

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

SM-5

27 November 1989

Ottawa, Ontario

"North of Havana"

Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter,

If I ever had any doubts about the interrelatedness of all things, they were thoroughly dispelled by the religious experience of spending 52 hours on a train. It left me stricken with wonderment, and believing for the first time in my life that I could write--and sing--a country and western song about the sweet, sweet circus of life.

I spent the better parts of my roundtrip journey to Halifax, Nova Scotia in the saloon car at the rear of the train. It was there, in the company of about a dozen ordinary Canadian crackpots (and with the aid of an effervescent holy water called Keith's Ale), that I saw the light: everybody is at least a little bit nuts.

When nothing else makes sense--when African ivory poachers are butchering elephants with chain saws and American ordnance is being dumped on hapless Salvadoran villagers and the world's pulp and paper magnates are saying we consumers would rather suffer dioxin than use beige-colored bathroom tissue; when earthly existence seems more and more like just another terminal disease--it is the common thread of looniness that keeps us all connected. Don't look for any solid reasoning here. I am talking about mild, localized and quirky forms of insanity versus the diabolical madness that pervades the planet.

I went to Nova Scotia because it was as close as I could get to Cuba. I can explain this bit of craziness, but later. On the way "down" to Halifax (Canadians go down to the Maritimes in the same sense that New Englanders go a bit farther "down east" to the coast of Maine), I met a chunky, 32-year old man sporting gold chains around his fleshy neck who claimed to be a neurosurgeon specializing in the reattachment of severed limbs. He was on his way to Moncton, New Brunswick, to deliver a paid lecture on "thumbs and other digits." On the way back, I encountered a roving conductor from Winnipeg who gave his own

Stephen Maly is an Institute Fellow studying the ethnic and cultural "nations" of Canada.

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

sort of lecture about how the U.S. Army conducted germ warfare against the Indians in the 19th century. I think he was talking about woolen blankets infected with smallpox, but I couldn't be sure, because he kept changing the subject whenever I or anyone else requested clarification. We all learned, for example, that Prime Minister Brian Mulroney is a paid agent of the White House, that all the "real Tories" are long dead, and turning in their graves over the recently concluded trade pact with "the bloody Americans", and that Charles Ng (the spelling is correct!), a convicted killer imprisoned in Alberta, would face certain death in "the police state of California" if extradited to the U.S., as one of the day's major news stories suggested he would be. This obviously well-informed, chain-smoking trainman frequently interrupted his own diatribes by taking off his official cap to hold it against his heart and state with great solemnity: "I only deal in facts."

Now, I must tell you that the young surgeon was a much more suspect character than the crazed conductor, who actually commanded a good deal of respect towards the end of our journey, if only because he had loudly proclaimed a wish (easily mistaken, under the circumstances, for an intention) to "stick someone's gut with a long, dull knife that's just been pissed on." His face was just inches away from mine at that particular moment, and it wasn't clear whether he was talking to me, or about me. Either way, it was clear by then that he wasn't fond of Americans. Luckily his walky-talky squawked a command to move "up train" to the baggage car just then, or he would have dominated the discussion for the rest of the evening.

Anyway, back to the earlier leg of the trip, and a shared sense of disbelief regarding the bona fides of the self-proclaimed scalpel wizard. Having just finished an exposition on the prolonged and costly experience of medical school (credible enough), he then went on to decry inadequate pay for nurses (fine), brag about his absolute dictatorship over nurses in the operating room (typical macho crap), denounce the Canada-U.S. free trade agreement (not unusual), and scream bloody murder about how generic drugs were undercutting his hard-earned profits.

