourishment – as witnessed in the 1994 neuritis epidemic.<sup>12</sup>

Obviously, such a collapse cannot fail to have had a deep impact on the stability and legitimacy of the political system. However, while opinions differ as to whether the point of total economic collapse is actually past or not, or is about to come, most agree that the economic direction chosen by the Cuban leadership is already clear, a fact which must equally affect the nature and the functioning of that political system.

Since 1986, the Cuban economic system has undergone a fundamental transformation, a real ‘revolution’, moving with astonishing rapidity from an inefficient, centrally-planned sugar-dominated system, largely dependent on barter trade with the Eastern bloc, to an economy that is increasingly open, and whose external trading enterprises are increasingly autonomous. Indeed, the economy is moving away from sugar towards tourism as the main currency earner, with increasing deregulation both externally and internally. Meanwhile, the informal economy (undeniably surpassing in efficiency and scope the stagnant and now contracting state sector) is being rapidly legalised. What we are seeing, in short, is the conversion of an economy following (for three decades) a supposedly ‘socialist’ model of development into a somewhat classical model of underdevelopment, in which the clear direction is towards some version of capitalism.<sup>13</sup>

So far, most observers would agree that this economic change has not yet been visibly accompanied by a commensurate process of radical political transformation. This disjuncture between deep economic change and an unchanging polity has naturally given rise to both dire predictions of imminent political collapse and attempts to apply to the Cuban case criteria developed in the wider Latin American processes of democratisation, many of which were, of course, stimulated by conflicts between economic crisis and political tensions. Why then has a political revolution not taken place? The main explanation has to be that, until recently, there has not been a commensurate political crisis. In 1989, such crisis as there was could be seen as purely economic in character. However, the potential always existed for this to be translated into a parallel political crisis, if economic solutions were not found readily, and especially at the grass-roots level. Here, the key

questions were not *whether* such a 'translation' could take place but *when* it might, and how long could the crisis go on until the cracks began to show in the edifice, how long before the underlying tensions and problems came closer to the surface. Could economic adjustment and progress come fast enough and be convincing enough? In the light of this, one should logically ask how the system has been able to survive so far, when far less afflicted systems collapsed throughout Eastern Europe and Latin America.

A starting point for possible explanations should be the wider process of democratisation in Latin America. For recent analyses of that process in some of the countries, where it has taken only shallow roots, have rightly focused on the issue of 'democratic contestation', the common experience of democratisation without citizenship. The issue here is that, in Cuba, recent change may be the reverse, i.e. citizenship without democratisation.

An explanation for this must start with the basic reality of Cuba since the earliest days of the Revolution, namely that the system has long stressed and practised a clearly participatory ethos, albeit one somewhat flawed and continually conflicting with other pressures, not least the vanguardism of the revolutionary leadership and the idea and practice of the Party itself. This ethos was, of course, especially relevant and palpable in the 1960s in the absence (at least until 1965), of an omnipresent and powerful national Party<sup>14</sup> and in the forced egalitarianism of rationing, the 'siege' and social revolution; in the more staid 1970s, that ethos was both enhanced (by more formal structures) and slowed, in the face of the more consumerist orientation of the process.

Another basic truth is that the Revolution's legitimacy has long been built on the extensive improvements to, and guarantees of, social provision, for most Cubans; the benefits of healthcare and education are certainly fundamental to the average Cuban's appreciation of the strengths of the system, and, until recently, the guarantees of full employment and a crime-free environment have fortified that perception. Thus, issues of 'democratisation' were often shelved provided that the benefits of 'citizenship' continued to be guaranteed.

Other factors militating against the emergence of any expected political crisis must include the existence of safety valves within the system. The first, and most obvious, is the long-standing toleration of emigration, the much-used (albeit expensive) valve adopted in the stressful 1960s. This phenomenon may detract from the system's legitimacy (externally and internally), and may even increase domestic discontent, but it has long proven its political worth – siphoning off both potential dissidence and potential unemployment – and must still offer some relief.

Furthermore, relief has often been provided by periods in which debate in the various mass organisations and academic circles has been encouraged, usually at times of crisis (1962-5, 1972-6, 1989-1990) and always restoring a degree of legitimacy to a beleaguered system.

By the late 1980s, however, the relative security of the political system had been undermined by three developments. First, it was undermined by the growing disjuncture between the social and political aspirations of younger generations and the economy's limited capacity to satisfy these demands, especially after 1984. Secondly, it was weakened by the discernible rise of an unprecedented, increasingly entrenched, power elite (beyond the guerrilla group), in the form of the Party, leading indeed to the growth of privilege and even corruption which saw their dramatic *dénouement* in the Ochoa affair of 1989 – although there clearly may have been other factors contributing to that crisis.<sup>15</sup>

The third factor was the surfacing of the various interlocking tensions that, perhaps inevitably, underlay the process of revolutionary change, tensions partly postponed and partly hidden by the scale, speed and depth of the changes and the imperatives of national unity, but also now aggravated by the pace and scope of the economic transformation under way since the early 1980s. These tensions were sometimes obvious, sometimes subtle, but always with serious long-term implications: between *fidelismo* (meaning, especially, the position of Fidel Castro as the pivotal figure in decision-making) and the growing institutionalism of the power structure; between the guerrilla generation and ethos and, variously, the 'technocrats' of the Soviet-oriented 1970s, the more Soviet-inclined ex-Partido Socialista Popular (PSP) politicians within the elite, and the newer generation aspiring to power; between the essentially closed system inherited from both the guerrilla experience and the 'siege' years and the social pressures for greater access to decision-making; between 'participation' and 'partyism'; between the need for a system based on mobilisation and the need for 'stability'; between the need for continuity (in both the power elite and the wider population) and the demands for adjustment to new circumstances (external and internal); between a tendency to generational inertia and a desire for renewal; and, perhaps most damagingly, between a potentially rigid, exclusive, ageing leadership (which still perceived itself partly in terms of the 1950s-60s) and the frustrations of a younger, educated Cuba, less amenable to the repetitions of older slogans and demanding alternative solutions.

Such tensions (partly accidental and partly inevitable) were certainly exacerbated by the effects of the leadership's recognition of the urgency of economic reaction to the crisis. By 1986, and certainly by 1989, that leadership was largely convinced of the overriding economic priorities facing the Revolution, namely the careful anticipation of crisis management (largely

through the 'special period in peacetime' prefigured in 1990<sup>16</sup>), long-term diversification and long-term efficiency (emphasising enterprise autonomy and managerialism).

In this context five factors conspired to bring these underlying and growing tensions to the surface in the form of a now identifiable political crisis. The first is, most obviously, the impact of Cuba's dramatic, sudden and deep economic, and therefore social, decline. With living standards falling daily, with shortages that are unprecedented for most Cubans (including even the much vaunted healthcare provision), demoralisation has visibly taken root, corroding the hope which played such a vital part in sustaining support throughout previous 'dark days'. For the fact is that the 'special period' (as the crisis is continually described officially) has had one particularly corrosive effect, in undermining the level of political activity. For the average Cuban, always highly politicised and often remarkably willing to be involved in a range of apparently time-consuming and demanding political mobilisations, has ceased to be as actively interested in politics as before the crisis; instead, the once committed citizen is more interested in the boring and demanding daily task of garnering personal and family supplies from the limited range of resources available, or, more corrosively, delving into the informal sector and the 'dollar' economy. The result is an evident cynicism, a growing disenchantment with the privileges of the leaders, and a visible decline in active participation in the mass organisations, especially the *Comités de Defensa de la Revolución* (CDRs) in Havana and the *Organos de Poder Popular* (OPP).<sup>17</sup> Too many Cubans have too much to do 'hunting and gathering' to be convinced of the need for the usual *guardia*, or even to be convinced that the *estado benefactor* can ever again be relied upon to meet their needs.

