

# THE DEBT IS UNPAYABLE

## *La deuda es impagable*

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Remarks at the Great Hall of the University of Havana on receipt of the degree of  
Doctor of Economic Sciences, Honoris Causa

December 3, 2008

I cannot begin to express the deep sense of honour that I feel on your bestowing upon me the degree of Doctor of Economic Sciences, Honoris Causa of the University of Havana.

Its significance for me is even greater by virtue of its coinciding with the marking of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Triumph of the Cuban Revolution.

I was a child of 12 when Fidel and his comrades stormed the Moncada Barracks. As teenagers, we would tune our radio dials to the Miami stations to get the latest in rock and roll. Sometimes we hit on Radio Rebelde, broadcast from the Sierra Maestra. Radio Rebelde was my introduction to the Cuban Revolution.

At the time of the Triumph of the Revolution I had just left High School and started my first job. The events of 1959—the trials of the criminals of the Batista dictatorship, the Urban Reform, the Land Reform—were followed with great interest and mounting excitement by my generation in Jamaica.

Our imagination was captured by the literacy programme by which young Cuban boys and girls left the cities to teach poor peasants in the countryside; learning as much or more from their host families as they were imparting to them.

I listened to the First Declaration of Havana during my first year at the University in Jamaica, courtesy of a recording of the address obtained by a fellow student. Fidel's passionate denunciations of Yanqui imperialism—the profits of American

corporations obtained at the price of undernourishment and infant mortality in Latin America—are still ringing in my ears.

The image of a million Cubans, assembled in one place as the National General Assembly of the People of Cuba, expressing their approval of the social and economic measures taken by the Revolution, and declaring their independence of foreign domination, was a transformative experience for me, a young man of eighteen. It helped to shape my view of the world.

Jamaica and the other West Indian territories were then preparing for national independence. The Cuban Revolution was a source of inspiration to many of us on the ability of a small Caribbean country to chart its own course of social justice, economic transformation, and national independence by relying on the mobilisation of the entire population, by relying on the will and energy of its people; with a leadership that trusted the mass of the population and refused to bow before threats, intimidation, economic punishment and counter-revolutionary violence from the greatest military power on the planet; just 140 kilometres from its shores. It remains so to this day.

During Playa Giron, I moved a resolution in the University Students Council condemning the shameless attempt to crush the Revolution by an illegal invasion launched from the territory of the United States. My collaborator in that Resolution was a young student from Guyana by the name of Walter Rodney. As you know Walter visited Cuba several times and was profoundly affected by the Revolution. You also know that he was victim of political assassination in 1980.

At the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, I had just arrived in London to commence graduate studies. Some of us, like myself, were dismayed at the way in which Cuba had been drawn into a confrontation between the two super-powers, one that could end with a nuclear holocaust of global scale. Others argued that Cuba had no choice but to secure an alliance as a means of protecting its Revolution and its national sovereignty. The debate continues to this day.

In the late 1960s I was a member of the New World Group, founded by Lloyd Best, whose book on Plantation Economy, co-authored by Kari Polanyi Levitt, is being launched in its Spanish edition at the Casa de las Americas this week.

Professor Levitt is present among us and was recently the recipient of an honorary doctorate from the University of the West Indies.

In a famous essay entitled “Independent Thought and Caribbean Freedom”, Lloyd Best argued that Cuba’s turn to the Soviet Union was a symptom of the failure of the rest of the Caribbean to provide moral, political and economic support for its struggle for self-determination.

In 1959-1960 Dr Eric Williams of Trinidad and Tobago was campaigning for the return of the Chaguaramas Naval Base from the United States to the Government of Trinidad, to be the site of the capital of the newly formed West Indies Federation. In the end Dr Williams made an agreement which left the US in control of the base. Lloyd Best argued that an historic opportunity had been missed for a linkage of anti-imperialist issues across the Caribbean, from Trinidad in the east to Cuba in the west; to forge an ‘integration of the regional consciousness’. He challenged us to:

“Consider what might have happened if the Government of Trinidad and Tobago had declared the(Chaguaramas) base nationalised, proclaim independence and joined Cuba in taking over the sugar industry. The colonial answer is to say that the marines would have come and that the other Caribbean governments would have sold out as they did in 1953 when the PPP ran into trouble in Guyana. But...Castro’s movement (and) the PNM ... had struck their roots in a Caribbean consciousness and it would not have been easy to cut them down.

