

Canada and the Venezuela crisis

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, Canada has stepped out of its comfort zone in hemispheric affairs, to speak and act forcefully, as Minister of Foreign Affairs Chrystia Freeland put it, in solidarity with “the people of Venezuela and their desire to restore democracy and human rights in Venezuela.” With its partners of the Lima Group, Canada imposed sanctions on the Maduro regime, recognized Juan Guaidó as interim president, and called for free and fair elections as soon as possible. The article identifies possible factors explaining Canada’s policy. The main proposition is that the Venezuela crisis features an extraordinary combination of domestic and international factors that make participation to a multilateral and diplomatic push for restoration of democracy an ambitious but judicious option for Canada. The article also presents the criticism to this policy, and discusses the issue of human rights and democracy promotion in the broader context of Canadian foreign policy.

Key words: Canada, Venezuela, foreign policy, democracy, human rights.

Canadá y la crisis de Venezuela

RESUMEN

En los últimos años, Canadá ha salido de su zona de confort en los asuntos hemisféricos para hablar y actuar enérgicamente, como lo expresó la ministra de relaciones exteriores, Chrystia Freeland, en solidaridad con “el pueblo de Venezuela y su deseo de restaurar la democracia y los derechos humanos en Venezuela”. Con sus socios del Grupo de Lima, Canadá impuso sanciones al régimen de Maduro, reconoció a Juan Guaidó como presidente interino y convocó a elecciones libres y justas lo antes posible. El artículo identifica posibles factores que explican la política de Canadá. La propuesta principal es que la crisis de Venezuela presenta una combinación extraordinaria de factores nacionales e internacionales que hacen que la participación en un impulso multilateral y diplomático para el restablecimiento de la democracia sea una opción ambiciosa, pero sensata para Canadá. El artículo también presenta las críticas a esta política y analiza el tema

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de los derechos humanos y la promoción de la democracia en el contexto más amplio de la política exterior canadiense.

Palabras clave: Canadá, Venezuela, política exterior, democracia, derechos humanos.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, Canada has stepped out of its comfort zone in hemispheric affairs, to speak and act forcefully, as Minister of Foreign Affairs Chrystia Freeland put it, in solidarity with “the people of Venezuela and their desire to restore democracy and human rights in Venezuela” (Government of Canada, 2019a). On January 23rd, 2019, Minister Freeland issued the statement that “Canada recognizes Juan Guaidó, President of the National Assembly, as the interim President of Venezuela.” On that occasion she called the Nicolás Maduro regime “despicable”: not a common adjective in Ottawa’s diplomatic dialect (*The Canadian Press*, 2019). On the day of Maduro’s second inauguration as president of Venezuela (January 10), she issued a statement that summarizes the Canadian government’s position on Venezuela:

Today, Nicolás Maduro’s regime loses any remaining appearance of legitimacy. Having seized power through fraudulent and anti-democratic elections held on May 20, 2018, the Maduro regime is now fully entrenched as a dictatorship. The suffering of Venezuelans will only worsen should he continue to illegitimately cling to power. Together with other like-

minded countries in the Lima Group, Canada rejects the legitimacy of the new presidential term of Nicolás Maduro. We call on him to immediately cede power to the democratically-elected National Assembly until new elections are held, which must include the participation of all political actors and follow the release of all political prisoners in Venezuela. (Government of Canada, 2019b)

Ottawa imposed targeted sanctions (under the *Special Economic Measures Act* and the new *Justice for Victims of Corrupt Foreign Officials Act*) against 70 Maduro regime officials. Canada has sanctions and related measures in place against nineteen other countries in the world, but only against Venezuela in our hemisphere.¹

On February 4, 2019, the Government of Canada announced close to \$55 million in humanitarian aid and development support, plus an additional \$4 million channelled through implementing partners for regional humanitarian assistance in the region. This placed Canada among the top donors responding to address the humanitarian crisis (Government of Canada, 2019a). To put this in perspective, the total budget for humanitarian assistance by Canada in 2016-2017 was \$286.03 million, including \$14.61 million for the “Americas” (Government of Canada, 2018a).

The Canadian government never provided detailed explanations as to why it is so distinctively concerned about human rights violations in Venezuela. But over and over again, Prime Minister Trudeau (and more frequently his min-

¹ These countries are: Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Mali, Myanmar, North Korea, Russia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Ukraine, Yemen and Zimbabwe.

ister Freeland) have reiterated that Canada needs to step up its pressure “in response to attacks on Venezuelans’ democratic and human rights by the regime of President Nicolás Maduro” (Government of Canada, 2019a).² One can nevertheless identify at least six factors that can help us explain Canada’s policy:

First, *the economic and humanitarian crisis* in this country is unprecedented in a time of peace. The economy has shrunk by half in the past five years, and up to 3.4 million Venezuelans have been forced to flee their homes since 2015. This has created a refugee problem for the neighbouring countries, in particular Colombia, a country with which Canada has a free trade agreement and close relations (UNHCR, 2019). A country like Venezuela, which hosted thousands of refugees during the twentieth century, is now experiencing an exodus of up to 5 million Venezuelans before the end of 2019.

Second, *the unprecedented momentum in the international community* to actually do something about the crisis. Canada has been an

active member of the Lima Group, formed in 2017 to put pressure on the Maduro regime.³ Since then another major coalition of European and Latin American countries, the International Contact Group, was created on January 31, 2019, to achieve essentially the same goal: free and fair presidential elections as soon as logistically possible.⁴ On September 26, 2018, Canada and its Lima Group partners also referred Venezuela to the International Criminal Court, which Venezuela joined in 2002 (ICC, n/d). Canada and its allies also used the UN Human Rights Council, the Human Rights Commission, and the OAS Permanent Council to leverage its diplomatic pressure. After four pointless attempts to negotiate with the Maduro regime, a fairly solid consensus emerged stressing the need for Maduro to step down and new presidential elections to be held.⁵

Third, *the presence of a credible and elected opposition, carried by the largest anti-government protests in Latin American history*.⁶ There is no doubt that the nomination of Juan Guaidó

² Interesting that on this updated website Maduro is still called “President” in March 2019.