The second, paradoxically, is the impact of the economic changes designed to arrest and reverse that decline. For the fundamental shifts already outlined clearly run the risk (which Cuban politicians and leaders recognise fearfully) of undermining the prevailing ethos of an ideology which has long run deep in the Cuban political culture. One example is the new emphasis on profit (rather than social need). A further destabilising factor is the effect of the reorientation towards tourism, with its predictable spin-off of a satellite 'black' economy of contraband, petty crime, pilfering and even, most demoralisingly, prostitution, which is now operating on an organised basis in tourist areas of Havana. These problems were, of course, features of the pre-1959 Cuba which the new Revolution so successfully eliminated.

This in turn has produced the politically astute, but dangerous, 'dollarisation' reform of July 1993, which, by decriminalising the holding of dollars (which can now be exchanged freely for *instrumentos de pago* at preferential rates), has created pockets of privilege among those with access

to the tourist economy or those involved in the evolving 'underworld'. It is a clear case of economic realism (to increase production and formalise a growing informal sector) and short-term political pragmatism (to reduce stress, not least among the more disgruntled population in and around the capital), taking precedence over ideological commitment, and possible long-term political damage to a culture which has long stressed, and largely practised, equality. It has solved one problem, in generating greater economic activity and ensuring access to limited supplies, but clearly created another. The resulting resentment, among the very sectors most loyal to the system, is a growing worry for the leadership; for that resentment is being directed not just against the petty 'black-marketeers' and those who frequent tourist locales, but also against the visible benefits being enjoyed by those in positions of authority in the joint ventures and the autonomous enterprises. Corruption is again on the popular agenda – a significant development politically.

Indeed, from the average Cuban citizen's point of view, there is effectively a four-sector division of the present Cuban economy. There is first the dollar-linked economy, until recently thriving, expanding, with few social, ideological or, some would say, moral constraints, in which many Havanans, for example, lead a relatively comfortable existence. By apparently turning a blind eye to this sector, the leadership has run the risk of losing the active support of those who are not so fortunate, but has also risked the growth of a large sector out of the control of the economic management team but under the influence of the currency of the United States. The balance between the advantages and the disadvantages of this economy has been a delicate one.

There is, secondly, the peso economy of Havana, which is denied access to basic supplies, such as officially rationed food, supposedly universally available medicines, and even, in certain areas, water – these provisions being often creamed off illegally by the dollar economy. This, of course, is part of the bedrock of the Revolution's political support, more socially cohesive than the dollar economy, often employed in the state bureaucracy or in state services and, until now, loyal to the system; the fact that such people have seen their standards falling because of the unchecked activities of those less loyal than themselves has been a cause for concern for the leadership and one basic reason for the economic measures announced in May 1994.

The third and fourth sectors are found outside Havana and outside the tourist enclaves, where dollars, being relatively unavailable, have not yet succeeded in undermining the existing systems of distribution, where the CDRs operate more effectively and where there is, consequently, a greater degree of basic commitment to the political system, as indeed was always the case. There is the economy operating in the provincial cities (especially

Santiago, Cienfuegos and Santa Clara) where there is some evidence not only of less inequality but even of small-scale economic growth and where the social infrastructure has not yet been as damaged as it has in Havana. Beyond that, the fourth sector is the countryside itself, even less assailed by the corrosive effect of the dollar and with its infrastructure and support much more intact, but also, more recently, with the prospect of economic gain in the freeing of the landholding system.

Another destabilising factor has been the effect of rising expectations. For, on at least three occasions, expectations of political reform have been raised, especially amongst the younger elements (not least within the *clase política* of the Unión de Juventud Comunista – the UJC): with the rise of Gorbachev and, subsequently, his visit to Cuba (which did indeed coincide with, or lead to, a vigorous political and intellectual debate); with the end of the Cold War (which, while it raised fears of a rampant, unchecked, United States, also raised the prospect of a decline in tension); and, in 1992, with the election of Clinton.

The final factor has been the reality that three and a half decades of politicisation (building on the high levels of political activity before 1959) have created a population which is well educated, politically articulate, used to expressing its opinion and being heard (through the local fora of the various mass organisations), well aware and informed of the options available elsewhere, and, especially among the young, increasingly distrustful of official information (even where patently true). Effectively, a culture of confident complaint has been created, to which the system has to respond. The combination of these factors has created a political crisis, but less one of mass desertion than one of credibility in the face of disappearing benefits and an apparent inflexibility.

How, then, has the Cuban system reacted to this crisis? Examination of what has actually happened since 1986 reveals the truth that, contrary to external impressions, Cuba has not stood still politically. While the political shifts may not have been as dramatic and fundamental, or at least as visible, as the economic, there has, on closer examination, been a process of change that we could perhaps characterise as not as deep and as fast as many (outside and inside Cuba) would prefer, but certainly more significant than is immediately obvious. At the more superficial, pragmatic, level, we can easily identify a series of reforms, measures and shifts which we may accurately describe as cosmetic, but which nonetheless have a significance in sending signals, as intended, to both the domestic and the international audience and have, also as intended, helped ease some of the growing pressure felt in the political arena. Certainly one should not discard ‘cosmetic’ changes as being insignificant within a system which has long been geared to codes, symbols

and its own 'hyperlanguage' of politics, and where signs can often play a real, proactive role.

One example of this sort of reform has been a noticeable easing of overt pressure on known dissidents since early in 1993, the more easily discernible after the visible hardening of attitudes during 1991-2, when many activists were harrassed, arrested and put under popular pressure. Now, however, many of the more prominent among those who suffered have been released, allowed to travel abroad (and, more surprisingly, return to Cuba afterwards) and even to stand for elections at the municipal level in the February 1993 elections.

Similarly, there have been many recent indications of an easing of the closed attitude to domestic debate which also characterised the 1991-2 period. This new toleration (even of a degree of iconoclasm), echoing the atmosphere of 1989-91, may have short-term pragmatic motives (to allow a safety valve for a disgruntled population), but it may also, as with the greater toleration of dissident activity, reflect some degree of official confidence.

Four further apparently cosmetic moves (in reality more significant than just symbolic), have come in the 1992-4 period. The first was the reform, in 1992, of the Constitution. While these amendments, as with changes to any Constitution whose primary function is to legitimise a system, may simply have been a 'rubber-stamping' (by an essentially 'rubber-stamp' parliament) of the changes decided by the more powerful Party Congress of 1991, they also sent significant signals abroad and at home. The most outstanding of these reforms enshrined in the Constitution were: the official toleration of the implications of joint ventures (in permission to foreign enterprises to repatriate capital and even to own Cuban property); the repeated emphasis on a more nationalist definition of the revolutionary ethos; and the opening of the Party to religious believers (partly a move to make overtures towards the supportive churches and partly a desire to tap the potential skills of hitherto ignored groups).

The second was the creation of the *Consejos Populares* (piloted in 1991 and extended in April 1993) – local committees formed from a mix of elected OPP councillors and heads of 'key' local enterprises and services. In a sense they have become a species of 'managerialist democracy', relatively accountable bodies with special executive powers to identify local problems of distribution, production and infrastructure, with some success in short-cutting bureaucratic bottlenecks, allowing greater flexibility and openness, and offering welcome channels of complaint.