“And even if the marines had come. Would we not have fought them as the Cubans were in any case to do against their agents at the Bay of Pigs and the Constitutionals, in Santo Domingo in 1965? How much territory could they have held if they had had the whole Caribbean roused against them? And even if they did hold territory – for a while – they would never have enjoyed any moral conquest and the satisfaction of seeing Cuba turn to another imperialism for support. And the Caribbean would have emerged from the struggle as morally and politically integrated as it has always been culturally. . . .

“If the opportunity was missed then, it was largely for lack of political experience. *But the time will come again.* (867-868)

The time will come again! That vision of a united and independent Caribbean was central to the motivation of the New World Group in the 1960s, a vision that was deeply rooted in the consciousness of a common history of colonialism and metropolitan rivalry, of the plantation system, of slavery and indentureship, of resistance and rebellion, of continuous assertion of an indomitable human spirit, of humanity in the face of brutality, of love of freedom and of life itself, of a Caribbean aesthetic permeated by a sense of the natural beauty of our islands and mainland, infused with the rhythms of our people and our music and our language, which are often so closely intertwined, and with their creative imagination.

And Cuba is an *integral* part of that Caribbean consciousness, of the Caribbean family.

George Beckford of Jamaica, another leading figure in the New World Group, was himself the author of a seminal work on the Plantation System in the Third World, *Persistent Poverty*. He visited Cuba in 1965, and was the victim of repressive action by the Government of Jamaica when his passport was seized after his return.

‘Gbeck’s’ professional interest, as an agricultural economist, was in the Land Reform and sugar economy; but what immediately impressed him, he wrote, were three important contrasts with the rest of the Caribbean:

“.. First, the conspicuous absence of symptoms of unemployment (and underemployment); the signs of poverty are much less stark than elsewhere in the region – there is no prostitution and no begging of any kind, not even the covert kind of begging which produces ‘tipping’ in other places. Second, the omnipresence of education schemes – on radio and television, in the newspaper and factories, and throughout the length and breadth of the country. And, third, the obvious involvement of the people with matters affecting the national life. The national and international awareness of the population at all levels and the general atmosphere of national cohesion, of public order, and of self-confidence are certainly not characteristic of the

rest of the Caribbean”. (A Caribbean View of Cuba, (*New World Quarterly* II. 2)271).

He refers to the speech of Fidel in Santa Clara on July 26, 1965, with over 600,000 people present; and writes:

“Clearly, there is much significance to Prime Minister Castro’s public challenge to a visiting American newspaperman during that speech at Santa Clara when he stated:

*“Let him take pictures, let him take films and see if in Washington, New York or anywhere else they can raise the enthusiasm of more than five hundred thousand citizens. Let’s see if any of those puppet governments of Brazil, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Paraguay and other....if any one, or all of them together are capable of bringing together half a million people like those who are meeting here today...A crowd, large or small, can always be assembled by different means, but what it is not possible to create is the enthusiasm of this crowd.”*

“Any witness of the occasion (said Beckford) could not possibly disagree”. (276)

Yes, the Revolution had a huge impact on the thinking, on the imagination, of my generation; and indeed on those that followed. It has retained its iconic significance as a permanent feature of our Caribbean landscape.

I am reminded of the words of Prime Minister Michael Manley of Jamaica at the Non-Aligned Summit of 1980; that Latin America and the Caribbean could count ‘on a movement and a rock; and that movement is the Cuban Revolution and that rock is Fidel Castro’.

In the decades following the Sixties I had the opportunity to form many associations with Cuban organizations, to collaborate professionally with Cuban academic centres, and to form long-lasting personal friendships with Cuban colleagues.