³ The Lima Group was established on August 8, 2017, in Lima, Peru, to coordinate participating countries’ efforts and apply international pressure on Venezuela. Meetings of the group have been regularly attended by representatives from Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and Saint Lucia

⁴ The International Contact Group includes the European Union, eight European countries (Germany, Spain, France, Italy, Portugal, Holland, the UK and Sweden) and four Latin American countries (Uruguay, Bolivia, Costa Rica and Ecuador).

⁵ The four attempts at negotiation with Maduro were: the *Mesa de Negociación y Acuerdos* (2002-2005), the *Conferencia Nacional por La Paz* (2014), the *Mesa de Diálogo Nacional* (2016-2017), and the *Mesa de Diálogo* in the Dominican Republic (2017-2018). See Pareja, 2018.

⁶ Venezuela is one of the most violent countries in the world and it is not easy to find reliable information on death and casualties resulting from repression of those protests, but since early 2014 many hundreds of protesters were killed by the regime. According to Amnesty International, 41 people died during public protests from gunshot wounds just in a few days (between Jan. 21 and 25) in early 2019. See The Canadian Press, 2019.

as interim president on January 10, 2019, emboldened not just Canada but an increasing number of likeminded countries from around the world to step up their pressure on Maduro. While there are debates about the constitutionality of his nomination by the National Assembly (based on articles 233, 333, and 350 of the Bolivarian Constitution adopted under Hugo Chávez in 1999), there is no doubt that the legislature became the only popularly elected branch of government after January 9, 2019. Guaidó's appointment as interim president offered a constitutional path to regime change that represented a "Venezuelan solution" to the crisis.

Fourth, *Venezuela is a Western country with a solid democratic tradition*, unlike countries of the Middle East for instance, which were similarly (and unsuccessfully) pressured to democratize in recent history. The goal of Canada and its like-minded partners is to "restore constitutional democracy", not to export it.

Fifth, Canada's bold response *aligns with its preference as a "middle power" for diplomatic and multilateral solutions to international crises*. Canada and its partners in the Lima Group explicitly and consistently support peaceful transition and reject military interventions.⁷ Countries siding with Canada are democracies-

-though Honduras and Guatemala, in name only--and Maduro's main allies are not (Russia, China, Cuba).

Sixth, Canada's policy toward Venezuela does not depart from an unspoken rule of our foreign policy according to which *the promotion of human rights and democratic values are more easily deployed in countries or regions where hard Canadian interests are not at stake*.

While various combinations of these factors can be found elsewhere, perhaps nowhere else do we find all of them in place and reinforcing each other.

A STRONG VOICE FOR DEMOCRACY IN THE WORLD, SOMETIMES

Canada ratified all the major international human rights treaties.⁸ The Human Rights and Democratic Values agenda (HRD) has been the third pillar of Canada's foreign policy since the foreign policy review process of 1993-95. In fact, it can be argued that it has been an integral part of Canadian efforts abroad since the early 1980s (Lui, 2012; Nossal *et al.*, 2015). Though they are all officially equal in importance, the other two pillars ("peace" and "prosperity") are clearly "more equal" than the third, to paraphrase Orwell.⁹ This is not

⁷ According to Adam Austen, a spokesman for Ms. Freeland, "We have been clear that the restoration of democracy must be driven by Venezuelans themselves; we do not support military intervention to resolve this crisis." Quoted in Dickson, 2019.

⁸ Indigenous rights may be counted as the exception. See Lightfoot, 2018.

⁹ Officially, Canada's priorities in the region under the current Liberal government are as follows: Encourage inclusive economic growth and sustainable development; support poverty eradication; promote and defend human rights; strengthen democracy; support climate change mitigation and adaptation; improve regional security; increase opportunities for marginalized groups, in particular women, girls and Indigenous people. Government of Canada, 2018b.

surprising: as Rhoda Howard-Hassmann convincingly argued, in foreign policy anywhere, human rights “rarely, if ever, takes precedence over other concerns” (Howard-Hassmann, 2018: 176-77).

Canada periodically “rediscovered” Latin America (Daudelin, 2007; Mace and Thérien, 2012). For all the talk about “our neighbourhood” and “our hemisphere”, the reality is that Latin America does not matter enormously for Canada. The country only joined the Organization of American States in 1990, though it has indeed been quite active in this institution since then, becoming a major contributor to its election monitoring and assistance, as well as human rights promotion activities (Legler, 2012, p. 592).

Former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney once said that the two most important files for a Canadian Prime Minister are national unity and relations with the US. Not all Canadians would agree with that statement, but it is undisputable that Canadian foreign policy is primarily directed at the US. Even our relations with other countries are affected by this intimate relationship.

This is not to say that Canada is always keen on following the US lead. Canada refused to join US-led military interventions in Vietnam and Iraq. What is more, in our hemisphere Ottawa has maintained friendly diplomatic relations with Communist Cuba and never supported the US embargo. But Canada-US relations are more vital for us than

for Americans, and Canada normally takes US sensibilities into consideration when conducting its business with the rest of the world.

In the case of the international campaign for regime change in Venezuela, Canada and its Latin American allies took the lead in pressuring the Maduro government, rather than following the US, as critiques of our policy sometimes suggest. But the US is certainly on board. President Trump famously said that “all options are on the table”, meaning that a US military intervention in Venezuela is not ruled out as an option. It is not clear if he said this just because Trump always likes the optics of having all options on the table, especially the ones that are likely to magnify his decision-making power, or because he is seriously contemplating this option. At the time of writing this article, it remained to be seen whether this threat would suffice to incite the Venezuelan military to switch sides and support interim President Guaidó, and how much waiting time is enough to call it a failure (Toro, 2019). Among the many countries involved in pressuring Caracas, the US is the only foreign country that does not reject the option of a military intervention. One should keep in mind that the Venezuelan opposition does not seem to oppose a military intervention as a matter of principle.