The third change has been the creation of *parlamentos obreros*, workplace assemblies called to discuss economic problems and proposals – a

development which, so far, seems to have been surprisingly well received, given both the level of participation and the degree of acceptance of often harsh economic decisions which have then been taken, arising formally out of proposals generated in these discussions. Obviously, they serve a valuable legitimating function, in involving the average Cuban worker in decisions which might, if imposed, be much less tolerable; it becomes perhaps less easy to blame an unresponsive government under these circumstances.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, in March 1993, came the Ministerial reshuffle which saw Roberto Robaina replace Ricardo Alarcón as Foreign Minister, with the latter being apparently shunted aside to the post of President of the new National Assembly.<sup>19</sup> Yet here we have clear evidence of the underlying importance of signs and symbols within the Cuban system. For this latter, apparently cosmetic, change in fact reflected deeper shifts. Outside observers (and many within Cuba) offered a number of initial interpretations of the reshuffle. To some, this was an insignificant, superficial, move; to others, it was, if anything, a gesture of resistance to change by Castro, given that Robaina, still under 40 in 1995 and the rising star of the new generation, had been moved to a post which traditionally could be seen as largely bureaucratic with little autonomy, and one which removed a potential rival to Castro himself. A further interpretation was, however, possible: that the move was a promotion of Robaina, a clear negotiating gesture to the United States and a legitimization of the National Assembly. It was a promotion of Robaina, first, because the post of Foreign Minister had after 1989-1991 acquired a new importance, as Cuba's external profile assumed more significance and played a greater role in its internal and external redefinition; without the diplomatic protection of the former Soviet Union, the Cuban leadership has evidently seen the cultivation of a new external profile as vital to its survival, in the same way that it had in the early 1960s when the much underrated Raúl Roa, as Foreign Minister, played a key role in establishing new alliances and in redefining both Cuba's external orientation and its internal ethos. Moreover, there is little question that, after Clinton's election, the most important foreign policy issue has become the establishment of some kind of dialogue with Washington; Robaina's appointment again raises the profile of the post in that context.

There is also, however, the Alarcón side to the equation. Certainly, given the powerlessness of the old National Assembly (which met briefly twice a year to debate, but ultimately approve, the decisions of the Party's Central Committee), the post of Assembly President would previously have been seen as a demotion for someone of Alarcón's stature; alternatively, it could also have been seen as something of a delegitimation of the Assembly itself, now put in the hands of someone whose sole political experience had been 30 years as a career diplomat. Inevitably, however, there was more to the move. In the first place, Alarcón was no mere bureaucrat, but a highly capable,



intelligent and trusted politician, with long tenure in the posts of Deputy Foreign Minister and then Foreign Minister; this was especially true of his often good relations with foreign policy establishments in many countries (often politically unsympathetic or even antagonistic), and even with certain émigré political circles in the USA. To put the National Assembly in the hands of a politician of his ability, record and loyalty actually had a great significance for the Assembly itself;<sup>20</sup> for he possesses valuable qualities of being seen as a reformer whose handling of issues is sound and of having an exceptionally good understanding of the intricacies and imperatives of both domestic US politics and the émigré community. Indeed, it was no coincidence that in April 1994, he played such a key role in the 'Nación y Emigración' conference in Havana, or that the negotiations with Washington in September 1994 were led by him.

The second major change was the reform of the OPP system, which, for some two decades, had been a curious mixture of the highly participatory (at the local, municipal level) and the highly centralised and executive (at the national level), with a mismatch between the legitimacy of the local democratic structures and the pointlessness of an Assembly elected only indirectly in which Communist cadres dominated. If any part of the political structure cried out for reform and opening it was this mismatch.

This gave an added importance to the planned elections for the National Assembly in February 1993, a voting exercise already full of some significance given that the reforms begun by the Party Congress of 1991 had made this election the first direct elections to the Assembly. Against the background of a widescale expression of public disillusion in the municipal elections of December 1992,<sup>21</sup> the leadership simply could not afford a repetition in February. The preparations for the February elections were therefore even more meticulous, including (as before the 1991 Congress) a wide and often vigorous debate in various fora, from which the underlying message from the grass-roots was of the need to offer as much openness and as wide a range of candidates as possible. Finally, as the elections approached, the leadership gambled on a move which would either be its trump card or its undoing – by presenting the vote as a referendum on the Revolution itself.

The results were apparently typical: the entire official 'slate' of 589 candidates was elected on the first round in a 98.8% turnout, and 70% of those elected were Party members: so much, it seemed, for reform and openness. However, the reality was actually more complex than the initial reactions suggested.

First, the turnout was up on the 97% figure for the disheartening December voting. True, the increase was minimal and not surprising, given that the

CDRs were given the clear task of persuading everyone to vote (a job they had conspicuously failed to do in December), but with the economic situation for most families worsening in the preceding two months, a low turnout might reasonably have been expected. Secondly, it was possible to gauge, by extrapolating from the figures, the scale of dissatisfaction and opposition: given that some 88.4% of voters voted for the 'slate' in its entirety, we can perhaps assume – to take a 'worst case scenario' – that the remaining 900,000 registered a vote of some kind against that list (against all or some); furthermore, the 560,000 blank votes (which equalled 7% of the electorate but as much as 14% in Havana) must be taken as clear 'opposition' – and to this extent the higher turnout can perhaps be explained by those oppositionists who did indeed intend to take the chance to cast a vote in what they too saw as a referendum; finally, there were the 100,000 who abstained. In all, about 19% of the electorate failed to vote for the full official list to some extent and in some form or other (totalling some 1.5 million Cubans). Interestingly, the leading dissident, Elizardo Sánchez, accepted that this sort of percentage was probably an accurate reflection of the size of a genuine opposition constituency, however defined; if true, then that figure also meant, of course, that around 81% of the electorate were prepared, for whatever reason, to register some sort of support. Even if we allow for a degree of official 'exaggeration', these statistics still tell a significant story.

There were other conclusions to be drawn. For example, 70% of delegates elected from the Party's ranks meant an unprecedentedly high figure of 30% of the new Assembly as non-Party people, and, perhaps more significant, 83% of those elected were total newcomers to the Assembly, indicating both a high turnover and the greater likelihood that Party control (which had been deliberately downplayed during the selection process) might be weaker over so many new, and non-Party, delegates, who might also be, as a result, more open to pressure from below rather than above. Indeed, most commentators recognised that, in the context of crisis and discontent, and bearing in mind the clear message given from the grass-roots before the elections, this new Assembly would be expected to respond more immediately and directly to constituent pressure than was ever the case before, especially via the six-monthly *Rendición de cuentas* meetings.

