

Drink The Kool Aid

As More Legislators See The Full Picture, Hopefully Change In Cuban Embargo Will Occur

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Little changes can be made in the relationship with the Cuban government, but it may take legislation to totally lift the embargo, according to Congresswoman JoAnn Emerson, (R-MO) who's a strong proponent of change.

"We have the Helms Burton act in place that we have to change," she said. "I think President Clinton actually started easing the embargo a little bit and he could do that regulatorily, but if we wanted to totally lift it we would probably have to pass legislation."

However, many Republicans and a few Democrats from districts with a sizeable group of Cuban-American refugees are opposed to lifting the embargo.

"Keep in mind the ranking member of the House Foreign Relations Committee is a Cuban-American, U.S. Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL). She has tremendous influence over the Cuba issues since her committee has primary jurisdiction over the issue. Two other Republican Cuban-Americans in Congress have made the case to Republican leadership that Raul Castro is a bad person and his government supports terrorism. They have been very successful in shaping the bias against trade with Cuba, and they insist that the U.S. cannot have a productive trade relationship with Cuba until the Castros are gone."

Emerson got into the Cuba issue when elected in 1996.

"I was on my first farm tour and Sonny Martin, a farmer in Dexter, MO, asked me a question on the farm tour: 'Cuba used to be our number one rice importer, and why can't we export to Cuba anymore?' He asked, 'I didn't know the answer so I went back to D.C., got together with a couple of my colleagues who had been working on the issue. So I got into it in 1997, and haven't let up since.'"

In her four trips to Cuba, she met everyone from Fidel Castro to the Foreign Minister, all the top government officials from the head of trade, Pedro Alvarez of ALIMPORT, Ricardo Alarcon, president of the legislature, Carlos Lage, Vice President, one of the up and coming young guys who's very market oriented to economists.



U.S. Representative
Jo Ann Emerson

"We had some very contentious meetings with the administration and I came back and actually wrote this law with George Nethercutt my then colleague, and we had two Senators as well," Emerson explained.

"On the cash-in-advance issue, State Department officials told us, 'it would be the intent of Congress to prohibit these payments for agricultural trade,' and I said 'as one of the authors of that language I can tell you it is not the intent of Congress to make it more difficult to trade U.S. agriculture to Cuba. You misread this.'" This was in 2005.

It costs the Cubans a little more to buy U.S. products, however, the U.S. product is always better," she added. "It does cost them more because they have to go through a third country to do the exchanges."

The 2005 ruling tightened up exchange rules, making it more difficult. Emerson said the people of Cuba are not different from other diplomats. All say the same things at meetings.

"When I was in Vietnam meeting with government officials we got the same story from every single person regardless of what jurisdiction they might represent, whether its trade, or energy," Emerson said. "I will say though, since we have built up relationships with the Cubans through the first few trips, because there's a familiarity with my colleagues and me I think they've been more relaxed and we can work more after the usual party line. We can get into the discussions, but it's really building a rapport and getting to know one another and trying to build up a tiny bit of trust."

The last trip Emerson took in December of 2006 was an official delegation. It was the first House Official Delegation trip since the embargo.

"It was very interesting and new for everyone, the military who always led us on these never dealt with Havana before and likewise the Cuban government wasn't used to dealing with us but it really went very smoothly. The only thing unusual was our plane normally gets to stay in the country where we visit, with some exceptions (like they don't get to stay in Iraq) but the plane had to leave Havana and go back to the states, then come back to get us.

In a February 19th 2008 Bi-Partisan Congressional Letter to Condoleezza Rice supporting a lift of the embargo, only 104 signatures were on the letter, however, Emerson explained there was a deadline to submit the letter. The 104 signatures don't represent all the support.

"There are different levels of support, some people are just in favor of lifting the embargo in its entirety, but among the group who are against lifting the embargo entirely there are people who think we should have more agricultural trade, people who believe we should be able to send more humanitarian items, remittances, things like that," she added. "So there are various degrees of easing the restrictions from doing nothing to lifting the embargo in its entirety."

Emerson has been extremely proactive in working toward free trade with Cuba, so much so that opponents of the issue are "always in my FACE, not Very Nicely in my FACE and they can be Very Intimidating."

"I'm just not going to be put off by it because I personally believe that trade is the best way to develop relationships, trade is the best way to have the people within a suppressed regime see opportunity and get empowered to change things from within, and the more trade we have, the more Americans we have visiting Cuba, the more the Cubans will want something more than what they have always had," she said. "We opened up trade with China, Vietnam and we opened up trade with other countries with whom we don't agree with their human rights issues. Nonetheless in many of those cases, many of the human rights problems have abated, not totally, but certainly to some extent and I think trade is the best ambassador."

Emerson feels other congressmen who think like her are getting the same kind of pressure she is.

"Absolutely, every single time, it's very interesting how they work," she said. "When we have a new group of Freshman members of Congress after election every November, the first people the Cuban-Americans visit are these new people and they talk to them about the situation. And those of us who want to change our policy haven't been as good at doing that. My colleague from Arizona who's been working with us from the very outset started doing this as well, just so we can present both sides of the story."

Future strategys of the free trade promoters will depend on who's elected to the White House.

"We all have recognized that, and the Cubans have recognized it too. I believe we might as well lay low here and try to make a little change here or there, if we do anything, but we will wait for the next administration."

Emerson was asked, Who in Congress favors maintaining the embargo?

