

Congressman Joe Moakley
Statement on U.S. - Cuba Policy
New England - Canada Business Council
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Thank you for inviting me to be with you today. It is a pleasure to spend some time with you to discuss the current state of U.S. - Cuba policy.

Today, I strongly believe we stand at a critically important juncture in this debate. The difficult and tragic case of little Elian Gonzalez has focused the people of the United States -- and the entire world for that matter -- on U.S. / Cuba relations.

Many normal Americans who knew very little about the United States' policy on Cuba could probably quote you chapter and page numbers from the Helms-Burton law now. As you know, that's how intense the media scrutiny has been over the last couple of months.

Now that they are aware, I believe many Americans are agreeing with me and several colleagues of mine in the Congress that our policy on Cuba is a failed one.

For nearly 40 years we've tried to strangle communism with our embargo -- but that system has withstood all of our efforts. It's time for a change.

By flooding Cuba with democracy, American ideals, books, newspapers, Reebok sneakers, the Internet, and Gillette razors, change would come faster than the Cubans could say Tropicana Club.

As you may have heard, I just returned from a 5 day visit to Havana. My former aide, and current Congressman, Jim McGovern and I took a delegation of 50 college presidents and deans to the island to meet with Cuban educators in the hope of starting a dialogue.

I've said for many years that an open dialogue is the only way we can effect change in Cuba, and the results of this trip have reinforced that vision for me.

In planning this trip, I had only hoped to get people together, get them talking and start the ball rolling. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined the progress that was made in just a few short days.

While we were in Cuba, several letters of intent and documents were negotiated and signed by our institutions, in a variety of different fields. Schepens Eye Research Center from Harvard Medical School will be setting up a program to bring Cuban medical students to study here. Massachusetts College of Art will be bringing artists and writers to Boston for a Cuban culture show. And Boston College would like to send its students to Cuba to study Spanish.

I was amazed at the interesting discussions that took place, and the relationships that took off. But, that is what I see when I look at Cuba -- I see people starving for a chance to learn, meet the world and ultimately create change.

And I believe these kind of exchanges will slowly break down the barriers between Cuba and the United States, allow us to understand each other better, and promote change in Cuba.

And I'll tell you there is opportunity for change in Cuba. During my recent visit, I went to Palm Sunday mass at the Cathedral in Havana. The Archbishop, Cardinal Jaime Ortega, led a beautiful procession around the grand old church, out into the street, with worshippers holding their palms high.

This open expression of faith and religion was unimaginable 3 years ago before the Pope arrived. I believe that more attempts to open up the Cuban society, like the Pope's, will have similar effects.

I was there when the Pope made his historic visit, and I'll tell you it was an experience that has left a mark on me forever. The Cuban people were ecstatic to have the opportunity to express their faith so openly, to be on the world's stage, and to welcome so many visitors to their country.

They're ready for change -- its time we help them get there.

The current U.S. policy that places an embargo on trade with Cuba may not have been such a bad idea in 1963. But we must acknowledge now that it has failed, and we must begin a course to change the way this country deals with Cuba. After 40 years, Fidel Castro has remained in power, in large part I believe because we have given him an excuse for his government's failures.

Let me tell you, the embargo hasn't hurt Castro and his supporters. Every time there is a food shortage, and every time there is a sharp economic downturn, Castro places the blame firmly in our lap. He points to the north and tells his poor people that the evil capitalists are causing their pain.

We must take this excuse away from him.

While in Cuba, I had a very frank conversation with a prominent dissident in Cuba, who told me that he believes the U.S. policy of embargo is a major reason Castro remains in power.

This is a man that has spent many years in jail for his outspoken criticism of the Cuban government, and the leading spokesperson on human rights in Cuba.

He and I agreed that by lifting the embargo, allowing Americans to interact with Cubans, showing the Cuban people our democratic ways and allowing our products to reach their shores, there is no way a communist dictatorship could remain in control.

I believe that it is very significant that this leader on human rights -- who is actually on the ground in Cuba -- is calling for the end of the embargo, while the Cuban American community in Miami is working harder than ever to keep the embargo on.

I believe the debate must be shifted to allow the voice of the many who are actually affected by the embargo -- those that live in Cuba.

The embargo, to me, means a lot more than just a ban on trade. Certainly the Cuban government is to blame for the plight of its people. But, I believe we have a responsibility to do all that we can to alleviate the difficult lives the Cuban people lead.

Conditions that the Cuban people live by are tremendously difficult. Food is short, medicines are scarce and the health of the average Cuban is declining. New breakthrough medicines that combat cancer are not available, doctors re-use disposable gloves until they break, and pacemakers for heart patients are virtually impossible to find.

I remember vividly a visit I made to a pediatric hospital just outside of Havana. One particular little boy had a heart disorder that is widely treated in the United States using the insertion of a plastic shunt. But, that simple device is made in America, and therefore not available in Cuba. So this helpless child spent 86 days in intensive care -- and nearly died. During that terrible ordeal the little boy lost a lung, and will have continued health problems for years to come. That is what the embargo means to me.

Now, I know, supporters of the embargo will say that Cuba can go to any other country in the world to buy medicines. That is true, but the problem is that the United States is the leader in medicines, medical supplies, medical techniques, and everything else with the prefix "med" before it. The fact is that we've got the corner on the medical market.

Furthermore, we passed the Helms-Burton law that prevents subsidiaries abroad from doing business in Cuba. As the economy has become more and more global, U.S. pharmaceutical and medical supply companies have increased their share of ownership around the world. Today, the U.S. owned subsidiaries dominate the market abroad.

So, when Cuba looks to other countries for medicines, they often run-in to road blocks there as well.

I know that Canadians are playing an active role in Cuba, and I applaud your organizations for your efforts to bring about freedoms in Cuba. I remember well last year when the Canadian government stood firm and criticized Castro for locking up 4 dissidents simply for speaking their minds.

It is that kind of relationship -- engaged, yet critical when necessary -- that I believe the United States should be holding with Cuba.

So, in your organizations' dealings with Cuba, I urge you to continue to speak about human rights and freedom. I encourage you to talk about how freely Canadians live, and I hope you'll talk about Canadian lifestyles and pastimes. Now, I don't know if hockey would catch on down there with all that hot weather, but it sure would make interesting conversation!

But, seriously, that is how change will come and I hope the U.S. government will join you soon in trying to bring change from within. I firmly believe this is an issue we must address and we cannot pass-up an opportunity to truly change Cuba for the better. We need to engage Cuba so we'll be there when the political status-quo is gone. After Castro, there is a giant vacuum of leadership -- and no one really knows who will step in and fill that role. Continuing the U.S. policy leaves us without any influence. But, by engaging Cuba now, the United States will have a hand in the future and can work to bring about democratic ideals to the island.

So, in closing, I'd like to say again that I this is a critical time in the debate. I'm going to continue to stand up and speak out against what I believe is a mis-guided policy, and I hope the American public joins me in this effort.

And I encourage you to continue what you're doing, continue to educate people and continue to open doors in Cuba. It is time we bring some sense to this debate on Cuba -- maybe then it won't take a little boy's tragedy to point out the difference between right and wrong.

Thank you.

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