Once elected, the new Assembly did in fact begin to acquire something of a life of its own. It may or may not be true that it rejected Castro's choice as President, but what was clear was that it intended to have a more permanent and responsive role. Alarcón, for example, criticised its previous 'rubber-stamp' existence, and ten Standing Committees were established which would be, and have been, in permanent session between meetings of the Assembly, systematically consulting Municipal and Provincial Assemblies. There was, in fact, little doubt that both leadership and electorate have expected much from this new body, the former seeing it as a safety valve and legitimating

device, as a means of making controlled change, even as becoming *the* forum for debate and change (rather than the Party), the latter seeing it as a means of exerting pressure on a leadership which had lost touch. Many expect it to be only a matter of time before the Assembly itself reforms its structures to become a more permanent and effective parliament – a move to which the leadership would not be opposed, at least (under Alarcón's respected but reliable tutelage) guaranteeing some degree of management of protest. This is the real significance of his appointment as the Assembly President, as a legitimate representative of the leadership, with sufficient popular support to carry the majority with him; certainly, Alarcón was a much safer choice for this task than others might have been.<sup>22</sup>

Beyond all this there has been a third area of deep change – in the Party itself and in the Government. The process of change began in 1991, with the build-up to, and operation of, the Party Congress. Preceded by an extensive, and often critical, debate, it resulted in a purge of cadres and in changes at the top. Most importantly, it confirmed the end of the old 'guerrilla generation', by removing some prominent veterans from the Buró Político (including Raúl Castro's wife, Vilma Espín, the long-standing leader of the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas). That process has been confirmed further by the election of the Consejo de Ministros (the executive committee of the National Assembly) in February 1993, which saw over half of the members replaced, including Guillermo García (a long survivor from the 1950s Sierra Maestra guerrilla *foco*) and Carlos Rafael Rodríguez (the arch-survivor from the old PSP). They were replaced by two army generals, one of whom, Sixto Batista, is National Coordinator of the CDRs. Finally, in June 1994 the two Vice-Presidents of the Consejo, the veterans Ramiro Valdés and Joel Domenech, were removed.<sup>23</sup>

Simultaneously, the removal of the guerrilla generation continued within the economic team, with Osmani Cienfuegos (whose replacement of Rodríguez in the mid-1980s had signalled the start of a more *fidelist* emphasis and of 'rectification') and Pedro Miret giving way to two rising stars of the new generation.<sup>24</sup> First, and most importantly, the changes saw the nomination of Carlos Lage, often seen as the economic *alter ego* of Robaina; indeed, from that moment, Lage has been described outside Cuba as the effective Prime Minister of Cuba, although in 1994 his public profile was reduced somewhat, allowing the Finance Minister to take any blame attached to unpopular economic measures. The second promotion was that of Estebán Lazo, the Afro-Cuban head of the Party in Santiago, almost certainly less a recognition of Lazo's abilities or popularity than of the constituency he represents, as a possible counterweight to a more disgruntled Havana and even as a step in a possible redefinition of the system.

Finally, in August 1993, came a swathe of important changes, with the promotion to various economic ministries of four key reformers: the Party boss in Cienfuegos and Buró Político member, Nelson Torres Pérez, as Sugar Minister, Alfredo Jordán Morales, as Agriculture Minister (undoubtedly given the task both of improving food production and of breaking up the state lands); General Silvano Colas Sánchez (Head of the FAR – Armed Forces – Technical Directorate) as Minister of Communications; and, most importantly of all, the naming as Finance Minister of José Luis Rodríguez, ex-Deputy Head of the Research Centre for the World Economy (CIEM) and long known as a pragmatic and highly imaginative thinker. The last is probably the key operator within this quartet, with the task of overseeing the opening of the currency system and masterminding the reform process.

As a result of this steady reshuffle, it has become possible to detect a clear generational shift, with a coherent group of young reformers on the rise and, in the real responsibility being given to them, seen as the successors to the now departing ‘guerrilla generation’. There is, for example, in addition to Lage and Robaina, Abel Prieto, Head of the Writers’ Union (UNEAC), and as such a key link with intellectual circles; Octavio Castillo, Deputy Head of the State Commission for Economic Cooperation; Osvaldo Martínez (Head of CIEM and of the National Assembly Standing Commission for the Economy). It seems that, at last, the ageing leadership has recognised the dangers of the growing generation gap, both within the Party and within Cuba generally, and sent out clear signals that a generational renewal is actually taking place. On the basis of these real changes, there seems considerable evidence of the Cuban system feeling its way cautiously, but at an accelerating pace, towards some kind of reformed system.

One such measure was the ‘dollarisation’ decree of July 1993, which does seem to have had the effect of easing pressure in the informal economy, putting more dollars into circulation and more goods on many tables.<sup>25</sup> A further, highly significant, move (significant for its practical, as well as symbolic, implications) was the September 1993 measure allowing private enterprise in a range of about 100 petty trades, crafts and services, a decree aimed at releasing the economic energies of the growing informal economy, but also intended to ease discontent among the working class.<sup>26</sup> Equally dramatic was the June 1994 agrarian reform (the first since 1963), which broke up state lands into small-to-medium staple-food cooperatives (Unidades Básicas de Producción Agrícola – UBPC)<sup>27</sup> and will do much to increase support, and, it was clearly hoped, domestic food supplies.<sup>28</sup> In September 1994, the long-expected return to the ‘free’ peasant market of 1981-6 was announced.<sup>29</sup>

The measures announced between May and September 1994 will undoubtedly take this process further, since it is expected that, over a period

of eighteen months, these will be progressively introduced and intensified in order to both formalise and restrict the informal economy, to reduce inflationary pressures (via the gradual phasing in of taxes on non-salary incomes and profits), to remove subsidies further and, most importantly, to move to the internal convertibility of the peso. The gradualness of the package is significant, indicating the leadership's determination to control some of the dangers of the recent changes.

In the light of all this, what is the 'new system' towards which Cuba seems now to be moving, albeit cautiously? In the first place it is one defined by a totally new world context. For one reality of the Cuban Revolution has been that the world context, which played such a fundamental part in setting the Revolution's agenda in 1959-62, now sets that agenda more rather than less. During 1986-91, Cuba was probably at its most isolated, rapidly losing allies and seeing once sympathetic leaders distancing themselves from what they saw as a dinosaur, with the stigma of the discredited Soviet bloc. Since 1991, however, a systematic and clever diplomatic campaign has turned that situation around somewhat. Within the region, Cuba is now certainly enjoying a much more favourable climate than hitherto. The annual Ibero-American Summits of 1991-94, which many expected to isolate Cuba (given political shifts within Latin American governments), actually proved much less critical, with many regional leaders distancing themselves from US pressure and setting up the means to cooperate with Cuba to ease it out of economic crisis and towards political reform. More specifically, the Mexican government, despite its preoccupation with NAFTA and its desire to maintain good relations with the United States, resisted US pressure in early 1993 and set up joint ventures in textiles, mining, communications and banking. Similarly, the Caribbean Common Market (CARICOM) called, in July 1993, for an end to the blockade, agreed a month later to set up a Joint Commission with Cuba on economic cooperation and, in July 1994, voted to include Cuba in the proposed Association of Caribbean States, against Washington's objections.

Further afield, most Western European governments have not only objected to the extra-territorial provisions of the Cuba Democracy Act, but have challenged it openly. Spain, after a period of distance, agreed loans in 1993 of \$40 million, in addition to the 52 joint ventures either agreed or already operating.<sup>30</sup> Finally, Cuba scored three major diplomatic triumphs with the successive UN General Assembly votes against the US embargo, in November 1992 (by 58 votes to 3, with 71 abstentions), in November 1993 (by 84 votes to 4) and in October 1994 (by 101 to 2, with 48 abstentions).

Cuba's links with the countries of the former Soviet Union have not been as problematic as expected. Most notably, Russia and Cuba signed a new cooperation agreement in May 1993, involving a new oil-sugar 'swap' (of 1.5

mt of sugar for 3.5 mt of oil), plus deals on tobacco, pharmaceuticals and fertilisers.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, such deals, while in the long-run beneficial to the beleaguered economy, do not in themselves signify any deep change; Cuba has long enjoyed good relations with a range of countries whose political systems and alliances might have ordinarily indicated otherwise. Where they are significant is in the light they shed on Cuban attitudes and the pressure they bring to bear on the main area of foreign policy concern, relations with Washington. If, then, the perceived moves towards some sort of *détente* are real, that world context may be creating the required external 'space' for the redefinition process.