The collaboration embraced many subject areas and activities—science and technology policy research and economic planning in the 1970s; in the 1980s and

1990s the Association of Caribbean Economists, the Regional Coordination of Economic and Social Research - CRIES, and the Centre for American Studies; the National Association of Cuban Economists, ANEC, since the 1980s; and of course the Association of Caribbean States in the 2000s.

You could almost say that I came of age with the Revolution and am growing old with it. But the Revolution retains a youthful vigour, and I try to follow that example!

There were some funny moments. I remember when Carlos Rafael Rodriguez warned us, as the first Jamaican delegation to visit the USSR, about accepting payment for Jamaican exports in convertible roubles, because they could not be used to buy anything. When I asked why they were called ‘convertible’, he replied with a broad smile, ‘that is we have been trying to find out for a long time’.

My friend Roberto Verrier Castro is President of ANEC. I once referred to him, jokingly, as President Castro. Roberto was sitting on the podium in the presence of Fidel; and his expression showed that he was not amused.

I remember the generosity of ANEC in hosting my family--my wife and two children and I--on a two-week visit in 1999, when we went to several provinces, including Santiago, Pinar Del Rio and Villa Clara. On that occasion I was made an Honorary Member of ANEC, and I wish to thank that Association once again.

I am very happy that Jasmine, my partner and soul mate, is here to share the occasion with me tonight.

You never know what children will notice. On our return to Jamaica from that trip, I overheard my 10-year old daughter telling a friend—“In Cuba, everyone is the same”.

I used to have a framed photograph of Fidel, Che and Camilo hanging on the wall in my house. One day it mysteriously disappeared.

Much later my son of 19 confessed that he had taken it with him when he went abroad to study. It was now hanging on *his* wall. He had been twelve years old when we visited the Che memorial in Santa Clara.

Certain other things stand out, and I want to use this opportunity to put them on record.

I want to say that I remember with especial pride and pleasure a long meeting I had with the Commander in Chief, while I was ACS Secretary General, late one night in his office in 2002, in which he explained to me the programme to make every Cuban child computer literate; and gave me his frank opinion of the antics of the foreign minister of a certain neighbouring Latin American country that lies to your west!

I want to say that in my contact with Cubans as individuals what has always stood out to me are your professionalism, your discipline, your organization, your individual and national self-confidence combined with a total absence of a sense of superiority, your value system that is not driven by the worship of money and material objects, your willingness to share and your solidarity with others.

I hope you never lose those qualities. You are an example to the rest of us.

I want to say that we in the Caribbean, especially those of my generation, will never forget the contribution made by Cuban men and women to the liberation of southern Africa from the scourge of apartheid.

I want to say that we will never forget—or we ought never to forget—the 70-odd young men and women of Cuba, Guyana and other countries who were taken to their deaths off the coast of Barbados in 1976, victims of one of the most heinous acts of terrorism in the history of our region.

I want to say that we will never forget the support provided by Cuba to the people of Grenada during their revolutionary process in 1979-1983; nor the unequivocal condemnation by Cuba of the murder of Maurice Bishop and several others when that process came to a tragic end, and the Cubans who gave their lives in the invasion that followed.

I want to say that for a country in Cuba's position to have survived the collapse of the Soviet Union, with all that that brought about in the disappearance of markets, of vital supplies of food, fuel and spare parts, a huge fall in national income; to have survived this catastrophe, in the face of a tightening in the US embargo; to

have survived it while preserving many, if not most of the gains of your Revolution, without widespread crime and major social unrest, without brutal political repression of the kind that we have seen in many other countries experiencing much less severe degrees of structural adjustment; for this to have happened defies all social, economic and political logic.

It is like a miracle, except that we haven't had any miracles on earth for past 2000 years.

So I want to say that, in my simple way of seeing things, I believe that this 'miracle' can only be explained by the practice of a profound participatory democracy in Cuba, with a leadership that explains everything, a people that discusses everything, an economic adjustment that was equitably shared, and a people determined to defend their Revolution and their independence, no matter what the cost.

But the thing that stands out most of all, the quality that want to mention above all, is the internationalism of the Cuban people.

The Guyanese revolutionary Walter Rodney, whom I mentioned earlier, is reported to have said once that "West Indians live more in time and than in space".

