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Embargo is embarrassing, anachronistic - and has failed

Time for US policy change on Cuba

3/13/2014

If a policy is not achieving its objective, either the policy must change or the objective. For more than 50 years the US has sought to suffocate communism and promote democracy in Cuba through sanctions. Last November Barack Obama admitted this outdated policy had failed. “We have to be creative . . . to continue to update our policies,” he told a Miami fundraising event. The intellectual case for relaxing and eventually removing the embargo is certainly strong. Mr Obama should now advance it.

The moment has never been more propitious for a fresh approach. Change is under way in Cuba, albeit fitfully. Since replacing his elder brother as president in 2008, Raúl Castro has begun a series of economic reforms. While meant to “update socialism” they have introduced elements of a market economy. Some 450,000 Cubans now work as self-employed entrepreneurs. Their position is precarious, and subject to the whims of a totalitarian state, but nonetheless they operate independently of the government. This is a welcome process that should be encouraged.

At the same time, 90 miles away across the Florida straits, opposition to lifting the embargo is crumbling. This month Alfonso Fanjul, patriarch of a pre-revolutionary sugar dynasty, broke with elite exile opinion by saying he had travelled to Cuba twice, spoken to officials and would invest in the island “under the right circumstances”. A few days later a poll by

the Atlantic Council found that a majority of Americans and even Cuban-Americans favoured normalising relations. Bilateral co-operation on migration, the environment and countering narcotics is already good.

Meanwhile, the EU is seeking a new approach to Cuba, and all of Latin America has normal relations. For some countries in the region, this is a cheap way to thumb their nose at the “gringos”. For others it represents a sincere desire to increase the chances of a soft landing.

This is in everyone’s interests, especially Cuba’s closest neighbour, the US. Opening to Cuba now would improve US standing in the region, while accelerating the possibility of change, especially given the troubles of Cuba’s main benefactor, Venezuela. Mr Obama has eased some restrictions on travel and remittances. He needs to go further. Although lifting the embargo fully requires an act of Congress, he has some executive powers at his disposal.

Travel restrictions for US citizens should be lifted; the list of authorised exports, currently only food and medicine, expanded; commercial activity with private businesses encouraged; and Cuba removed from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. Havana has played a crucial role in Colombia’s peace talks; Cuba’s continued inclusion, which brings tough financial strictures, makes a mockery of the list.

The aim of the new approach is simple. The more restrictions there are on the island, the less Cubans have and the more subservient they become to whoever dispenses it – currently the state. Creating economic space therefore creates freedom. At the same time, engagement does not mean ending support for human rights or political liberalisation. Rather it provides a more credible context for criticism.

Mr Obama may suffer political blowback from any new approach. Cuba remains an emotional issue. Yet engagement is not appeasement, except as Winston Churchill once put it: “Appeasement has its place in all policy. Make sure you put it in the right place. Appease the weak; defy the strong.” It recognises that the constituency for reform within the regime is thin, and needs to be encouraged from outside. It also accepts that rebuilding democracy in a country that last had free elections in 1948 may be an uncertain process – and that policy must begin where you are, not where you hope to end.