

Cuba getting a Quebec office

22/04/2016



Cuba is a priority for Quebec. This week, Christine St. Pierre, the French-speaking province's International Relations Minister, announced plans to open a permanent office in Havana.

"It would be a very concrete gesture to show our determination to establish [a] sustainable and permanent relationship with Cuba," St. Pierre told CBC News in an interview on Monday April 18, 2016.

"It's about time."

Mme St. Pierre made an official visit to Havana in November 2015, that included a trade fair. She said 50 countries were also present, most with the same plans.

Peter McKenna is a professor of Latin America and International Human Rights, at the University of Prince Edward Island. He says Quebec's move is good news, and "it's about time."

Professor McKenna says "Canada has been lagging behind". The French, the British, Chinese and Russians have been busy making inroads into Cuba, he says. "Everyone's positioning themselves in trying to get in to establish closer business relations with the Cubans before the Americans dominate the economic landscape there."

"Statue of Pierre Elliot Trudeau in Havana"

Squandered opportunities is how McKenna describes former Prime Minister Stephen Harper's handling of the ties with Cuba. He neglected the relationship that had been built over centuries. Quebec has ties with the Caribbean's largest island that date back to the 1700's when French-Canadian explorers first arrived.

Today, Canadians from across the country make up a third of the tourists vacationing in Cuba annually, and Quebecers make up nearly half of them. One of the major tour operators that organizes the trips to Cuba has its

head office in Montreal, just a three-and-half hour flight away. Tourism management is one of the areas in which Canadians could prosper on the island.

'It's a good sign that Quebec is looking at establishing a permanent office there in Havana.' according to McKenna. He says it would be a good idea if the federal government of Justin Trudeau were to focus its diplomatic efforts on Cuba as well.

McKenna says the personal history of the Trudeau family is a major asset. "I think there was a very respectful relationship there, intellectually, between Pierre Elliot Trudeau and Fidel Castro."

McKenna says Cubans have a long memory and appreciated that Canada, along with Mexico, did not sever diplomatic ties following what's become known as the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. When Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau visited in 1976 he was the first NATO head-of-state to do so, when the Cold War was still a major factor in international relations.

The relationship was further strengthened in the 1990's when Canada opposed the United States' Helms Burton legislation in an effort to tighten the US embargo against Cuba.

The relationship and history with Canada is so valued, McKenna says, he's head plans for a formal honour. "The Cubans are interested in constructing a statue to acknowledge the close relationship between Canada and Cuba, to create a statue of Pierre Elliot Trudeau in Havana, and they're waiting for Justin to arrive to inaugurate that statue."

Meanwhile, in Cuba, the Communist Party just concluded its 7th congress. "The time will come for all of us, but the ideas of the Cuban communists will remain as proof on this planet that if they are worked at with fervour and dignity, they can produce the material and cultural goods that human beings need, and we need to fight without truce to obtain them." Fidel Castro said.

Professor McKenna says it's time Canada gets back into the business of cultivating the Canada-Cuba relationship, time to re-engage politically, diplomatically, and economically.

As for those reasonably-priced Cuban vacations, Canadians will be competing with a lot more people from many parts of the world, in the winters to come.
