

CUBA'S PLACE IN THE WORLD TODAY

Bernard Regan, National Secretary of the Cuban Solidarity Campaign (CSC), gave Faringdon Peace Group an overview of the history of Cuba and the challenges of the US blockade. Having just returned from a visit to Cuba he was able to give an up to date account of the present situation.

Cuba was a Spanish colony from 1511 till 1898. Only 90 miles from the Florida coast, Cuba was seen as a 'natural appendage' of the US and even after it became a republic in 1902, the US retained the right to interfere in Cuban affairs until the revolution of 1959. They controlled public finances and major parts of the Cuban economy and from the 1920s Cuba became their offshore casino and brothel - the gangster capital of the Caribbean.

The Cuban Revolution was a mass uprising against President Batista's dictatorship and repression, not just a guerrilla war in the mountains. Eisenhower, Kennedy and other US presidents since have tried to overthrow the Revolution through numerous assassination attempts on Castro, crop spraying, CIA infiltration and most famously the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion. But all these measures were unsuccessful as they did not have the support of the Cuban people who, since the Revolution, had enjoyed better health, education and employment. Their form of communism was not transplanted from Russia, but home-grown as a consequence of their enforced isolation.

The CSC campaigns against the US blockade of Cuba which has been in place since 1959 and for its right to govern itself. There can be no business transactions between the US and Cuba and third countries trading with Cuba are banned from the US. Any product with at least 25% made in the US counts as breaking the blockade. To begin with the blockade was by presidential decree and didn't need the approval of Senate but in the 1990s laws were changed making it more formal and requiring an Act of Congress to repeal it. It has been calculated that the extra costs of the blockade to Cuba in the fields of health, food, culture, education, construction and biotechnology amount to 1 trillion dollars since 1960. Bernard explained that although Obama has eased some restrictions, the blockade is still very much in place.

Despite the blockade, and maybe in some ways because of it, Cuba has developed a certain self-sufficiency and retained strong human values of respect and care for others. This is evident particularly in health and education. Cuba has brigades of health workers ready to respond to disasters and provided the largest number of medics of any country in the West African ebola outbreak. In 2015 Cuba became the first country in the world to eliminate mother-to-child transmission of HIV and syphilis. Their literacy programme has won UNESCO awards and been adopted with great success around the world.

Bernard encouraged us all to visit Cuba and experience the country for ourselves.