This last bit was too much for several of the doctor's fellow passengers. The old man next to me had already explained to no one in particular (i.e. everybody ignored him) that he suffered from type B diabetes, and consequently had to take special medication, and that it cost him an arm and a leg. Mr. fixit clearly didn't care much about that, even though he admitted that "chemicals are chemicals, they all work the same"; what really "burned" his "ass" was the burden of a neurosurgeon's overhead expenses--office, car, phone, covering nurses, conventions, etc. His biggest mistake, I think, was in forgetting that just two beers earlier he had been gloating about his big chunk of real estate in Florida, and a mere swig or two before that he had showed us his "privileged customer" card, which meant he NEVER had to pay his own way on Air Canada or VIA Rail, both taxpayer-supported enterprises.

This guy's credibility gap was neatly summed up by a young French Canadian firefighter, hitherto silent (I had met him earlier in the dining car), who said afterwards, "If he's a physician, I'm the prime minister."

I think Pierre might have been the only sane person on the train. He was taking a brief working holiday from his hook and ladder job in Montreal to sell a special roast of Colombian coffee to the upscale restaurants in Halifax. After an exchange of pleasantries *en français* over dinner, I asked him the obvious questions about getting his coffee business mixed up with the booming trade in cocaine. The RCMP (federal cops, aka "mounties") had just made a couple of big busts in New Brunswick, and Canada's larger cities, like Montreal, are facing drug problems every bit as serious as our own. Pierre said his business was clean, that it was just a way to help him and his sole partner "get ahead" and out of the dangerous work of fighting fires. I believed him (not that it matters), and figured Pierre to be a perfect example of the youthful, confident, business-oriented (and therefore functionally bilingual) Quebecois that are said to be shaping the future of French Canada. What was more important to me at the time, however, was that here was at least one regular guy who would likely be nursing a beer in the bar car if and when all hell broke loose.

It never did, of course, even though at times I felt like I was being drawn into a nether world of collective dementia. The narrow corridor leading from my space-capsule-like berth to the saloon car became, as that first night wore on, a darkened tunnel connecting two completely different states of mind, one characterized by cool, rational conjecturing and an occasional warm memory, all in the context of complete privacy, with stars and pitch black walls of scrub pine forest to gaze at through the window; the other a smoky swelter of strange people playing games with half-truths, deceptions, and rampant excesses of illogic, without a care for who they were, or where. The only constant in both settings was the rhythmic clicking of friction-warmed steel wheels on cold steel track.

The saloon car, like nearly all of VIA Rail's rolling stock, was put together in the 1950s. It was well maintained. There were comfortable, wide-body fake leather chairs lined up along the perimeter of the car's oval-curved rear section. Drinks could be safely situated in the indentations surrounding the deep dish ashtrays that were mounted on sturdy, movable pedestals between the facing rows of seats. It was relaxing, at first, to just sit and watch the rails slide away into the horizon, pausing on occasion to read a page or two of newsprint. Check this out: "The United States and Canada," according to Stanford sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset, "are like trains that have moved thousands of miles along parallel railway tracks. They are far from where they started, but they are still separated."

The passage jumped out at me from a Globe and Mail review of Lipset's new book, entitled *Continental Divide: The Values*

and Institutions of the United States and Canada. "Hmmm...well put," I thought, savoring that moment of serendipitous connection, but knowing full well that sooner or later the fat guy pretending to read his epic-sized novel across from me would break the silence with a question.

I had spotted him earlier, wandering around Montreal's Gare Centrale (Central Station) wearing a navy blue trenchcoat and a pair of old Hushpuppies. Owing to his substantial girth, the belt of his coat was, shall we say, riding rather high, but he nevertheless seemed light on his feet, bopping around the station to collect an assortment of snacks and reading materials for the long journey. He was obviously an inveterate rider of trains.

What I did not know was that this saloon car veteran's one little ice-breaker inquiry would unleash a torrent of amiable invective from the rest of the people in our cozy abode.

"Where are you from?" asked Bill, who turned out to be a computer programmer for the CBC, a part-time church organist, his aging mother's caretaker, a real pro at train ride prep--he said he kept a private stock of scotch in his roomette--and the only admitted Mulroney Conservative within shouting distance of what soon became a mobile general assembly meeting.

