
Rep. McGovern: 'We Should Have Normal Relations With Cuba'

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Massachusetts Congressman Jim McGovern has been at the forefront of improving U.S.-Cuba relations for years. Despite new business and travel restrictions from the Trump administration that have chilled relations between the two nations, McGovern says he is still hopeful, and he believes the unique connections between Cuba and Massachusetts can help pave the way to something better. WGBH News Morning Edition host Joe Mathieu spoke with McGovern in Havana about his commitment to improving U.S.-Cuba relations. The transcript below has been edited for clarity.

Rep. Jim McGovern: I was fascinated with the island when I first came here as a college student. The commitment to universal literacy and universal health care — something about it appealed to me. And I think back then I was ready to during the revolution. I came home and got on with my life, but I've come back here many times since. I've seen the changes and I've seen [the] political space grow. There are some things about this island that are really impressive, and there are some things that I have great concern over. But I do believe one thing for certain, and that is that the United States should change its policy. We should have normal relations with Cuba. We should lift the embargo and we should start building on that relationship.

Joe Mathieu: Well, it's interesting when you talk about our policy and the embargo. There was quite a bit of progress being made in thawing that relationship in the Obama administration, and it seems that things have turned around quite a bit. How different is it now? How much more challenging is it for you to do work here than it was just a couple of years ago?

McGovern: Well, I thought we were on our way to a better relationship. I came to Cuba with John Kerry when he reopened the embassy, and I came with President Obama when he became the first president in a long time to be able to visit this island. I thought we were on the way to the kind of relationship that I think we should have — a constructive relationship, a positive relationship. Trump became president [and] surrounded himself with a bunch of right-wing ideologues, who I think are mad that Cuba is still standing, notwithstanding all their attempts to try to overthrow the government here. I think they're nostalgic for the Cold War, and they're reverting back to a policy that

has been a huge failure. It's disappointing to me that that's the direction the president has chosen to go, but I believe the majority of Americans want a better relationship with Cuba. I think we just need to keep at it, and ultimately we will get there.

Mathieu: It can't be easy working under this dynamic with government officials as you come to Cuba as a member of Congress. It's not the same way of doing business as we're used to in the United States — schedules move, things are chaotic. You put up with a lot here.

McGovern: When Fidel was in power, I remember a couple of times being hunted down. In one particular place at a nightclub in Havana, where I was just listing some beautiful music, four guys came in and said, "you have to come with us." I didn't know whether I was in the wrong place or I was going to be arrested or what was going on. But I was whisked off to do a late night meeting with Fidel Castro, which went on for hours. That's the nature of this place, and I think some of the unpredictability of the meetings, especially with the president, are really security concerns; they don't want people to know when meetings are going to happen for that reason in particular. But we've had some very productive conversations [and] we've even had some heated conversations when it comes to the issue of human rights. But I've always thought they were worthwhile conversations, and I continue to believe that we should build a better relationship with Cuba. It's not only good for the Cuban people, it's also good for the American people. Cuba is a natural market for our products. Cuba has a very robust medical research program. They are developing medications, treatments and therapies that a lot of our researchers would like to know more about.

Mathieu: There are quite a number of ties between Cuba and Massachusetts — Havana and Boston — that people might not be aware of when it comes to industry like biotech. Even when it comes to investing in the sugar industry a century ago. There are long ties that have been forgotten because of the embargo.

McGovern: There are long ties between Massachusetts and Cuba, and I think that it's natural that Massachusetts should take the leadership role in helping to bring our countries together again. And I want Massachusetts to lead on this. I want our businesses to lead on this. I want our biotech companies and our medical research firms to lead on this. I want our colleges and universities to lead on this. [When] I walk through Old Havana, it's not uncommon to bump into students from various colleges and universities in Massachusetts. We're still building bridges here. Unfortunately in Washington, they're trying to blow the bridges up. I have a bill to try to lift the travel restrictions on U.S. citizens traveling to Cuba. By the way, any restrictions on U.S. citizens traveling to Cuba are imposed by the United States government. We're the country that's supposed to be the symbol of freedom, and yet we restrict our citizens in terms of their travel here. I'm also on a bill to lift the embargo. I just don't think this makes any sense, and again, it reflects a policy that we've pursued for decades that has been an abysmal failure. Our policy toward Cuba makes the United States look petty. It makes us look small. It makes us look insecure. And the whole world is dealing with Cuba except us.

Mathieu: So your goal before your career is over [is] unfettered travel [and] lift the embargo?

McGovern: Absolutely. Americans should be able to travel here. We have to lift the embargo. We ought to improve our relations. And by the way, even during these difficult times, the Cubans are cooperating with the United States on issues involving drug interdiction — hunting down criminals who have fled to Cuba from the United States hoping to seek safe haven here. The Cubans are cooperating with us to make sure that they are brought to justice. So there are examples of cooperation even now that continue to go on. When people say to me we can't deal with Cuba because they're a communist country, well, we deal with China, Russia and Vietnam. When they say, we can't deal with Cuba because their human rights record is imperfect. That's true, but quite frankly there's more political space here than there is in Saudi Arabia. And we not only deal with Saudi Arabia, we sell them weapons. As a United States congressman, I want to make sure we're doing things that are in our interest. I want to make sure we're doing things that reflect well on us [and] that don't make us look stupid. I think the embargo and all the exaggerated Cold War rhetoric that has come out of Washington has made us look foolish.