Canada has free trade agreements with seven countries south of the Rio Grande, more than with countries of any other regions.¹⁰ But with the exception of Mexico, these agreements

¹⁰ Canada has Free Trade Agreements with Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Honduras, Panama, Peru, and Mexico. Additionally, Canada has nine Foreign Investment Promotion and Protection Agreements in the region.

have not resulted in significantly increased bilateral trade with Canada. They have more to do with Canadian investments in the extractive sector and, to a lesser extent, the financial sectors (the latter in the Caribbean mostly), in a handful of Latin American and Caribbean nations. Looking at total trade by region, Latin America comes 4th (C\$ 66,346 million), behind the US (C\$ 665,397 million), Asia/Oceania (C\$186,182), and Europe (C\$119,874) (Government of Canada, 2013a).

Venezuela is not a very important trading partner for Canada. Petro-Canada left Venezuela after selling its stake to state oil company Petroleos de Venezuela SA on June 26, 2007. According to the Canadian Trade Commissioner Service, total merchandise imports from Venezuela reached C\$ 35 million in 2014 (Canadian Trade Commissioner, 2018). The data appears to be inconsistent from one source to another about Canada's exports to Venezuela, but the relative insignificance of the South American country in our trade relations is not in doubt.

Table 1
Ranking of countries that imported the most Canadian shipments by dollar value (2017)

1. US	\$319 billion (76%)*
5. Mexico	\$6.1 billion (1.4%)*
16. Brazil	\$1.3 billion
26. Chile	\$682 million
30. Colombia	\$574.8 million
34. Peru	\$548.1 million
45. Argentina	\$343.5 million

52. Ecuador	\$240 million
61. Venezuela	\$152.1 million
47. Cuba	\$313.1 million

* Percentage of total Canadian exports.

(Source: World's Top Exports. <http://www.worldstopexports.com/canadas-top-import-partners/>)

This being said, it appears that Canadian oil producers have capitalized on Venezuela's economic crisis by increasing their share of the world's largest refining market. According to an article published in the *Financial Post*, "Venezuelan heavy oil production competes directly with Canadian oil sands barrels for space at refineries specially calibrated to process heavy blends." For the first time in 2018 Canadian exports to the U.S. Gulf Coast outstripped Venezuelan exports. "That's a fairly considerable shift in the balance", according to Scotiabank commodity economist Rory Johnston (Morgan, 2018). And yet, it is hard imagining this to be a key factor explaining Canada's policy toward Venezuela.

There does not seem to be meaningful domestic "demand" from civil society for our assertive policy in Venezuela. According to the 2016 census, there are 674,640 Canadians of Latin American origins in the country, out of a total population of 37 million, and according to available (and conceivably not up to date) numbers, only 26,345 of them come from Venezuela (Statistics Canada, 2016). Electoral politics is hardly an important factor explaining our policy.¹¹

¹¹ Conversely, electoral politics may help explain Canada's bold policy in Ukraine, since more than one million Canadians claim Ukrainian roots.

Finally, a minor but perhaps relevant factor is the weakness of the Venezuelan regime's ideological lobby in Canada, compared to the Cuban lobby, for instance. For the latter, a small but vocal and well-entrenched group of academics and consultants (including a former ambassador) have been cheering for decades in favour of ever closer political and economic relations with the island. This has resonance in a population with some sympathy for the no.1 scourge of Uncle Sam in this hemisphere. Unlike some of the countries in the region, Venezuela is not a popular destination for Canadian tourists. In short, Canadians do not have many reasons to be directly concerned about Venezuela.

Canada's strong stand against the Maduro regime is routinely presented by government officials as evidence of Canada's consistently "strong voice" in support for human rights and democratic values (HRD) around the world (Government of Canada, 2017). In fact, Canada's record is spotty at best when it comes to pursuing this agenda. As Dominique Clément concluded in his history of human rights in Canada, foreign policy has been "the weakest link in Canada's rights revolution" (Clément, 2016, p. 139). And yet, HRD have unquestionably become an objective of Canadian foreign policy in the past few decades. Since then, as Andrew Lui points out, Canada has played a leading role "in facilitating the diffusion of national human rights institutions around the world." For instance, he writes, Canada, "has been one of the major financial backers of

human rights commissions in South America, most notably the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights."¹²

A factor relevant to this case study is the perception that our default position on international conflicts is to offer a helping hand as an "honest broker," that is to say a neutral position. This has been to some extent our approach to conflicts in the Middle East, in particular the conflict between Israel and both Palestinians and Israel's Arab neighbours, except under the conservative administration of Stephen Harper (2006-2015). This by the way is another interesting example of an "exception" in Canadian foreign policy: Harper's refusal to be "neutral" or "balanced" in the Israel-Palestine conflict, a view that somewhat departed from the policy of his predecessor (or his successor Justin Trudeau) (Chapnick, 2016, p. 107). Of course, all other administrations have recognized Israel's right to exist and to defend itself against terrorism, so the difference is subtler than it may look at first glance. Similarly, the Trudeau-Freeland stance against the Maduro regime appears more forceful than Harper's only if one forgets that the situation in Venezuela has deteriorated significantly since the election of Trudeau's liberal government in October 2015. Canada may well be an easy case study for structural realists in international relations, since we rarely observe huge shifts in foreign policy as Liberals and Conservatives alternate in power.

Evidently, a policy of "honest broker" or "bridge builder" can be problematic when

¹² Lui, 139.

the time comes to muster the moral clarity necessary to defend a meaningful HRD agenda. Canada was not neutral during the first or second world war, and our foreign policy generally aligned with the West, the US and NATO. In this hemisphere Canada, under the Liberals, participated in a multilateral push to oust Peruvian strongman Alberto Fujimori in 2000. It also condemned the coup d'état in Honduras in 2009, though it was criticized for normalizing the relations too soon afterward. In sum, there are precedents for Canada both remaining neutral and for taking sides.