"I am coming from Ottawa," I replied. (In my opinion, lying about one's nationality, except perhaps in the most extreme circumstances, is really asking for trouble, besides being some sort of sin. Still, there's no commandment against telling the whole truth in increments, and I reckoned, correctly, that too early a confession of my American citizenship might cramp some Canadians' style.) This innocuous beginning was enough to get the rest of the saloon car crowd going with cliché complaints about federal bureaucrats and the "dunderheads" in Parliament. A balding, portly long-faced man wearing a crested golf sweater soon bellowed "Lawyers don't know how to run a business, so why do they think they can govern a nation!", but not before assuring everyone that he had been educated "in the school of hard knocks, from bottom to top and back down again" (leaving him in the lurch of our lowly company), that he feared most the "damned Americanization of this country", and that he thought "Lee Iacocca would make a damn fine president for Canada!" Go figure.

Before long we all turned our verbal guns toward national defence, ever the discussion topic that brings people together. The lead-off man in this round was a Lt. Colonel in the Canadian Forces, on leave from a Nato command post in Germany. "The Stars and Stripes will NEVER be raised over Canada," he said gruffly, "not while this soldier-patriot is alive." (I have since heard similarly stirring comments from active and retired servicemen; felling the first American G.I. to cross the St. Lawrence Seaway seems to be a popular Canadian fantasy.) A bit later on, having skirted such issues as the federal budget deficit, the Bank of Canada's interest rate policy, the practice of "flipping" housing properties to avoid taxation (it's some

sort of capital gains scam)--all of which were much too complicated to hold anyone's interest, we finally settled on the possibility of Quebec's separation from the rest of Canada.

It started out gingerly, because there were two French Canadians present: Pierre the entrepreneurial fireman, and a tall, skinny guy with slicked back hair and an amazingly pointed adam's apple. This fellow looked like a youthful Don Knotts but he acted more like Peter Lawford; his accent, demeanor, and the \$1500 blue suit he was wearing in honor of his girlfriend, a clothes designer in Montreal, were smooth as silk. Most of the crowd warmed up to Jean-Michel after he began to liberally dole out American cigarettes which he had purchased "rather cheaply" on an Indian reservation in western Quebec. The Iacocca fan finally succumbed to his crass nature with the sneering remark, "What was that?", but only after the generous, broad shouldered (or was it just the shoulder pads?) Quebecker had picked up his wine cooler and left.

Our discussion went nowhere. The topic came up again, inevitably, during the return trip. An older woman with a gravelly voice said, "You will NEVER see Quebec separate." Then a young French Canadian (another Pierre, perhaps), muttered quietly, "I think it will happen in five years." "There could be a civil war," said big book Bill, who had the same round-trip ticket as I did, and appeared not to have made any progress on his novel. "That would be a real rhubarb!" exclaimed an unshaven guy in an oversized wool and leather athletic jacket who up until that moment had not uttered a word.

It was a perfectly timed, completely unintended cue for the rabid conductor I was telling you about earlier to make his second dramatic entrance, whipping cigarette ash in all directions as he swept down upon the lot of us, like a pontifical buzzard, a raptor in rapture, spouting his received wisdom: "Bush would recommend troops!" "Don't forget!" he cried, "in 1980 the U.S. amassed the National Guard along the Quebec-New York frontier!." I knew this to be a gross exaggeration. There had been concern in Washington about the advent of a "Cuba North" if the then left-leaning Parti Quebecois had won a mandate to negotiate separation. Time magazine even reported that the National Security Council had drawn up secret contingency plans, just in case the ensuing instability threatened U.S. "interests", but most of the worry faded after Quebeckers voted NO in the referendum. Like a fool, I was all fired up to to impress everyone with this telling bit of arcane knowledge. Fortunately, just as I was gathering my wit, he swiveled his beaky face around, glared fiercely at what he had by then surmised to be a yankee spy, and whooshed out of the car, screeching for one last time that he only dealt in facts.