Does this 'redefinition' therefore mean a move towards an alternative system? Almost certainly, internal or external expectations of such a fundamental revolution are unrealistic. There are two reasons for this. The first is that, exodus notwithstanding, there is still no visible evidence of any popular, organised discontent (as opposed to reported instances of local protest). That is not to say, of course, that it does not exist or is unlikely to evolve; it is simply that there are factors in the Cuban system which make such a coherent development less likely. For example, there is no organised national vehicle for opposition in Cuba – no basis for a Solidarity-style movement, no large popular dissident Church – to articulate whatever discontent there is. Hence, it may simply be a case of widespread discontent still seeking an instrument. Nonetheless, the fact that as yet no organised internal movement seems to threaten the stability of the system presumably suggests that the system, beleaguered though it is, still enjoys the luxury of some time to sort itself out politically as well as economically.

Secondly, there is no apparent elite cleavage within Cuba, no interest group sufficiently organised to mount a challenge to the existing leadership. Politicians have been marginalised individually, but the leadership has taken care not to marginalise whole groups. The only institution capable of such a challenge, and which indeed was once marginalised, is the Armed Forces (FAR).

The Cuban leadership has, since the end of the Angola campaigns and the return of the troops, been steadily reducing the size of the armed forces and of military expenditure (by over 50% of its 1989 figure). Needless to say, this development has been the product of a mix of motives, most notably the need for drastic cuts in the state budget, but also the need to send signals to Washington that a less military Cuba is willing to make concessions to reduce any perceived 'threat' to regional stability. Many observers, however, saw the moves as reflecting the need to reduce the potential power base of any disgruntled FAR groups. For, in the wake of the high level of autonomy which sections of the FAR had begun to develop in, and as a result of, the Angola episode (an autonomy which played a part in the rise of the Ochoa-La

Guardia group in 1989), the leadership could not be unaware of the potential for discontent among cadres whose prestige was exceptionally high until 1989, but who are now perceived as less needed and have a less clear military role to play. While there may not be a clear-cut military-civilian cleavage in Cuba (thanks to the peculiar nature of the FAR-militia complex and the persistence of public attitudes to what has been referred to as the 'civic soldier'<sup>32</sup>) and while there may no clear 'militarist' identity, the potential threat from a 'separatist' armed forces (especially one with a powerful industrial base, such as the FAR enjoys) cannot be ignored. Indeed, many outside commentators attributed just such a motivation to the arrest and execution of Ochoa in 1989, seeing it as a severe warning to any potentially disgruntled and perhaps overconfident FAR officers that they should not overstep the mark.

Against that background, however, there have been recent indications of a return to favour, and a reincorporation, of the FAR. If true, this may be simply a reflection of the increasingly important economic role which the FAR plays, not least in staple food production (where productivity seems to be higher than on cooperatives),<sup>33</sup> it must also, though, reflect the dangers of a long-term marginalisation of such a powerful force.

In this respect, the recently higher profile given to Raúl Castro, head of the FAR, is significant. It was he who, after some months and even years of apparently declining political importance, was given the task of announcing the liberalisation of the peasant markets in September 1994, the opening up of cooperatives and the deregulation of prices. There are several interpretations possible: first, that it was a move to deflect some of the media attention from an unhelpful Fidel-centric focus; secondly, that it was the granting of a voice to the 'old guard' (in which case his clear defence of the reform process is perhaps instructive, as though such a voice were needed to give a 'historic' *imprimatur* to ideologically unpalatable reforms, reforms to which Fidel himself was perhaps less willing to lend his name). The third explanation is that it signalled a recognition of the strength and future significance of the FAR in the process of political and economic recovery.

Beyond these intra-regime perspectives, there are more basic reasons why an alternative system is not at this stage a likely, or even desired, outcome for many Cubans. The first is the residual, if weakened, loyalty of a sufficient number of citizens to a system (and a leadership) which, for all its faults, has much still to offer, has firm popular and historical roots (unlike many of the pre-1989 Eastern European systems), and which, by allowing benefits to be allocated extensively and safety valves to operate, may still enjoy majority support.

Indeed, there seems at present to be a three-way political division of the Cuban population. About a third of that population can be judged as, one way or another, opposed to the present system in any form, either through ideological objections, émigré connections or simply personal experiences. That figure is based partly on extensive impressions but also on the 1993 voting figures, enhanced by a further year of problems, corrosion and outright discontent, especially in the 20-35 age group. Alongside that is another third perhaps, who are wholly committed to the system, whatever its visible faults or its patent effects on them personally. These are especially most Party activists, the older generation (who remember the sacrifices and who personally experienced the social changes), those over 35 and the rural population.

It is the remaining third that is, however, most significant, the less committed but still loyal section. These are typically Cubans who have suffered throughout the 'special period', whose patience has been sorely tested, whose regular involvement and participation in the various mechanisms of the political structure has declined in the face of the task of daily survival, but whose fears are at present greater than their discontent and in whom a residual loyalty, or trust, is still evident. Those fears focus patently on two possible outcomes. The first is a genuine fear, reinforced by press coverage of post-1989 Europe, that Cuba will be pushed into a process of economic change on the Eastern European model, with the inevitable price of mass unemployment and the dismantling of systems of social provision. The average Cuban's reliance on the universal free health service is a factor not to be underestimated. The second fear refers to a future in which the exiles return to 'claim their own' and come to dominate an unchecked market-led economic recovery. For this third, therefore, there is still a level of tolerance, a passive willingness to sit out the crisis (which is often optimistically referred to as a period being 'passed through') and a reluctance to contemplate a real alternative. There is also a residual hope that the state can continue to protect as it has and to guarantee minimum standards.

The second critical factor is the essential flexibility of a political system, which has consistently shown an ability to react pragmatically to successive crises (though none as deep as this). The breadth of the discourse of the Cuban revolutionary political culture allows it the clear possibility of shifting easily without 'betrayal' or confusion. Moreover, just as the system proved capable of developing first the CDRs in the 1960s, then the *Rendición de cuentas* in the 1970s, and now, in the 1990s, a more responsive National Assembly and the *parlamentos obreros*, the Revolution's ability to be flexible is still obviously strong.

If, then, the system is not likely to move, voluntarily or by force, towards a totally new system, what future direction is likely to be followed? What are



the alternative scenarios, or even the possible outcomes of a likely process of political reform, assuming that the system's economic survival guarantees sufficient time and space for such reform? Most (apart from a few émigrés) would rule out any sort of rapid move to a multi-party democracy: that is clearly not only perceived as too dangerous (by the leadership), but also as irrelevant, given the evident lack of a base for significant alternative parties (the organised opposition having steadily decamped to Miami over the decades), and, above all, the lack of a coherent, consensual opposition project. The dissident groups may be many and vociferous, but they probably represent few Cubans actively and remain small and divided; the exile community, on the other hand, seems still to enjoy no great legitimacy within Cuba, even among the most disillusioned. What, however, is not only likely but even already evident is a shift towards a sort of internal pluralism, the development of a kind of 'government of national unity', a 'broad front' both to open up (in a controlled fashion) and to broaden legitimacy.