**REGIONAL INCONSISTENCY:
"OUR ALLY" CUBA**

To get some more perspective, one could quickly look at Canada's policy toward the only country in the region that is arguably a worse offender of democratic rights than Venezuela: Cuba. If "Canada will not stand by silently as the Government of Venezuela robs its people of their fundamental democratic rights," as Minister Freeland said, its policy toward Cuba has studiously been to stand by silently as the Castro brothers (and now President Miguel Díaz-Canel) rob the Cuban people of their fundamental democratic rights (Grenier, 2018).

In response to a question during a town hall meeting at Brock University on January 15, 2019, on why Canada has a friendly relationship with Cuba but not with Venezuela, PM Trudeau said: "I think our perspective on Cuba has always been one of those proof points that Canada makes its own foreign policy determination," and "rightly so" in the case

of Cuba, even if "successive American administrations were not particularly pleased with Canada's perspective." But on Venezuela, the tone changed abruptly. He called Maduro an "illegitimate dictator" and a "brutal dictator", and added that "anyone who contends to be a friend of Venezuela, whether it's Cuba, Canada, or an individual, anyone who contends to be friend with the Venezuelan people, should be very clear and standing up and condemning the Maduro government" (Kalvapalie, 2019). Perhaps we can find here a hint of criticism of Cuba, but nothing explicit was ever said by his government about Cuba's support for Maduro.

All in all, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Canada is excoriating Venezuela for trying to emulate a country Canada is proud to have sunny relations with.

While the situation may be worse in some respects in Venezuela, the difference in criticism can be in no way because of Cuba's superior "democratic behaviour." The kind of presidential elections held in 2018 in Venezuela, while clearly unfree and unfair, would represent a positive step toward pluralism in Cuba's one-party system. Arbitrary detentions, total control of all branches of government by the executive, and violation of democratic rights are systematic and written into law on the island. While Maduro is accused of violating the constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, his Cubans counterparts do not need to disregard their 1976 constitution to trample democratic rights: its template is the USSR's constitution of 1936 (Rojas et al., 2017). Cubans visiting Venezuela are pleasantly surprised at how relatively free the media and internet access are compared to the reality at

home. Monitoring organizations such as The Economist Intelligence Unit, Reporters without Borders and Freedom House rank Cuba lower than Venezuela in their indexes of democracy, press freedom, and civil and political rights. Finally, one cannot imagine the Cuban government tolerating public demonstrations by the opposition, let alone having opponents meeting regularly in a government building, and appointing an interim president, who could then leave and return to the country.

True, violent repression in Cuba is not as overt as it has been recently in the *patria* of Bolívar. Arguably, this is because Cuba is a more stable dictatorship, one that has already exported most of its opposition overseas. To recall: in the wake of the 1959 revolution, violent clashes with the “counter-revolutionary” opposition lingered on until mid-1965 in Cuba.

This being said, the humanitarian situation is conceivably worse in Venezuela, primarily because of rapidly deteriorating access to food and medicine. But then again, it is hard to measure and compare. The Cuban government does not produce statistics on poverty on the island. We know most Cubans are very poor, especially if they don't have access to remittances regularly sent by their family in exile, a source of income not (yet) available to most Venezuelans.

One can think of several plausible explanations for this inconsistency, starting with the Trudeau family and its strange fascination with Fidel. Comparisons with US President Donald Trump's man crush on Vladimir Putin come to mind. One cannot help but wonder if Minister Freeland's silence on Cuba (it would

be a shoe-in addition to her Putin-Maduro axis of evil) is a concession made to the boss.

Other explanations, *inter alia*: Venezuela is (still) an OAS member, unlike Cuba, though if memory serves, Canada and other principled guardians of the OAS Democratic Charter are invariably sanguine about welcoming Cuba back to the hemispheric fold. Perhaps hostility toward communist Cuba is now perceived as an outmoded residue of the Cold War. Venezuela is a post-Cold War failing state, driven to the ground by a clumsy heir of Hugo Chávez, with no Bay of Pigs or even embargo (the US purchases most of Venezuela's oil) as convenient excuses. Venezuela is in the midst of a crisis, with lots of moving parts, rather than being fully constituted (or ossified) like Cuba, where it is too late for international pressures to work. The island fully “slipped into authoritarianism” — just as Freeland described Venezuela recently — in 1952 and then into totalitarianism in the 1960s. Former US President Barack Obama's rationale for opening up to Cuba was ostensibly that the US tried to topple the regime for longer than he had been alive, and repeatedly failed. Venezuela is still in flux, increasingly isolated in the region and the world, and consequently, amenable to change under international pressure. Maybe.

Canada's last ambassador to Caracas, Ben Rowswell, testified on Venezuela in front of the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, on February 21, 2019. Rowswell's voice is important not only because he represented Canada in Venezuela, but also because in his new position as Director of the Canadian International Center (CIC), he has been perhaps the most

vocal supporter of the Liberal government policy in Venezuela. Asked a question about the possible role of Cuba in both the Venezuelan crisis and its denouement, Rowswell said that he is “not very knowledgeable on Cuba”, that he often heard observers saying that Cuba and Venezuela’s regimes are closely linked and depend on each other for their resilience, but that in the absence of popular pressure for political change in Cuba, an important condition for Canadian intervention was not met. He even said that Cuba must be “reassured” by Canada and possibly the US that it will not be next on the regime change agenda (CIC, 2019). This is extraordinary since Canada’s justification for its bold policy toward Venezuela has always been first and foremost that the Maduro government is authoritarian and therefore illegitimate.

