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Canada's silence on U.S.'s Cuba policy speaks volumes: experts

By JENNIFER DITCHBURN

OTTAWA (CP) - The moment Fidel Castro passes away - or at least the moment the world finds out about it - has taken on almost mythic proportions south of the border.

In Washington, there are elaborate plans to help Cuba with its "transition." An entire government commission has been set up for the purpose, with a \$80-million price-tag to prove it "stands ready to work with the Cuban people to attain political and economic liberty." In Miami, anti-Castro expatriates plan to pack the Orange Bowl for a celebration, and some contemplate potentially incendiary "aid" flotillas destined for the island's shores.

In Canada, experts say the political silence over Castro's failing health speaks volumes about this country's commitment to pursue a different path - a policy of constructive engagement.

Canadians continue to visit Cuba by the millions each year. Canadian businesses pursue mining, tourism and other interests on the island. And the Canadian government maintains normal diplomatic relations with Havana, normal being the operative word, says longtime Cuba observer John Kirk.

"The policy of constructive engagement even during Conservative and Liberal governments that didn't look kindly on Cuba has maintained a degree of stability in the bilateral relationship," said Kirk, a professor at Dalhousie University and co-author of "Canada-Cuba Relations: The Other Good Neighbor Policy."

"Like any country with which we have a normal relationship, whether its Canada and Spain arguing over fishing ten years ago...we have a normal relationship which means that we agree to disagree."

That normal relationship has meant that Canadian diplomats have communicated freely with the Castro regime, and with the few civil society groups that have been able to take root in the communist country. Three of the Department of Foreign Affairs' top bureaucrats have been posted to Havana in the past and bring with them a wealth of contacts and knowledge.

That type of access is impossible for U.S. diplomats, who because of their country's 46-year embargo of Cuba have only a small interests section run out of the Swiss embassy. Their movements are restricted to the capital.

Now, with Castro still recovering from gastric surgery in July and his brother Raul governing the country, Canada's ties to Cuba have been labelled "useful" to the United States. Last December, a high-ranking U.S. official visiting Ottawa said pointedly that Canada could "play an important role expressing some expectations about what a successful and peaceful transition to democracy might look like."

But no Canadian bureaucrat or politician to date has acknowledged or backed Washington's master plan for Cuba, or expressed its "expectations" for what should or should not occur once Castro passes away.

"That's very significant. Nobody supports it," says Carleton University's Arch Ritter, another veteran observer of Cuban politics.

"The United States continues to be all alone in its policy on Cuba. They don't seem to get lonely there. Their policies have failed for so long, nobody has backed them."

Adds Kirk: "Since the foreign policy of the Harper government has been increasingly aligned with the United States, then it makes sense to see if you can push the envelope a little bit by seeing if Canada will come onside. I think



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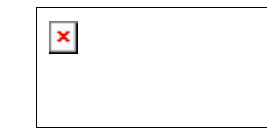
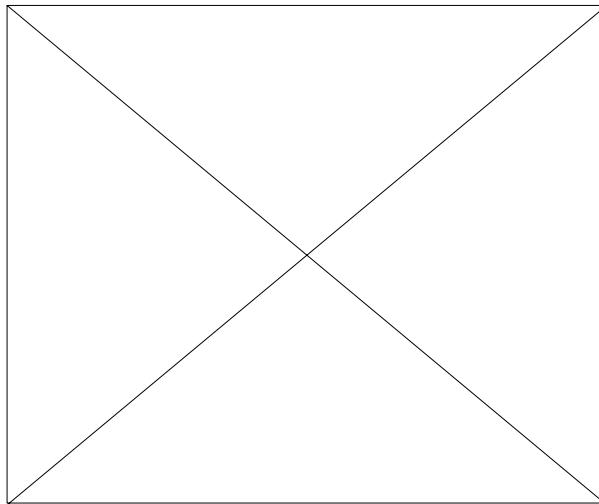
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Canada is too smart to get sucked in by enticements by Washington."

The last public statement this government has made about Cuba was last summer, when Foreign Affairs Minister Peter MacKay emphasized Canada's "sovereign, independent position vis-a-vis our relations with Cuba." In November, Canada was among 183 other countries to vote against the U.S. embargo of Cuba at the United Nations General Assembly.

So what exactly would happen if Castro died, say, tomorrow?

Kirk says protocol would dictate MacKay would be on the first plane to Havana, there to express condolences and press the flesh.

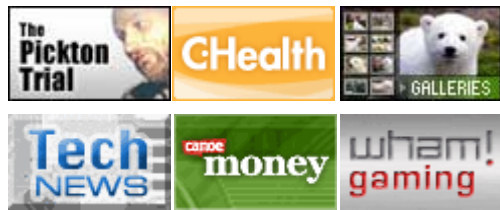
"The Canadian government would say we're happy to help in any way we can...if you want to look at a freer market economy or if you want to look at opening up the political system we have a lot of experience, we'd be happy to help you," Kirk says.

"The Cubans would be very polite and say, thanks but no thanks, we're interested in increasing tourism numbers, trade numbers, exchanges in any way we can ... but that's it. Thanks for coming down."

Both Kirk and Ritter, who visit the island regularly, emphasize that nothing is likely to shift in Cuba for many years, with or without Castro. They note that Cuba's economy has been getting progressively stronger over the past decade, with higher nickel prices, cheap oil from Venezuelan ally Hugo Chavez and more tourists - all developments that point away from civil unrest in the country. Raul Castro, as longtime head of the successful and respected Armed Forces, has a firm position in the government.

While the new aggressive messages from Washington might serve to entrench the regime, say Kirk and Ritter, Canada's approach and that of other countries simply won't make much difference either way.

"Whether with the stick or with the carrot, Cuba's going to march to its own drum," said Kirk. "I think the sensible policy is to leave Cuba be and let it figure out what it wants to do itself."



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