Such a 'front' would necessarily have to have as its base the Party, but what kind of Party would this be, and is it already happening? Ever since 1989, a discernible trend has been under way to redefine the Party in more nationalist, *cubanista*, terms,<sup>34</sup> emphasising its and the Revolution's historical roots and Cuban character. Given the evident need for a more responsive structure to reclaim lost legitimacy and broaden its appeal (since there seems to be unprecedentedly widespread cynicism about the Party), it is by no means out of the question that the Party may soon cease to be as selective as it has been and may even rename itself. Such a party, in alliance with some or all of those above forces, could indeed offer some prospect of a different approach, while still keeping faith with its roots – perhaps redefining 'Communism' as some sort of 'communalism', or, more likely, 'communitarianism' (to allow for the *détente*, and possible alliance, with religious groups). In this respect, the model of the Mexican Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) has its attractions, namely of a 'hegemonic' party within a 'corporate' political structure.

With which forces or groups, then, would the Party ally itself in this way? The first candidate is the definable 'Christian Democrat' or 'Social Christian' constituency in Cuba, in the form of the variously sympathetic, but often critical, Protestant Churches, which in October 1993 distanced themselves from the more hardline stance adopted by the Catholic Church.<sup>35</sup> Certainly there is ample evidence of an *entente* between the Revolution and these organisations, which have long given support to the Revolution's social policies and which now fiercely condemn the embargo. There seems less possibility of the inclusion of the Catholic Church in such an alliance, but a history of pragmatism on both sides leads one to surmise that the mutual advantages of inclusion rather than exclusion may well overcome such problems. Certainly, the advantages to the Cuban leadership, in terms of

widening active support, gaining legitimacy and even aiding the process of ideological redefinition are considerable.

The second, third and fourth candidates – namely the FAR, the CDRs and the Cuban Workers' Confederation (CTC) – may seem to make the concept of a 'broad front' a misnomer, since these three bodies have not obviously been autonomous actors, being closely linked to the Party itself. However, that assumes the continuation of those links and of the Party in their present form. The FAR, for example, would regain some lost credibility and potential disillusionment might be diverted by greater visible access to decision-making, while the Party would send a message to possible dissidents that hopes for a military removal of Castro are unrealistic, and that those who contemplate any such removal for themselves would have the military to face as well. Moreover, given the military's economic muscle and their potential role in recovery, their inclusion in a more formal way would offer much. Recent evidence certainly supports this idea.

Equally, to treat the CDRs as separate might offer the possibility for those who reject the Party as a forum and a channel to see a nationally coordinated CDR movement as a viable, or at least non-Party, alternative, perhaps akin to some of the more visible new social movements of Latin America, with greater informality, flexibility, responsiveness and participation. Certainly, the attempt to raise the profile of the CDRs indicates some sort of enhanced role, perhaps nationally, although the decline in public legitimacy of these bodies in Havana may prevent that from being universally effective.

The third force – the CTC – is, on the face of it, extremely unlikely, given its record since the early 1960s of subordination to leadership and Party and its long-standing function as 'transmission-belts' for leadership decisions and means of mobilisation.<sup>36</sup> However, there are clear signs that the CTC has been given its head by a leadership anxious for more safety valves and keen to develop as many safe channels of communication as possible. Certainly that would explain the apparent rise of Pedro Ross Leal, the head of the CTC, less on account of his own abilities than for his power base, but also the increasingly critical tone adopted by the newspaper *Trabajadores*, which seems to have been given the role of social conscience, commenting on the various economic reforms and thus ensuring a level of leadership awareness of the possible political consequences of the social costs of the reform programme. This scenario would also be reinforced by the apparent success of the *parlamentos obreros* as consultative and legitimating fora.

There is also one further possible candidate – the exile community, or part of it. Already, in 1993-4, moves were made by the Cubans to facilitate links: increased visas (to 500 per week), with no currency limit and no obligatory exchange amount or rate, but also with conciliatory noises being made in

public by certain leaders. In this context the anger of many émigrés to the Clinton measures in summer 1994 was understandable. On the political side, hints were first dropped in 1993 (by Alarcón) of the desirability of Havana treating its 'lost children' less as a threat and more as part of a cooperative 'family', in some sort of formal way. Given Alarcón's record, his undoubted importance and the role planned for the new National Assembly, the possibility of the vote being extended to certain émigrés (under strict conditions) is not out of the question, with a resulting 'cooptation' of certain more cooperative leaders. Such a move would clearly do much to broaden the legitimacy of the process and weaken any political pull of the exiles (and even any influence they might still enjoy with Washington). The April 1994 conference reinforced that likelihood, with its message of unity and 'Nación', its reiteration of nationalist codes and its visible success in undermining the émigré political forces. Moreover, Robaina's meeting in Madrid, in September 1994, with the leaders of three more *dialoguista* émigré groups confirms this scenario.<sup>37</sup>

If any or all of these possibilities emerge, then there is an even greater likelihood of the 'impossible' happening, namely the withdrawal from active leadership of Castro himself, a possibility not allowed by the continuation of the crisis in its present form. One expects his finely attuned survival instincts and ability to put his finger on the pulse to make him aware of the need to be seen to be stepping down at some time. The likelihood, therefore, of some sort of collective leadership is greater now than at any previous moment, with Castro in some sort of figurehead role, as President, defining the process both externally and internally, and with Robaina, Lage and Alarcón taking the key roles of political and economic management. Indeed, such a collective leadership probably already exists, but clearly needs to be formalised.

Here, however, there is a contradiction. Fidel Castro still remains central to two opposite outcomes. On the one hand, he is vital to legitimacy, especially among those who have lived through difficult times, those who have benefited most and those who do not perhaps dissent so clearly. On the other hand, he is equally central to the hopes of real change, by his removal from power. Indeed, to complicate matters further, many also see him as the sole guarantor of a real change which would still provide both social peace and official support. The conundrum is that the longer he remains, the more one section of the population sees him as the guarantee of continuity and stability, but the more others (especially the young) see no chance of basic change. For one group Fidel remains the solution; for the other he is increasingly the problem.

## Conclusion

All of this leaves the Cuban political system in a delicately balanced situation, in which certain factors will be decisive. The first must be the question of economic recovery (regardless of reform). Here the signs are mixed; at one level the prospects look good. Rises in the price of sugar (partly offsetting the disastrous harvests) and nickel eased some of the pressure, and domestic production has increased in several areas, notably in nickel and oil (the latter from 550,000 tonnes in 1991 to 1.2 mt in 1994). Oil deliveries (down from 13 mt to 6 mt at one stage) have picked up again, aided by a 1993 Venezuelan-Russian oil swap of 2 mt). Inward investment is clearly still inadequate, but it is rising and the steady increase in joint ventures augurs well, aided by the fact that over 500 state enterprises in external trade are now self-financing. Above all, tourism is booming, rising by some 30% per annum and earning \$380m in 1992, generating 59,000 much needed jobs (with average monthly pay in the tourist sector, in 1993-4, of 375 pesos, compared to the national average of 200).

It is, however, at the family level that economic indicators should be examined for their impact on political support and the political future. Here the consensus seems to be that shortages have stabilised somewhat, especially after the September 1994 reforms and greater liberalisation, and health levels (which underwent a serious and worrying decline in 1993) seem to have stopped falling. In this respect the political significance of the elimination of the neuritis epidemic is not to be underestimated. As a result, there are more economic analysts, even outside Cuba, who predict for 1994-5 some levelling off in the precipitate fall in activity and living standards. For a delicately balanced political structure, that fact, if true, cannot have come a moment too soon. Indeed, the possibility exists that 1994 may already be too late, with too much fundamental political damage already caused.