According to the CBC journalist Evan Dyer, author of a very good article on how the Trudeau government deals with Cuba’s influence in Venezuela, Canada has been reluctant to call out a government that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called an “ally” during a 2016 visit to Havana. Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland went as far as

characterizing Cuba’s role in Venezuela as “concerning” (Dyer, 2019; Cárdenas, 2018). “The issue of the Cuban role in Venezuela was discussed at the Lima Group meeting in Bogota on Monday,” she told CBC News. “We have heard directly from the Venezuelan opposition that they’re concerned by the role that some Cubans are playing in their country.” Dyer quotes Global Affairs Canada’s director for the Americas, Michael Grant, saying to a Senate committee that “Recently, we held our annual discussions on a senior level, and I can tell you that Venezuela was a topic of those discussions, with a view to sharing points of view and trying to find a common way forward. Did we? No. We have a fundamental disagreement.” CBC News asked Freeland if Canada still considered Cuba an “ally”. Her response conveys the government’s malaise: “Cuba is a country with which Canada has a longstanding relationship, a relationship that includes tourism, and where there’s a relationship with many Canadian businesses, and Cuba is a country where we have a relationship that allows us to raise serious concerns.”

Seemingly, Canada is not contemplating the responsibility of Cuban leaders in the

¹³ Corrales and Penfold summarize well the importance of Cuba in the ascendancy of Nicolás Maduro to the presidency: “For a start, the presidential succession was carefully orchestrated in Havana, under the guidance of the Castro brothers, Latin America’s champions of political survival. Fidel and Raúl Castro were key actors in helping Chávez identify and select a successor, eventually opting for Nicolás Maduro. For Cuba, Maduro was a good candidate for a number of reasons. As Venezuela’s foreign minister he showed unconditional loyalty to Havana, to *chavismo*, and to an anti-American foreign policy. Maduro also was committed to continuing sending oil subsidies to Cuba. He was also seen as capable of appealing to the most radical factions within *chavismo* while remaining able to talk to moderate forces, just as he had been able to do as foreign minister—for example, toward Colombia. He could be both belligerent and conciliatory by turns, depending on the circumstances, and this made Maduro appealing to the Cubans. Furthermore, there were rumors that Maduro was China’s and Russia’s top choice for the succession, a type of endorsement that Cuba could not simply ignore” (Corrales and Penfold, 2015, p. 163).

current crisis in Venezuela. Cuban infiltration of Venezuelan state institutions is apparently complete, as Cuban “advisers” can be found in virtually every single office, ministry or barrack of the Venezuelan state.¹³ The Secretary General of the OAS, Luis Almagro, advanced the number that 22,000 Cubans had infiltrated the Venezuelan regime, especially in security services such as the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN). When Chávez declared in 2007 that Cuba and Venezuela were a “single nation” with a “one single government”, he was not kidding. As Moisés Naím and Francisco Toro concluded in well-argued article on the current crisis in Venezuela, Chávez’s legacy and “Cuba’s influence must be at the centre of any attempt to explain it” (Naím and Toro, 2018).

Of course, Canada is not alone in being indulgent on Cuba. As Patricio Navia wrote, in 2009 the OAS resolution on Cuba, “showed that Latin American democracies were willing to relax the strict adherence to the principle of democracy in Latin America.” For him, “Many Latin American leaders would be amenable to accepting Cuba back in the community of nations regardless of whether there is a transition to democracy on the island. Many Latin American leaders regularly visit Cuba and fail to advocate for the respect of human rights or even meet with opposition civil society groups in the island” (Navia, 2019). That inconsistency could in theory become useful if Cuba could be pressured by its hemispheric friends to pressure Maduro. But to seriously entertain this

possibility, one needs to discard or ignore how important the presence of a pro-Cuba government in Venezuela is for Cuba’s own stability.

FROM HARPER TO TRUDEAU: PLUS ÇA CHANGE

Major turns in Canadian foreign policy are rare, and the foreign policy of Liberals and Conservatives (the only two parties that ever governed in Canada) do not differ as much as each of them want us to believe.¹⁴

The Trudeau administration’s pugnacious policy toward the Maduro regime followed the path of our 22nd Prime Minister Stephen Harper (February 6, 2006 to November 4, 2015), who always had adversarial relations with the governments of both Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) and Maduro.

Harper’s preference for free trade and liberal democracy in the Americas immediately clashed with Chávez’s “21st century socialism”. In July 2007, Prime Minister Stephen Harper toured Latin America and the Caribbean to announce his government’s policy of re-engaging the hemisphere. “Canada’s vision of the Americas” comprised three familiar pillars: security, prosperity, and democratic governance. The trip included stops in Colombia, Barbados and Haiti. However, the highlight was a speech the prime minister delivered in Chile, in which he presented Canada as a preferable alternative to both the “return to the syndrome of economic nationalism, political authoritarianism and

¹⁴ As mentioned earlier, in the Americas, our policy toward Cuba appears to be the exception, with Conservative government officials now and again voicing negative judgements on Cuba’s communist system, whereas Liberal officials typically refrain from that, at least in public.

class warfare,” in a clear allusion to Venezuela, and to the laissez faire capitalism of the United States (a rare criticism of the US model by the conservative PM). “Canada’s very existence demonstrates that the choice [between the US and Venezuela] is a false one,” he said (Woods, 2007). Note that he alluded to Venezuela rather than Cuba, a worse offender of civil and political rights and enemy of capitalism. This is perhaps due to the fact that unlike the “21st century socialism” of Venezuela, Cuban communism has never been a model for the region, not even in Venezuela. On the other hand, twenty-first century socialism, that is to say left-wing populism, seemed to be flourishing earlier in the century, as Hugo Chávez’s rhetoric (and economic largesse) seduced governments in Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador, Bolivia, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, and small countries in the Caribbean. The “pink tide” differed from the “red” one of the previous century in one important way: it did not embrace command economy and one-party state, and therefore blended better with national revolutionary and populist traditions. A common feature however was the propensity to confront the US and to court anti-US governments in the world, regardless of specific ideological orientations. Thus, Venezuela joined Cuba in developing warm relations with countries like Russia, China, Iran, Iraq, Libya, and of course North Korea.

