

CSA teaming up with Washington think

By Holger Henke

On November 16, 2009, the Caribbean Studies Association teamed up with the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and the Heinrich Böll Stiftung North America to present a symposium entitled “Engaging Cuba: Policy Options for the United States, Europe, and the Western Hemisphere.” The event sought to bring together scholars, policy-makers, and representatives from civil society or NGOs to discuss similarities and dissimilarities in policy approaches to Cuba in North and Latin America, Europe and the Caribbean. The event’s timing was well chosen, as several days later a hearing in the U.S. Congress focused on the still evolving approach of the Obama Administration.

The symposium is a first outcome of initiatives suggested a few years ago by then CSA President Pedro Noguera and a number of council members in the association to make CSA more policy-relevant, as well as to start to organize and engage in events outside of the annual conference. The idea to organize the event evolved earlier last year when it became increasingly clear that Barack Obama might just win the White House and a subsequent shift in U.S. Cuba policy would become possible, if not even likely. With the help of a U.S.\$ 15,000 grant provided by the Heinrich Böll Foundation, facilitated through the Research Foundation of the City University of New York, as well as a significant contribution by the Wilson Center, the very well-attended event attracted not only students and general public interested in the issue, but also Congressional staff, a representative of the Cuban Interest Section in Washington, representatives from various policy groups, as well as the media.

Presenters at the event included Dr. Karl Buck from the Council of the European Union, former CSA President Dr. Jorge Heine from CIGI and Wilfrid Laurier University, Ms. Bisa Williams, the Obama Administration’s point-person for Cuba in the State Department, who spoke (off the record) for the first time publicly in Washington about the Administration’s approaches to Cuba, Dr. Stephen Wilkinson of London Metropolitan University, Dr. Anna Ayuso from Fundació CIDOB in Barcelona, Dr. Susanne Gratius of FRIDE in Madrid, former U.S. Ambassador to the OAS John F. Maisto, Mr. Carlo Dade of FOCAL (Canadian Foundation for the Americas), and Mr. Dan Fisk, J.D., from the International Republican Institute. The presenters were organized into two panels – “Europe and Cuba” and “The Western Hemisphere and Cuba.”

Within the conference and symposium circle in Washington Cuba is a regularly discussed topic and a successful event within this context needs to be conceptualized carefully in order to be “competitive” and attract the desired attention and attendance. The purpose of the symposium was to bring together practitioners, researchers, as well as advocates from both sides of the Atlantic to exchange views and experiences, as well as collectively think about the way forward. It was gratifying that the event had policy representatives from Europe and the United States, even while one might have liked to see more intellectual exchange across the two differently focused panels.

Cynthia Arnson, the Wilson Center Director for Latin American program, framed the discussion at the outset by articulating some of the important questions this symposium set out to answer. Thus, she posed the following questions: To what extent does the transfer of power Fidel to Raul Castro mark not only change in personalities, but also meaningful change in the goals and policies of the Cuban Revolution? If there is a reform process underway, does it include political liberalization, and if so what is the role of the international community in deepening such transformation? What should be the terms of engagement in the political, economic, and cultural spheres? Does engagement per se in the diplomatic and commercial

arenas contribute to change over time by its very nature, or should such engagement be withheld pending improvements in human rights and political freedoms on the island? What are the existing convergences and divergences within the international community in the specific policy areas of trade, migration, energy and human rights? Will Spain's forthcoming presidency of the European Union take European policy in a new direction? What is the Cuba policy of the Obama Administration? What are its goals and policy instruments, and what are the domestic U.S. constituencies pressing for a change in the relationship or insisting on continuation of a policy of isolation? Within the Western Hemisphere, does the OAS uphold a double standard with regard to the applicability of the democratic charter to Cuba's readmission to that body? Of course, an event of this nature could not expect to exhaust this list of questions, and to analyze with finality an ever unfolding historical scenario, but the consensus of participants and visitors at the end of the seminar was that the symposium was a very useful platform for transatlantic dialogue on this charged issue.

Presentations by Dr. Ayuso, Dr. Williamson and Dr. Buck made clear the constraints and approaches different European countries/entities faced as they engaged (at significant higher levels than the United States did) Cuba over the years in different areas. Dr. Buck stressed that in the face of growing Cuban conditionalities the EU worked to clear out unreasonable Cuban expectations, while different actors throughout Europe collaborated economically with Cuba and the EU itself extended significant financial assistance to facilitate reform processes in Cuba. Dr. Ayuso pointed out that for Spain several dualities (e.g., Spanish political parties vs. public opinion; constructive vs. coercive approaches; fluctuating official contacts vs. stronger non-official ties) acted upon the evolution of relations with Cuba over time and across different governments. Dr. Williamson argued convincingly for a convergence of U.S. and European approaches encouraging changes in light of a less and less efficient embargo and Cuban ability and determination to resist coercive approaches.

The Western Hemisphere panel was equally diverse in its perspectives. The State Department representative spoke off-record about the approach of the Obama Administration and how subtle new approaches differ from the restrictive policies of the previous administration. Carlo Dade painted a complex picture of Canadian policies and perceptions that in some ways resemble the Spanish situation. In fact, in Canadian politics a certain fatigue over engagement with Cuba seems to be the order of the day. Assessment of the outcomes and results of many years of sympathetic government approaches seem to tip the balance to the negative side. However, with increasing U.S. interest and engagement, Canadian is likely to become more engaged again. An important intervention was offered by former CSA President Jorge Heine, Professor of Political Science at Wilfrid Laurier University and Distinguished Fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI). As Dr. Heine pointed out, in South America the issue of Cuba is widely perceived as a relic of regional subordination in the international arena. There is in fact a strong embrace and engagement with Cuba already evident as seen by the number of Latin American and Caribbean embassies in Cuba, as well as the high ranking government visits to Cuba. Unlike in Spain or Canada, this new affinity cuts across political lines and is by no means simply an expression of cookie-cutter solidarity between several left-leaning governments in the Hemisphere. Cuba is and remains a litmus test of U.S. attention to Latin American and Caribbean political and historical sensibilities.