A second key must be the political skills of Fidel Castro himself, who has so often been able to make capital from gross errors and calamities, who has often in a sense led the opposition (by attributing blame to others and articulating popular demands for change), and whose record for survival is second to none. He may be the last to admit the need for change (as the evidence seemed to suggest during 1989-91), but he is more than capable of being the first to instigate it once its need is realised.

The third factor is the corrosive effect of the process of rapid economic liberalisation, offering new values and undermining so many of the old ones which have remained in force for three decades, especially the sense of 'community'. Indeed, one might argue that a widespread and deep sense of communally shared values has lain at the heart of the Revolution's survival during the crisis years. In a sense, 'citizenship' has been the system's saving

grace. But how long can that sense withstand the atomising and disaggregating pressure of a capitalist ethos, with competition, profit and personal gain in the ascendancy, generating the inevitable inequality? One irony of the present situation is that the sector most loyal to the Revolution (the FAR) is the one without extensive access to the dollar economy, but the one whose loyalty was undoubtedly in the minds of those who dictated the May 1994 measures; however, many of those who currently clearly benefit from the 'dollarisation' may actually prefer the present situation to continue, since a full opening might be less amenable than a limited freedom which suits them personally.

On the more obviously political front, much depends on the perceived responsiveness, efficacy and willingness to reform itself of the National Assembly (for which the signs are so far promising) and the openness of the grass-roots and intellectual debate being encouraged again, in which the existing, and always useful, *Rendición de cuentas* system and the CDRs (under the newly powerful Sixto Batista) will play a vital role. Indeed, it is precisely in this area that the stability of the system will stand or fall. Equally, the impact on popular support of the evident moves to rejuvenate the Party structures and leadership cannot yet be judged, but will be critical.

Certainly, in the past, the Cuban leadership has been seen to step back from expected changes and to be reluctant to shift ground. That reluctance is, of course, predictable, and arises from a variety of motives. In the first place, old habits die hard, not least among a tightly knit group of ex-guerrillas who have seen three and a half decades of 'success' crafted and led by them (against all manner of threats, pressure and conspiracy, external and internal) and who naturally distrust any move to undermine that achievement. There has also been, from 1991, an inevitable fear of the 'Gorbachev factor', of opening the floodgates to demands incapable of being met within a limited system. There is, furthermore, a deeply entrenched fear of any move which might weaken the front against a 'US imperialism' whose whole policy has been since 1961 to undermine the Revolution in some way or other. One should not underestimate, either, the perception – or, indeed, one might accurately say, the recognition – that the need for political change in Cuba is simply not as urgent as it had been in Eastern European systems that lacked legitimacy as far as the majority of their citizens were concerned and which lacked the 'safety valves' available to the Cuban population – systems which, in other words, lacked 'citizenship'.

This brings us back to the original focus. For a twist of fate has meant that the Revolution's future in some definable form still depends on decisions made in Washington. The ending (or easing) of the embargo will undoubtedly make many of the reforms and measures take effect, and would bring a much needed element of hope to the beleaguered population. One should not rule

out the possibility of new initiatives from a Clinton administration which is clearly keen for foreign policy success (especially as it is the one area where the President still has freedom to act, in the face of a Republican-dominated Congress) and which has already been sufficiently alarmed by the ripple effects of turbulence and hardship in Cuba.

All of which makes an unusual outcome in Cuba likely, but not perhaps the one predicted by so many since 1989 (indeed, in some cases, since 1959) – namely the total collapse of the Revolution. The possibility seems greater now than five years ago that the system may not only survive, but even reform itself. Indeed, we may just see the re-emergence of the version of revolution planned and hoped for between 1959 and 1961, before the blockade and the Cold War combined to distort it. If the *balsero* exodus had any significance, this may be it.

## Notes

1. By June 1994, the numbers of *balseros* (raft people) had reached 3,335 (compared to 2,257 in the whole of 1992 and 3541 in 1993); by 20 August, this had reached 8,116 (with 1,189 leaving on that day alone). Finally, once official toleration became clear, about 32,000 were recorded as reaching either Florida or Guantánamo.
2. The whole crisis began with the occupation of the Belgian Embassy on 28 May by 114 asylum seekers, followed by similar occupations of the Chilean and German Embassies. In July and August there were a number of hijackings of harbour craft and, finally, violent incidents in which two policemen were killed.
3. Only in 1993 did the first major sociological studies of the Mariel exodus of 1980 begin to emerge, often with surprising findings, which lends a necessary note of caution to any rush to judgement on the most recent exodus.
4. *Cuba Business* (London), vol. 8, no. 6, July/August 1994, cited the cost of some *balsas* as \$1000 (p. 1).
5. In May 1994 the National Assembly gave the government powers to introduce taxes on the self-employed, cooperatives and private farmers, to cut subsidies to unprofitable state enterprises, to raise prices of services and goods (including food and medicines), to exchange bank deposits for government bonds, and (in a move towards the eventual convertibility of the peso) to control the circulation of currency. As a result, in June there were massive price rises – cigarettes (566%), petrol (270%), electricity (122%), beer (100%), transport, water, postal rates and telephones. There was also a 100% increase in taxation

on the self-employed – whose numbers may now reach 25-50% of the workforce (*Cuba Business*, vol. 8, no. 8, October 1994, p.1) – and cuts in subsidies to cafeterias. Similarly, the August Assembly approved the introduction, in January 1995, of taxes on public services, property, transport, and toll charges.

6. Radio Martí and TV Martí were set up under the Reagan administration as part of the campaign to isolate Cuba in the hemisphere and as a concession to the right-wing exile lobby. The CDA was the result of the bill by Florida Senator Torricelli to tighten the economic pressure on the Cuban government in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although it was opposed by many Democrats and foreign governments, it played an important role in the 1992 presidential campaigns and in the search for votes in Florida.

7. The Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) is the largest political grouping amongst the émigrés; led by Jorge Mas Canosa and closely linked to Republican policymakers, it has long been the most intransigent of the exile groups, but also the one with the highest political and media profile.

8. Clinton's initial nomination was Mario Baeza, an Afro-Cuban émigré known to favour dialogue, who was opposed fiercely by the CANF. Their own choice was, however, overruled and Clinton ended by appointing Alex Watson, a non-political career diplomat.

9. Thanks to the mediation of ex-President Carter, the two sides began discussions which produced the agreement of 9 September. This allowed for the granting of visas to 20,000 Cubans annually (this being the number of *balseros* picked up by the US coastguard after 19 August), plus visas for all those on the US Interest Section's waiting list (estimated to be about 6,000). In return, the Cubans agreed to take measures to stop the exodus with effect from 13 September, a delay which increased the number of refugees still further.

10. Estimates vary considerably of the cost of the embargo to the Cuban economy. One frequently cited figure puts it at a total of \$38 billion between 1960 and 1990. In a letter to the UN General Assembly in October 1994, Foreign Minister Robaina gave a figure of \$970 million for 1993 alone.

11. As a result of the CDA, the embargo now includes a ban on imports to the USA with any Cuban component or on exports to Cuba of any product with over 20% of US input, a ban on US bank holdings of Cuban money and on ships docking in US ports for six months after calling in Cuban ports.

12. In 1993 a mysterious eye disease epidemic hit Cuba, affecting thousands of Cubans. Many experts attributed it to malnutrition, but cures eluded the health

system for some time. Eventually, however, a well organised campaign did succeed in stopping the epidemic.