A low point in the history of relations between the two governments was PM Harper’s message of condolences to “the Venezuelan people” following Hugo Chávez’s death on March 5, 2013. The prime minister offered his “condolences to the people of Venezuela,”

and said that he looked forward “to working with (Chavez’s) successor and other leaders in the region to build a hemisphere that is more prosperous, secure, and democratic” (Kilpatrick, 2018). As reported by the *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), Harper also said: “At this key juncture, I hope the people of Venezuela can now build for themselves a better, brighter future based on the principles of freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights.” PM Harper’s message of condolences sounded more like an invitation to seize the moment to liberalize and democratize Venezuela. It was deemed “insensitive and impertinent” by Venezuela’s vice-minister for North America, Claudia Salerno (Mazereeuw, 2014a).

Over the years Harper made numerous comments against “economic nationalism, class warfare, and political authoritarianism” in the Americas. “There’s nothing out here that says that running an authoritarian state on petro dollars is not going to get you very far in the long term,” Harper said. And yet, the Harper government never shut the door on dialogue with the government of Venezuela about trade, security and good governance. For instance, according to the same *Globe and Mail* article, “The day before the news broke of Chavez’s departure from a Cuban hospital, [Canada’s Minister of Foreign affairs John] Baird told The Canadian Press that he wanted to hold talks on increasing opportunities for Canadian businesses in Venezuela.” Furthermore, “Baird said he had a full business agenda planned in Venezuela, but that ‘obviously we want to promote democracy, and we want to promote political freedoms.’” The minister also mentioned his displeasure about Venezu-

ela's rapprochement with Iran. Canada closed its embassy in Iran in September of 2012, and Baird said that "Canada views the Government of Iran as the most significant threat to global peace and security in the world today."

Diplomatic tensions are also illustrated by several episodes involving the Canadian embassy in Caracas. It has been inordinately active for years with funding to strengthen civil society in the sensitive areas of human rights, public health, and democratic governance (Government of Canada, 2018c:10). The Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (former name of Global Affairs Canada) launched a democracy promotion centre (the Andean Unit for Democratic Governance) in October 2009, based in Lima but backing civil society organizations in places like Bolivia and Venezuela, in addition to helping to establish independent ombudsmen in Guatemala and Peru (Government of Canada, 2013b).

Under Harper, the Canadian embassy started to award human rights prizes essentially to opponents of the Maduro regime. Canada's annual Human Rights Award, co-sponsored with the Central University of Venezuela, was presented for the first time in 2009. Each year the recipient has travelled to Canada and met with Canadian parliamentarians to share experiences (Government of Canada, 2018c).

It goes without saying that this singular activism created tensions with Caracas. A fairly simple gesture like exchanging ambassadors proved to be difficult over the past five years. The appointment of Canadian ambassador, Ben Rowswell, described in *The Hill Times* (Ottawa) as "a rising star in the Canadian foreign service partly for his reputation as an

early adopter of digital diplomacy," was announced on Feb. 28, 2014, but the two countries accepted each other's ambassadors only in June of 2015 (Shane, 2015a; Shane, 2015b; Mazereeuw, 2014b). A working group of the leftist NGO Canadian Council for International Cooperation, the Americas Policy Group, deplored the nomination of Mr. Rowswell because of indications that "this specialist in the political use of social media was appointed to the post to facilitate Canadian communications with social forces that aim to overturn the Venezuelan government" (Gómez et al., 2014). Mr. Rowswell, who is now President and Research Director of the Canadian International Council in Ottawa, was ambassador until 2017. The same year Venezuela's Vice-President Delcy Rodríguez declared the chargé d'affaires at the Canadian embassy Craig Kowalik *persona non grata*, because of his alleged interference in domestic affairs (Gordon, 2017). Canada downgraded diplomatic ties with Venezuela after the fraudulent elections of May 2018 by announcing it would not seek to replace Rowswell.

Another early indicator of tensions between the Harper government and the Maduro regime, *The Hill Times* also reported that in July of 2015, Venezuela's former foreign minister, José Vicente Rangel, accused the Canadian embassy of helping about thirty agents of an unnamed "important intelligence organization" to enter Venezuela. The Canadian government rejected the accusations as "ridiculous and patently false". The former minister-turned-TV-host made more accusations in October that Canada was trying to destabilize the country, which Canada

again rejected (Shane, 2015a). Similarly, a prominent member of the ruling party and President of the National Assembly, Diosdado Cabello, alleged in the Spring of 2015 that the Canadian embassy had prior knowledge of an attempted coup against Maduro, an allegation the Canadian embassy characterized as “completely false” (Shane, 2015b).

Finally, it must be pointed out that in addition to the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs delivering statements on Venezuela, two standing committees of parliament (the Sub-Committee on Human Rights and International Development and the Senate Committee on Human Rights) worked on the Venezuela crisis going back years, inviting numerous witnesses from the Venezuelan opposition (including the wife of imprisoned opposition leader Leopoldo López) to testify about the looming political, economic, and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela.

CRANKING UP THE PRESSURE UNDER TRUDEAU-FREELAND

By the time Justin Trudeau’s Liberals won the parliamentary elections on October 19, 2015, the crisis in Venezuela was well under way. What is sometimes described as a “slow motion coup” transformed the regime from a “competitive authoritarian regime” under Chávez to a full-fledged dictatorship under his former Minister of Foreign Affairs Nicolás Maduro (Polga-Hecimovich, 2017: 35).

