

INTERVIEW: PETER KENT

Canada and Cuba must talk in public, says the minister of state for foreign affairs

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Canwest News Service

Friday, May 15, 2009

OTTAWA - Canada's cabinet minister for Latin America says he has no regrets about chiding Cuba on human rights, even though Havana abruptly cancelled the trip he was to make there next week.

But Peter Kent, minister of state for foreign affairs for the Americas, says Canada has only good intentions in helping Cuba reform. That's because it stands "at a crossroads in history" with positive overtures coming from U.S. President Barack Obama that could end the half-century-old U.S. embargo which the minister says has isolated Cuba.

In an exclusive interview with Canwest News Service and Global News, Kent said the quiet diplomacy or "constructive engagement" of past Liberal governments has not worked and that Canadians expect their government to conduct human rights discussions in the open, not behind closed doors.



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Minister of State of Foreign Affairs Peter Kent. Canada's cabinet minister for Latin America says he has no regrets about chiding Cuba on human rights, even though Havana abruptly cancelled the trip he was to make there next week.

"This government is much more open in its discussion of foreign policy in speaking up on human rights, not just in the Cuban situation, but in other countries around the world and I think that the Canadian public as well, as perhaps citizens of Cuba . . . deserve a chance to see the process," said Kent.

"We are very understanding of the Cuban situation. They have been isolated through the years of the Cold War by the Helms Burton embargo, but Cuba stands today at a crossroads of history and Canada."

Kent learned 10 days ago that his planned trip to Havana was no longer possible. The Cuban government gave no clear explanation other than it would not be able to accommodate him.

It is unclear whether Kent's tough language - as well as some frank talk from Prime Minister Stephen Harper about Cuba's totalitarian state - rubbed the Cuban communist regime the wrong way.

Kent has previously told Canwest News Service that he wanted to use the trip to prod the Castro regime to release political prisoners, to show better respect for human rights and to open itself up to allowing meaningful political dissent.

But Harper also said the U.S. embargo did not work, and Kent reiterated this, saying it has hindered meaningful change in Cuba.

"There have been improvements over the years. They have been incremental. The greatest obstacle has been Helms-Burton, the Congressional law that isolates Cuba."

Last month, Obama relaxed travel restrictions on Cuban-Americans and lifted limits on the cash remittances they can send back to their homeland.

Obama admitted that his country's economic embargo, which has been in effect since 1962, has not worked. But he called on Havana to allow democratic freedoms before lifting it.

1962 was also the same year that Cuba was suspended from the Organization of American States, but pressure is mounting in the 34-country group to readmit Cuba.

Along with the U.S., Canada is opposed to readmitting Cuba until it allows political freedoms that are in line with the OAS charter.

Kent will represent Canada at the next major OAS meeting in early June when Cuba's future will be discussed.

"Canada believes that the time is right for Cuba to move towards a more democratic society, with greater respect for human rights and the release of political prisoners and for its re-integration into the OAS. It's not that we oppose Cuba's re-admittance or the end of its suspension from the OAS," Kent said.

He said that a consensus emerged from the recent Summit of the Americas, where OAS leaders, including Harper and Obama met, "that for Cuba to be readmitted would require its embrace of the OAS principles of democratic practices."

"This is a time to encourage - again in a more public way perhaps now - that Cuba move towards democratic practices and principles," Kent added.

"Canada has had very close relations with Cuba for 64 years now . . . We've encouraged Cuba to move closer to the democratic norms of this hemisphere and to recognize human rights and to release political prisoners and we'll continue to do that."