Now, on to Cuba, or rather the largest gathering of Cubanologists ever to touch down, detrain or wash ashore in Halifax history. What relevant connections, you may ask, could possibly exist between English Canada's oldest Atlantic port and the largest, most controversial, and most isolated island regime in the Caribbean? This was precisely the rhetorical question

the Lord Mayor of Halifax put to the over 700 Canadian, Cuban, American, Latin American and European scholars and officials who filled up the Sheraton Hotel's spacious convention hall during the opening ceremonies of a conference entitled "Thirty Years of the Cuban Revolution: An Assessment." His own list was a short one: Cuba's Atlantic fishing fleet ties up in Halifax each summer; every winter hundreds of Maritime Canadians escape the cold by heading to Havana and nearby beaches. He also admitted a penchant for Cuban cigars, although I couldn't help noticing that he didn't have one on hand. Nobody actually smoked a cigar during the three days of conference proceedings except Ricardo Alarcon, Cuba's Deputy Minister of External Affairs, who never went anywhere without his aromatic stogie.

Alarcon seemed oddly familiar. I took a chance: "Haven't I seen you on Nightline?" He dropped his smile momentarily and inhaled a breath of fresh air in order to reply with an exact date (which I've forgotten) in 1983! Ted Koppel must have as much impact on his guests as he does his viewers.

The main reason for locating this event in Canada was because it is impossible to do so in the United States, which maintains severe restrictions on travelers to and from Cuba (not to mention an economic embargo, truncated diplomatic relations, and a host of other outdated policies designed to teach Castro a lesson.) The conference took place in Halifax because scholars from several of the city's well-respected universities took it upon themselves to make it happen. It was quite a feat, and it was an incredible learning experience for me.

In a word, I got religion--but not the sort I expected. For all the opportunities that such a gathering provided, there was precious little glorification of Fidel, undeniably a world champion of charisma. No, despite the fact that the majority of people in attendance were frustrated, disgruntled socialists of one kind or another, eager (and quite prepared to document) the numerous ills of the world capitalist system, there were no paeons to Marx or Lenin, no attempts to bestow secular sainthood on Che Guevara, Jose Marti, or Augusto Sandino, and no shortage of informed criticism about the Cuban state and Castro himself. There were one or two dogmatic speeches read by diehard Trotskyites, and one fellow with silver-streaked hair who delivered his unintelligibly abstract paper dressed in black leather pants, a black silk turtleneck, and gold-tinted spectacles. He was from Harvard--the philosophy department, I think.

Most of the presentations were solid, reasonable, pragmatic. More than anything else, I got the sense that Cubans and supporters of Cuba around the world are learning to live with the thought of living without Fidel. As the American filmmaker Saul Landau put it, Castro's enormous presence prohibits much-needed initiative in Cuba, thus the issue of his retirement is a crucial one. (Landau's excellent new documentary "The Uncompromising Revolution" was screened at the conference.) The political formula that has worked fairly well for 30 years--Cuba=Fidel=Party=Revolution--has worn out. There is a whole new

set of variables that have to be worked into the equation, such as technological change, economic diversification, dramatic changes in the Soviet bloc, a new process of negotiations in southern Africa (meaning Cuban troops are coming home), and, not least, fresh and vigorous demands for more democracy. Force of nature that he is, and, I believe, genuinely loved by the majority of Cubans, Castro just doesn't fit into the picture very well any more.

Though not an old man (64), Fidel is just a bit over the hill for a country confronted by shrinking support from Russia, an intransigent United States and the 21st century all at once. Castro reportedly responded to Mikhail Gorbachev's suggestion that he undertake a perestroika of his own with a four-hour speech in which he predicted the fall of the Soviet Union and made a vow to keep his country faithful to the principles of socialism. Cubans have heard it all before, and indeed look to their leader with genuine interest and affection for political guidance, but what Fidel is apparently unable to grasp is that educated, newly-confident people find four hours of a talking head and shoulders hard to take.