Politically, the important landmarks are as follows. In December of 2015 the Opposition Democratic Unity (*Mesa de la Unidad Democrática*, or MUD) coalition won two-

thirds majority in parliamentary elections. But despite winning a legislative majority, and possibly a supermajority, the MUD has been largely unable to legislate. In fact, as a report for the Latin American Studies Association points out:

[...] through a combination of presidential vetoes and favourable rulings from government-stacked courts, President Maduro has rendered the National Assembly nearly powerless. This has included giving the Supreme Court (Tribunal Supremo de Justicia, TSJ) the power to approve the budget law in October 2016 (a prerogative that belongs to the legislature), perpetuating Maduro’s recurring state of emergency, and even declaring the National Assembly in contempt of court (Polga-Hecimovich, 2017: 35).

The opposition’s response was to organize a recall referendum, which is perfectly legal according to the Constitution. It was nullified by President Maduro in October of 2016.

Arguably, the complete rupture of the constitutional order came in March of 2017, when the government-controlled judiciary basically stripped the National Assembly of all its power, opening the door to the pseudo-elections of a new Constituent Assembly controlled by the executive in July of 2017. The action against the National Assembly led the OAS Permanent Council to adopt on a resolution on April 3rd, co-sponsored by Canada and others, determining that there had been “an alteration of the constitutional order” in Venezuela.

The presidential elections of May 2018, boycotted by most of the opposition, was the last nail in the coffin of Venezuelan democracy. Most of the opposition leaders were banned from participating, because they were in jail

or in exile. Meanwhile Maduro continued to integrate military generals into national leadership roles (a trend started under Chávez), escalated the imprisonment of political dissidents and the repression of popular protests that kept coming back in large numbers since February of 2014.

Economically, the turning point appeared to be a sharp fall in international oil prices, falling from \$147 per barrel to \$30 per barrel in 2016. This led to the calamitous shortage of basic goods and medicine, as well as frequent and lengthy power outages. Of course, as Moisés Naím and Francisco Toro wrote in early 2018, “Venezuela’s decline began four decades ago, not four years ago.” They point out that “all of the world’s petrostates suffered a serious income shock in 2014 as a result of plummeting oil prices. Only Venezuela could not withstand the pressure” (Naím and Toro, 2018).

Under the Liberal government, Canada continued to exert pressure on the Maduro regime. It supported the appointment of prominent Canadian human rights defender, former Minister of Justice and Attorney General Irwin Cotler, to an OAS panel of independent international experts that were examining evidence on possible crimes against humanity in Venezuela, with a view to bringing these before the International Criminal Court should the evidence support this course (OAS, 2018).

Perhaps the most significant initiative for Ottawa was the establishment, with the active support of Canada, of the Lima Group on August 8, 2017, in Lima, Peru. It is committed to closely monitoring events in Venezuela and applying pressure on Venezuela’s government until the full restoration of democracy in the

country is achieved. There is no doubt that the momentum for the Lima Group was amplified by a particularly activist OAS committed to denouncing the violation of human rights in Venezuela, thanks to the leadership of its new Secretary General (and former foreign minister of the socialist government of José Mujica in Uruguay), Luis Almagro. Almagro is an outspoken critic of Maduro and (increasingly) of Cuba as well.

The last Declaration of the Lima Group (February 25th), with US vice-president Mike Pence in the attendance, was to “reaffirm the right of all Venezuelans to live in democracy and freedom, and therefore reiterate their support for the holding of free and fair elections, open to the participation of all political forces, with international accompaniment and observation, organized by a neutral and legitimately constituted electoral authority.” For these new democratic elections to be held, the group demanded “the immediate departure of Nicolás Maduro and the cessation of the usurpation, respecting the constitutional authority of the National Assembly and the Interim President, Juan Guaidó.” The Declaration also reiterated the members’ conviction “that the transition to democracy must be conducted by Venezuelans themselves, peacefully and within the framework of the Constitution and international law, supported by political and diplomatic means, without the use of force.”

Under the Liberals the Canadian government continued to support initiatives in Venezuela by NGOs working more or less explicitly with the opposition. According to the Government Response to the July 2017 Report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and

International Trade on Venezuela, through the Peace and Stabilization Operations Program (PSOPs), the “Government of Canada has been supporting the work of Barcelona-based Institute for Integrated Transitions (IFIT) in Venezuela with \$203,000 in funding in the 2017-18 fiscal year. IFIT is a highly respected non-governmental organisation dedicated to helping fragile and conflict-affected states achieve more inclusive and sustainable transitions out of war or authoritarianism” (Government of Canada, 2018c). Furthermore, “The Canadian Embassy in Caracas further supports domestic efforts to restore democracy and resolve the crisis by using CFLI funding to support democratic coexistence in vulnerable communities and building understanding between civil society and political actors. Much of its \$150,000 in annual program funds are used to create space for human rights defenders with a focus on justice, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, as well as the right to health and access to food (see above)” (Government of Canada, 2018c). Finally, “Yet another CFLI project is allowing a local NGO to build understanding between Venezuelan civil society and political actors in what is a highly polarized Venezuelan society. It brings civil society leaders and political actors together to promote the setting up of agendas of understanding in five priority areas: (i) governance, (ii) democracy, elections and institutions,

(iii) political economy and development, (iv) justice and security; and (v) life conditions of Venezuelans” (Government of Canada, 2018c: 13). The Canadian government is also one of the sponsors for a team of researchers who investigate corruption in Venezuela, named *Transparencia Venezuela*. A branch of the international NGO Transparency International, its goal is to “fight corruption and impunity”: not the line of research the Maduro regime is keen on (Transparencia Venezuela, n/d).

CRITICIZING CANADA’S POLICY

In parliament, the government’s policy is basically supported by the official opposition (the Conservative Party), and it was not virulently opposed by the social-democratic NDP either, until an internal rebellion seemed to have pushed its embattled leader to listen to his leftist base and refrain from supporting Guaidó.¹⁵

Outside of parliament, some critical voices have been heard, namely from unions, like Canadian Union of Public Employees and the Canadian Labour Congress; and from some NGOs, academics, and columnists.¹⁶

Though one likes to think that responding to a humanitarian crisis of this scale is not or should not be an ideological battle between the right and the left, the reality is that voices opposed to Canada’s policy usually come from the left, though not exclusively, while a wider cast

¹⁵ The NDP’s Foreign Affairs critics H el ene Laverdi ere “told the National Post that she was speaking for the party when she said she’s ‘comfortable’ with Canada recognizing a new interim president in Juan Guaido,” but then the party leader Jagmeet Singh refused to do the same. In July 2018 Laverdi ere announced that she will not run for the third time in October 2019 (see Zimonic, 2019).