I believe this is one of the most profound statements ever made about the Caribbean condition. It is all the more remarkable that Walter made it while he was a student at high school.

What did he mean by this? I believe he was saying that the West Indian sense of himself, of his place in the world, is governed more by a consciousness of the historical forces that have shaped us than by the geographical confines of our existence.

It cannot be an accident, for instance, that Marcus Mosiah Garvey, the first person from the English-speaking Caribbean to create an anti-imperialist mass movement, was a Pan-Africanist. His political organization took in most of the English speaking islands, with branches in Cuba, Central America and the Continental United States. Garvey lived more in time than is space.

He helped to inspire Mandela, Kenyatta and Nkrumah.

He was followed by outstanding Pan Africanists from our islands and mainland, like George Padmore, CLR James, Sylvester Williams and Walter Rodney.

People could not understand how Michael Manley, leader of a tiny nation of 2 million people, could have the audacity to campaign for a New International Economic Order.

Bob Marley called for “World Citizenship, and the Rule of International Morality”.

And Jose Marti spoke not only of ‘Nuestra America’. He proclaimed “Patria es Humanidad”—the Fatherland is Humanity--the message of welcome that greets visitors to Cuba arriving at the airport in Havana that bears his name.

Jose Marti lived more in time than in space. And his legacy of internationalism is sustained by Che, by Fidel, and by the entire Cuban people.

One of Fidel’s most moving speeches was one I heard him give at the South Summit here in Havana in 2000. It was called Global Economic Apartheid.

And that sense of internationalism, dare I suggest, is a psychic bond between us as Caribbean people. And the practice of international solidarity that flows from it is the one I think of most, when I think of the Cuban Revolution.

In 1985 I attended a Conference here on the External Debt of Latin America and the Caribbean. Fidel proclaimed ‘La Deuda es Impagable’—‘The Debt is Unpayable’!

Tonight, Cuban friends, as I thank you most sincerely for this honour you have given me, from one of the most distinguished Universities in our hemisphere, which I accept not only in my name but in the name of my generation of Pan-Caribbean thinkers, in the names of Lloyd Best and George Beckford and others in the New World Group; tonight I want to acknowledge to Cuba that *la deuda es impagable*.

But I do not mean the debt that is owed to the banks by the people of the Latin America and the Caribbean, and is measured in United States dollars. I mean the

debt that is owed to the Cuban people by the rest of the Caribbean and indeed by all humanity, that is measured by their sacrifices and their solidarity and the unshakeable resolve of their leadership.

For the 185,000 Cuban medical personnel who have served in 103 countries in the last ten years alone, *la deuda es impagable*.

For the nearly 350 million visits carried out by Cuba's Global Health Programmes in poor communities abroad in the past seven years, for the one million four hundred thousand lives that have been saved, and for the 327,000 persons who have had their sight restored under Operation Milagro, *la deuda es impagable*.

For the 2,451,000 persons in 13 countries who have learned to read and write through Cuban literacy programmes, *la deuda es impagable*.

For the 27,000 students from 120 countries studying in Cuba and for the thousands of scholarships granted the sons and daughters of the Caribbean to gain a higher education, *la deuda es impagable*.

For the 330,000 Cubans who served in Angola from 1975 to 1991, and for the blood of 2,000 of them who gave their lives in the struggle against the racist regime, and for the families whom they left behind, *la deuda es impagable*.

For doing all this, while withstanding an economic embargo for nearly half a century from the mightiest power on the planet, that cost an estimated \$93 billion dollars, equivalent to 12 times the foreign debt of Cuba, for the material sacrifices and hardship you have endured, providing hope and inspiration to the rest of the world, *la deuda es impagable*.

For invoking the immortal words of your National Hero Jose Marti, that 'Patria es Humanidad', and for living it, day by day, month by month, year by year and decade by decade, *la deuda es impagable*.

For giving universal meaning to the 'Patria' in the pledge, 'Patria or Muerte, Venceremos!', *la deuda es impagable*.

Thank you for this honour. Thank you for your kind attention. Thank you for your heroic example.