Background: "The 110th Congress includes four Cuban-American members, one Democrat and three Republicans; Lincoln Diaz-Balart, (R-FL), Mario Diaz-Balart, (R-FL), Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, (R-FL), and Albio Sires, (D-NJ). Mario and Lincoln are the sons of exiled Cuban politician Rafael Diaz-Balart, and a nephew of Mirta Diaz-Balart the first wife of Fidel Castro. He Cur-

rently lives in Miami with his wife and son." Emerson explained. "There father was also the security chief to Batista."

The Senate Cuban-Americans are; Senators, Mel Martinez (R-FL) and Bob Menendez (D-NJ).

Cuban-American Carlos M. Gutierrez is the Secretary to the United States Department of Commerce and Nancy Montanez Johner, USDA Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services (FNCS), she is also Cuban-American. **All are opposed to normalization of trade.**

Emerson explained it's a political issue for them. Their families had all their landholdings stripped, so it's personal and that's all it is.

The different generations present different levels of opposition. "The older generation of Cuban-Americans are those who fled Cuba with nothing in many cases and consequently they are bitter and that's a normal feeling. They are unable to let it go and think about the big picture like what happens if we let American kids go down for spring break and what would that do for the Cubans. It might help generate some more outspokenness, but anybody who depends on the vote in Florida – and, to some extent, New Jersey, but really Florida – they're going to pander to the Cuban-American population because it represents minimally 250,000 votes."

There are the younger Cuban-Americans or Americans who have never lived in Cuba, so they would be Americans 100%. They don't understand the mentality, because they have never lived in Cuba. They simply have heard it from their elders.

Then there's the third generation, the group of people led by Sylvia Wilhelm, executive director of the Cuban-American Commission for Family Rights, "She, and a lot of middle-aged moderates really want to change things because they see that the same policy since 1959 has changed nothing."

"She heads up this other Cuban-American group in Miami, and she actually has many Cuban-Americans from California and all around the country who are on the other side and they've really grown this group."

Emerson feels the embargo should be lifted for a number of reasons.

"Number one, it's like if your a football coach and you use the same play over and over and you never get down the field to make a goal, then you would say, 'we've got to change that.' Our goal has always been to punish Fidel Castro, but what we're doing is not punishing him, it's punishing the people of Cuba. We have allowed Fidel and now Raul, to use us as the foil that we're the bad people and the reason Cubans don't have what they should have is because of America, and that serves nobody. Fortunately, most Cubans like Americans. Nobody has risen up against Fidel. There are dissidents, but nobody has risen up. There's been no coup, so consequently it's been a waste of energy, a waste of time."

"The reason I think we should lift the embargo is because it would be good for America. It is really critical that we keep our neighborhood as friends, whether its any Latin-American country including South America and obviously Canada, but our neighborhood is



U.S. Representatives Jo Ann Emerson, Jeff Flake and Jerry Moran at a recent press conference on establishing greater agricultural trade opportunities to Cuba in the House Agriculture Committee Room recently.

very, very important. Cuba in my opinion is not a direct threat to the United States, they just don't have the army or mechanism to be a threat. However, by not engaging we will allow China, Venezuela and other countries who aren't crazy about us to get a foothold there, just like the Soviet Union did.

"We're basically forcing Cuba to do that because they have no alternative," she continued. "We also miss opportunities. We talk about being dependent upon Saudi sheiks, even Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and others who hate us; we're dependent on them for oil. Right now Cuba just opened up 52 blocks of oil lease opportunities and the United States is the only country who isn't able to bid on these. This is oil right off our shore. The Canadians, Spanish and other countries have invested heavily, invested in Cuba and they will reap returns, but where are we? We're just sitting around thumbing our noses and we choose to ignore the implications of missed opportunities."

Congress is far from overriding a veto.

"The problem is that many of my colleagues on the Republican side of the aisle have drunk the Kool-Aid. The three Republican Cuban-Americans pay a huge political price on other issues in order to retain the support of their leadership on the Cuba issue."

Change will come, yet it will be slow but sure. Raul has lightened things a little bit. People buy cell phones now or go into a hotel if they can afford it.

"At least it is a show he is a little more market oriented and I think you'll see a few changes in regard to small businesses and the like," Emerson said. "If we start seeing those maybe a few people will change their minds. It's also important to take as many of our colleagues as possible down there so they can see that it's not as bad as they have been told and that there are opportunities. What right do we have as a country to impose this embargo on people who in the last 48 years have done nothing to us?"

Emerson likes to use the Soviet Union as an example.

"We used to have educational exchanges all the time with the Soviet Union, people were allowed to travel. I went on an educational exchange program in 1968 to the Soviet Union, to Poland, Czechoslovakia, and East Berlin as a high school senior. My parents said 'you have to do this.' I remember I wasn't overly excited about it, it was for me a life changing experience; but the more of those types of exchanges you have in letting Cubans come to America, which the Cuban government gets a little nervous about, doing that is how people understand there is a world beyond the one in which they live. That's the best way to bring about change."

Emerson named other advocates for change:

"My colleague Jeff Flake (R-AZ), Jerry Moran (R-KS) (Senior member of the House Agricultural Committee), a bigger aggie than us as far as he has 65 counties, maybe it's 71 now, but anyway it's gigantic and I have 28. They have corn but their doing a little cotton now too. Even my colleague Jack Kingston (R-GA), who visited Cuba and had been anti, now thinks we should ease the trade restrictions, at least that piece, not totally, but somewhat. We have a large group of Democrats as well. I've seen two or three of my colleagues change their position on this issue over the last few years. The more they get to know some of my other colleagues and they drink the Kool-Aid they begin to change a little. We'll get there. It's so important for our American agriculture. The Cubans prefer our commodities because they can count on them and we need access to every export market there is." Δ

The ninth part in this continuing series, "Political Stumbling Blocks Preventing Interaction With Cuba", will be published on July 25, 3008.