13. It can be described as a 'mixed' model overall, given the definitions offered by the economic team now managing the changes. For the current intention seems to be the creation of an economy with three sectors. The first is a state sector which – albeit at a necessarily reduced level – is a guarantee of the continuing provision of what are still seen as 'social' services, and also a guarantee of the continuation of a 'socialist' character to the whole model. The second is an increasingly self-financing sector of productive enterprises, of varying sizes. The third sector covers the burgeoning range of enterprises which are patently pushing back the frontiers of the permissible at an increasing rate, namely the Joint Venture Agreements (JVA), the autonomous state enterprises and ever larger-scale private activities.

14. The various Party organisations of the Revolution in the 1959-65 period reflected the shifting ideological and political process. Between 1959 and 1961 there were two leading political groups (all others having collapsed): Castro's July 26 Movement (including the ex-guerrilla Ejército Rebelde) and the pre-1959 Communist Party, the Partido Socialista Popular (PSP), which joined the rebellion in 1958. The increasingly close alliance between these groups led, in 1961, to the nomination of a leading PSP activist, Aníbal Escalante, as the person responsible for coordinating them, and a third group, the Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil, into one umbrella grouping, the Organizaciones Revolucionarias Integradas (ORI). In March 1962, however, he was removed, and several ex-PSP cadres were purged, as the ORI turned out to be a largely PSP-led body; in its place, a largely paper party, the Partido Unificado de la Revolución Socialista (PURS) was set up. Finally, in 1965, the Partido Comunista Cubano was created – but with only some 50,000 members and with no Party Congress until 1975 it remained little more than a vehicle for the ex-guerrillas who constituted the majority of the leadership.

15. In July 1989, General Ochoa, Cuban Commander-in-Chief in Ethiopia (1977-78) and then Angola (1987-88), and one of only five 'Heroes of the Republic', was arrested and charged with treason and corruption (accepting \$3.5 million from the Medellín drugs cartel to allow transshipment of drugs through Cuban airspace). He was eventually tried with 13 other high-ranking officers, sentenced to death and executed. The fall-out included the arrest, trial and sentencing of the Interior Minister and his deputy and a wave of sackings in the FAR and the Ministry, all linked to the long-standing 'sanctions-busting' operation.

16. The 'Special Period' was instituted in the early 1990s as a response to impending crisis, focusing on self-sufficiency and survival. It tended to overtake the post-1986 process of 'rectification' which had characterised Cuban economic



policy until the collapse of the Eastern bloc, and which involved a fundamental rethink of economic orthodoxies.

17. The CDRs were set up in 1960, as 'vigilante' bodies at street and village level and as part of the preparations for the coming US-backed invasion. After their success in April 1961 (the Bay of Pigs) they tended to take on a more positive socialisation role, involving over 6 million Cubans, and became a valuable mechanism of the revolutionary process. The Organos de Poder Popular (OPP) were set up in 1976, in a Soviet-style pyramid structure, with municipal assemblies being elected directly for 30 month-periods, and provincial and national assemblies being elected by these local bodies.

18. The unions were given a critical role in the May 1994 measures, with approximately 80,000 *parlamentos* discussing the proposals; as a result, the CTC put the proposals to the National Assembly for May.

19. Robaina was long seen as the popular and charismatic head of both the Federación de Estudiantes Universitarios (FEU) and the UJC. His promotion to the Central Committee in 1990 and to the Buró Político in 1991 were widely seen as signs of a political shift.

20. According to some commentators, Alarcón actually beat Castro's appointee to the post, in something of a gesture of Assembly autonomy; there is no clear evidence of this, however.

21. In December 1992, with the economic crisis apparently deepening and discontent increasing, municipal elections were held throughout Cuba, being seen by many as a critical indicator of popularity. The resulting message was all too clear: about 30% effectively abstained (by spoiling ballots or actually not voting), with especially high figures in Havana and even the usually loyal Santiago, and a very high proportion of the candidates had to go to a second round of voting, having received insufficient votes (under 50%). Given the usually high turnout for such elections and the local pressure to participate, such figures were indeed significant – and were seen as such by a leadership startled, but perhaps not surprised, by this display of protest.

22. One such aspirant might have been the outspoken leading reformist Carlos Aldana who, after a meteoric rise in the early 1990s was suddenly demoted in autumn 1992, ostensibly for corruption. Observers suggest that he may have overstepped the mark in terms of permissible declarations.

23. Ramiro Valdés was one of the original activists from 1953 and always part of the 'inner circle' of the Revolution, particularly as Minister of the Interior. However, from the early 1980s he was progressively demoted, perhaps as part

of some internal struggle (he had tended to become identified less with the Sierra veterans and more with Moscow).

24. Osmani Cienfuegos, however, returned to favour in 1994 with his nomination as Minister of Tourism; if there was any significance in this, it may have been a move to place such an ethically delicate development in the hands of a trusted guerrilla veteran.

25. Certainly, that move, in conjunction with the May 1994 measures, has dramatically reduced the black market price of the dollar, which fell from an average of 120 pesos in May 1994 to 25 in November 1994.

26. The measure was clearly aimed at small, family-based, enterprises among that sector since graduates, who were still guaranteed jobs, were specifically excluded from the decree. Even this exclusion was subsequently removed.

27. The new UBPCs (2,600 by June 1994) accounted for 36% of non-cane cultivation, but including 62% of previously state land for vegetable cultivation. One feature of these new units was the explicit lifetime rights conceded.

28. *Cuba Business*, vol. 8, no. 8, October 1994, p. 1.

29. The limited *mercado libre*, set up in 1981, proved an immediate success; in one year, 84% of domestically consumed food was produced by the system. Politically, however, it proved dangerous, giving rise to considerable resentment at the rising prosperity of certain farmers. Gradually, it was cut back by the introduction of a state-regulated 'parallel market' and finally, it was abolished as part of the 'rectification' drive in 1986.

30. By Spring 1994, Spanish companies numbered 78 out of the 352 foreign companies operating in Cuba, by far the largest contingent. In February 1994, Cuba and Spain reached a settlement in the long-standing dispute on compensation for expropriated property.

31. Russian-Cuban relations have not, however, been without their difficulties, as witnessed by the brief suspension of Russian oil deliveries in November 1994, ostensibly responding to the shortfall in Cuban sugar.

32. Jorge Domínguez in particular has used this term (*Cuba: Order and Revolution*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1978, p. 341 and *passim*).

33. FAR agricultural production (mostly through the Ejército de Juventud Trabajadora) achieved a 30% increase in 1992 and again in 1993. *Cuba Business*, vol. 8, no. 7, September 1994, p. 4).

34. For a fuller discussion of *cubanismo* see the author's 'Martí, Marxism and Morality: the Evolution of an Ideology of Revolution', in Richard Gillespie (ed.), *Cuba after Thirty Years: Rectification and the Revolution* (London, 1990, pp. 161-83).

35. For a fuller explanation of the evolving position of the Catholic Church, see John Kirk, *Between God and the Party. Religion and Politics in Revolutionary Cuba* (Tampa, 1989). In September 1993, the hierarchy, responding to pressure either from certain laity or from the Vatican, or believing the end of the system to be nigh, suddenly broke with its policy of cautious *entente* and produced a highly critical statement, to which the government responded angrily.

36. Many authors have seen the role of unions in socialist Cuba as problematic, and have tended to agree with their characterisation as 'transmission belts' for executing Party policies.

37. During Robaina's visit to Spain, he met in particular Eloy Gutiérrez Menoyo (of *Cambio Cubano*), Ramón Cernuda (of the *Comité pro Derechos Humanos y Reconciliación Nacional*) and Alfredo Durán (of the *Comité Cubano para la Democracia*).