At any rate, after about 72 hours of immersion in this exotic stew of ideas, questions, and debate, I found myself much more worried about what my government might do to Cuba in the next five years than about whether Castro will turn his country into the Albania of the Western Hemisphere. He won't, and Cubans would not let him do it anyway, but I don't have half as much confidence in the Bush Administration, who for all sorts of reasons may find the early 1990s an opportune time to make a move on Havana. God help us--and the Canadians, who have just joined the Organization of American States, and would find themselves in very difficult diplomatic straits if the U.S. went maverick in the Caribbean.

For me, beyond a chance to think more expansively about the future of North America as an interdependent region, the conference on Cuba was really a seminar about leadership. Without effective leadership, a nation starts to drift. This is particularly true of multi-national states: the Soviet Union could never have become the empire it is today without the likes of Lenin, and Stalin; Yugoslavia could not have held together without Marshal Tito; Canada, one could argue, would not have survived the 1970s wave of Quebec nationalism without the overarching brilliance of Pierre Elliot Trudeau. Cuba has not suffered the same sorts of internal ethnic strife--it is more a "nation-state" than the countries mentioned above--but there is no doubt that Fidel's role in shaping the social and political character of modern Cuba has been monumental. A number of speakers delved into Castro's own character, and thus engaged themselves and their audience in the age-old debate about whether individuals or compelling circumstances are the driving force behind revolution. The social scientists in the crowd held that Cuba in the late 1950s was ripe for a leader, and that turned out to be Fidel. The minority viewpoint, set forth by a bald, aristocratic gentlemen from Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, was that Castro the man was key, and that as a

young boy the future dictator was known to have exhibited signs of "a strange brain disorder." Needless to say, the Cubans present broke out laughing at this point.

Then something REALLY interesting happened. A short, grey-haired man rose up from the audience to declare that an essential aspect of Castro's life had been overlooked: a Jesuit education. He went on to explain the three principles upon which such training was based. First, that responsibility ultimately rests on the shoulders of one man. Authoritarian decisionmaking is thus an inescapable fact of life. Secondly, personal greatness is a matter of choice and will. A man-- Jesuits have never had much to do with women--has to decide whether or not he is fit for leadership. Thirdly, the road to greatness is one of fighting for others; a true leader must struggle for social justice, and never quit. After all this, the speaker said he had attended the same school as Fidel (that's how he knew), and then promptly sat down. "Talk about a dialectic," muttered the person next to me, "the Jesuits used to be the Vatican's agency of counterrevolution; now they are the world's purest communists."

I will leave it at that, save to say that Pierre Trudeau also attended a Jesuit school. There are more connections between Canada and Cuba than meet the eye.

The trip home was not uneventful, but I will spare you any more details of the goings-on at the rear of the train. I will never regret choosing this mode of transportation, but the truth is it is going out of style in Canada. The federal government has announced plans to cancel 50 percent of existing trains, cut passenger rail subsidies by over half over the next five years, and eliminate about 2800 jobs, all beginning January 15. There were signs and petitions protesting these seemingly draconian cuts at every stop between Montreal and Halifax, and the irony of the almost simultaneous announcement of a multi-million dollar grant to Thailand to aid in that country's development of a light rail transit system was not lost on the crowd I was travelling with.

The future of train travel in Canada looks grim. The main problem is that ridership is declining. As columnist Craig McInnes put it, "Canadians still love their trains, but it has become a long-distance romance. Few actually consummate the affair at the the ticket wicket." There are a host of other reasons why passenger rail service isn't paying for itself, but all attempts to forestall the cuts have failed. So, people seeking asylum from the tedium of long-distance driving, the discomforts of riding in cramped, overcrowded aircraft, and the social hazards of taking the bus are going to have to make some unwelcome adjustments, unless their leaders suffer a change of mind. That the current prime minister railed against his predecessor for planning to do away with subsidized train services has not been forgotten. It makes one wonder what those crazy Jesuits teach about hypocrisy.

Adios!

Stephen Maly

Received in Hanover 12/11/89