¹⁶ A petition is circulating, representing 15 organizations and 167 individuals as of mid-April 2019.

of ideological characters support this policy. Among the voices opposing a diplomatic push for “regime change” in Caracas, it is conceivable that many would call for nothing less, if Maduro were a right-wing dictator supported by the US, and Gaidó, a budding Fidel or Chávez.

Criticism of the Canadian government’s position can be summarized in the following six points, in no particular order (e.g. McQuaig, 2019; Gagnon, 2019; Taylor, 2019; Kirk and Kimber, 2019; Avalos and Spronk, 2019).

First, referring to Canada’s participation in the Lima Group, many consider that the coalition is suspicious, because it cannot be much better than the least recommendable of its members. Canada is indeed siding with countries with questionable democratic credentials, like Honduras and Guatemala, or questionable *tout court*, like Brazil under the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro (though the country joined the Lima Group before he was elected in a free and fair election in October of 2018). Many on the left have quickly noticed that the Lima Group is composed mostly of conservative governments.

Second, siding with the US is almost automatically condemned by the left, but also by many centrists. With Donald Trump in the White House, it is even easier to mistrust the US and fear its intervention in the region. For example, the NDP stated that “Canada should not simply follow the U.S.’s foreign policy, particularly given its history of self-interested interference in the region,” the NDP leader Jagmeet Singh said. “The question of who is to lead Venezuela should be in the hands of Venezuelans” (Ballingall, 2019).

Third, the Canadian government indulges in hypocrisy when making a fuss about human rights in Venezuela and not in Honduras, Guatemala, or Brazil. It also has business as usual (mostly) with countries like Saudi Arabia and China, among many others offenders of human rights.

Fourth, the policy is all show and rhetoric, with no plan B, and no intention to apply the same principles in our relations with other non-democratic countries in the world (a good thing since it would be unsustainable).

Five, Canada should not push for regime change in Venezuela; it should be neutral, not blame Maduro more than the opposition, and favour no more than dialogue between the two.

Finally, six, the interim president Juan Guaidó is (too) young, a self-appointed president, and a rookie with no base outside of the small district that elected him as representative in the National Assembly

To my knowledge, the government has not responded point by point to all these critiques, but this much can be said: it does not comment on how unsavory some of its allies are in the Lima Group; it makes a point of reminding everybody that Canada has been involved in multilateral effort to democratize Venezuela for years, before the US jumped in; it repeats that the Venezuela crisis is unique and therefore calls for a unique and urgent response; it highlights that neutrality or dialogue with Maduro are no longer viable options, since they were attempted several times in the past and failed; and finally, it contends that Guaidó was elected as president of the National Assembly, the only branch of government with popular legitimacy, and therefore

he is plausibly the only legitimate leader left in the country. Supporting Guaidó, for Canada, is supporting a made-in-Venezuela solution to the crisis: Guaidó is not supposed to act as interim president for very long. The Canadian government always insists on the urgency of the situation in Venezuela, something its opponents are typically very reluctant to do¹⁷.

The Canadian government is not the only advocate of its own policy. The Canadian media have been broadly supportive, and so are several columnists and academics. The bottom line is, foreign policy is almost never a major source of concern for Canadians, not even during electoral campaigns. To say that our policy toward Venezuela is a burning topic around the water cooler would be an exaggeration.

CONCLUSION: MOVING FORWARD?

At the moment of writing this article, Guaidó had just returned to Venezuela from Colombia. Since his return to the country, the regime has been zeroing in on Guaidó, barring him from running for public office (joining opposition leaders Leopoldo López and Henrique Capriles in the penalty box), accusing him of sabotaging the electric sector, arresting his chief of staff Roberto Marrero, removing his parliamentary immunity as president of the National Assembly, accusing him of fraud, and letting various officials accuse him of treason. There are two possible interpretations: either

the regime is losing patience with Guaidó, or the regime is in fact showing a great deal of patience: how many dictatorships would let an opposition leader freely organize demonstrations and speak to foreign media and politicians.

If Maduro steps down sooner rather than later, and Venezuela finally restores democracy, it will be counted as a fine victory for the Trudeau government, the Lima Group, and many other partners in Europe. It may embolden the Liberals to try the same formula elsewhere: to be sure, there is no shortage of corrupt and autocratic regimes in the world to lean on.

What is more probable is that Canada, either under the Liberals or the Conservatives (they may well return to power in the Fall of 2019), would soon go back to their usual prudence in choosing when and where it can practice the difficult art of liberal and democratic interventionism. While there are many non-democratic countries in the world, one cannot easily find another country where all the ripe conditions for multilateral diplomatic pressures are present in such a pressing way.

Canada and its allies may also fail. The Maduro regime may get a grip and stabilize itself somewhat, as Cuba did after the revolution or during the very trying “Special Period” after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Then what? You own it if you break it, as the saying goes, but did Canada break anything? Arguably,

¹⁷ The circulating petition mentioned above handles this in two awkward sentences: “We are cognizant that both internal and external factors have played a role in generating the current crisis. Internally, none of the contending parties are beyond reproach for their deep erosion of political legitimacy in Venezuela”.

no. In fact, its responsibility to help would potentially be greater if democracy is restored. If the US intervenes militarily, it will not be with Canada's support. One thing is for sure, a defeat in Venezuela would probably dampen Canada's newly found enthusiasm for virtuous foreign policy.

Either way, the promotion and protection of human rights will continue to be an integral part of Canadian efforts abroad. How big a part, it is hard to know.

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