

**The Scottish Parliament
Cross Party Group on Cuba
15th March 2021
Virtual meeting**

MINUTES

1. Welcome

Elaine Smith MSP welcomed everyone to the meeting, with a particularly warm welcome to Ambassador Bárbara Montalvo, noting that this was the last meeting of the CPG. She advised the meeting that she was standing down and so too were the deputy conveners, Neil Findlay MSP and Sandra White MSP and, therefore, hoped that MSPs in the next session would re-establish the group. Elaine thanked everyone for their understanding of the change of date, due to parliamentary business, and noted that some members had indicated they had to leave early due to other meetings.

Elaine then gave a brief history of CPG on Cuba noting that it was initially established in the first session of the Scottish Parliament by John McAllion as Convener with Mary Scanlon, Trisha Marwick and Tommy Sheridan as co-conveners.

The Group had welcome interesting and informative visitors from Cuba over the years including; Cuban delegations from the Cuban National Assembly, a number of Ambassadors, Dr Aleida Guevara, Members of ICAP (The Cuban Institute of the Friendship of the Peoples) including Luis Marron, representatives of the Federation of Cuban Women; Wives and families of the Miami Five. Elaine also noted that the Scottish Parliament was the first parliament in the world to debate the issue of the Miami Five but was unfortunately in recess when Gerardo Hernandez and Rene Gonzalez came to Scotland.

The CPG also heard from many other informative speakers including authors on books about Cuba including Jorge Aliaga, Arnold August and Keith Bolender, and had interesting presentations from friends of Cuba in Scotland including Brian Wilson, the first UK minister to develop relations with Cuba and a founder of Havana Energy; the Cuba Conservations Trust; “Beyond the Frame” organiser Jan Pietrasik and Sean McLaughlan’s interesting account of his visit to Cuba with young Trade Union group.

Elaine also recalled the event held at the Scottish Parliaments Festival of politics in 2009, Salsa, song and socialism: Cuba 50 years On, where speeches and discussion were followed by songs from Voces Del Sur.

Elaine thanked the Scottish Cuba Solidarity Campaign, in particular Kath Campbell, for supporting the CPG and arranging many of the speakers over the years. Elaine also reminded the meeting of the sad loss of Katy Campbell who had supported the CPG from its inception.

Elaine shared her disappointment that the CPG had not been able to visit Cuba as an official delegation but was pleased she had been able to visit Cuba on a personal basis. It was disappointing that the CPG couldn't physically meet but an event would be arranged in future.

Attendees

Elaine Smith MSP
Neil Findlay MSP
Kath Campbell
Phil McGarry
Lesley Dobbin
Katrina Faccenda
Liz Elkind

Paul Harding
Matthew Crighton
Arthur West
Fiona Montgomery
Zaki El Salahi

Jane Wood

Marlyn Glen
Kath Bateman
Maeve Mackinnon
Ruben Romero

Freida Park

Special Guest: Her Excellency Bárbara Montalvo Alvarez

Apologies were given by;

Sandra White MSP Murdo Fraser MSP, Colin Beattie MSP, John Finnie MSP, Rhoda Grant MSP, Joan Cutting, Margaret Cameron, Vince Mills, Pauline Bryan, Dougie Kerr, Gordon Munro

2. Update from the Venezuela Solidarity Campaign on matters of interest in the region

Phil McGarry gave a report on the current situation in Venezuela and impact of the sanctions imposed by the Trump administration. Phil advised that continuing the campaign and dialogue remained vital and encouraged Members to visit the [Scottish Venezuela Solidarity Campaign](#) website. Phil thanked Elaine, Neil & Sandra for their work on the CPG on Cuba and their interest in Venezuela and thanked Lesley for her administrative support.

3. Update on Cuba Solidarity Campaign – Kath Campbell

Kath Campbell took the opportunity to share her appreciation of the work Elaine has done over the years for the CPG on Cuba and Scottish Cuba Solidarity Campaign. This had included arranging CPGs, attending vigils and meetings, hosting visitors and guests from Cuba, and advocating for the release of the Miami Five. Kath also gave an update on the ongoing work being done by the solidarity group, advising she would share a link to an Early Day motion in Westminster which condemned the blockade and encouraged the Biden administration to normalise relations, with a view to asking people to contact their MPs to sign. Kath also advised the SCSC next meeting would be on 5th May and the AGM in June, advising that they are likely to be remote. Kath ended by saying that Elaine would be sadly missed as convenor of the CPG and a parliamentarian, wished her well for the future. She concluded by thanking Elaine, Neil, Sandra and Lesley for all their work to support the CPG on Cuba over the years.

Neil Findlay MSP informed the group that he had been involved with the CPG on Cuba for 10 years and thanked everyone for their support. He committed to helping to ensure that the group continues in the new session of parliament by encouraging newly elected MSPs to re-convene the CPG. **Elaine** stated that the group couldn't have continued without the strong support of a wide-ranging membership and noted that Marlyn Glen was in attendance and had been a member of the group whilst serving as an MSP.

4. Messages from Cuba

Arthur West conveyed thanks to all, especially Elaine and Lesley, for the ongoing support and debate around matters in Cuba and read out a message to Elaine from Luis Marron who had worked closely with Elaine when he was based in the Embassy in London. Luis expressed his thanks for the friendship, solidarity and support given. **Elaine** thanked Arthur for the surprise message and asked that her regards be sent to Luis.

Katrina Faccenda then played a video showing The Cuban Deputy, Oden Marichal expressing his thanks and gratitude for the friendship and solidarity shown to Cuba, recalling his visit to the Scottish Parliament on an official parliamentary delegation from Cuba and wished Elaine well for the future.

5. Speaker: Her Excellency Ambassador Barbara Elena Montalvo Alvarez

The Ambassador began her presentation by thanking Elaine and group members for their interest in Cuba over the years, recognised Elaine's personal solidarity with the Cuban people and extended an invitation for her to visit the Cuban Embassy in London when restrictions are lifted.

The Ambassador gave an update on Cuba's response to the pandemic, advising that five vaccines had been developed, despite the ongoing challenges of the unfair blockade, and were about to be approved. The difficulties caused by the severe US blockade had been exacerbated by the additional 222 measures imposed by the Trump administration and resulted in hardships felt in everyday life ranging from shortages of medicine and foodstuffs to the inability to get spare parts for hearing aids. Despite this, the Cuban medical brigades were working and assisting with the pandemic in 35 countries throughout the world.

Following the Ambassador's presentation, a question and answer session was held.

During the session **Kath Bateman** of Caledonia Tours outlined her concerns regarding the lack of direct travel routes to Cuba and thanked Elaine for the political intervention which resulted in Lloyds Bank reversing a decision to halt Kath's international banking account and helped to save the business.

Arrangements were made by the Ambassador to have further discussions with the Paul Harding of Cuba Conservation Trust and Kath Bateman of Caledonia Worldwide.

6. A.O.C.B.

Elaine Smith MSP thanked the Ambassador for her well received contribution to the meeting and wished her well for the future. She then advised of a recently lodged motion to help raise awareness of the issues affecting Cuba, indicated that a final motion would be lodged and a letter sent to President Biden regarding the US blockade.

Elaine closed the meeting by thanking her staff, the office bearers and all members of the CPG for their attendance over the years and, specifically, those attending this final meeting of the parliamentary session.