

**Presentation to Committee on Economic Development, Agriculture, and
Planning on the Normalization of Relations of the US and the Cuba
Dr. Malik Sekou**

Greetings, to the Chair of this important Committee, Honorable Senator Janette Millin-Young, other Members of the Committee, and the Esteemed Participants/Presenters. Warmest Greetings, to the audience. I am unable to physically participate in this important hearing due to conflicts in my schedule. As many of you may know already, I have been a steadfast advocate for normalization of US-Cuban relations for decades. In fact, in the past, my detractors have taken me task for my pro Cuban posture. Needless to say, I am a friend of the Cuban People and expect positive value when relations are normalized.

I was able to glance at the written statements that were provided today, Monday, September 29, 2015. I am pleased to see thoughtful, insightful comments of this most important process, the normalization of relations between the US and Cuba. Much of what I read I agree with but there are some differences in perspectives. So I will seek to indicate agreement and show my views. And I will point to future benefits and constraints.

First we need to clarify a common perception. In our collective consciousness, we, the Virgin Islands People, take the posture that our modern economic model emerged in the early 1960's as the Cuban Revolution emerged. To a certain extent, we are correct to say at a unique moment in world history, the Caribbean Basin had a chance to seize the moment as Cuban Revolutionaries allied themselves to the Soviet Union, Socialist Bloc, and China. Puerto Rican and the US Virgin Islands leaders had a window of opportunity to attract US capital and capitalists in abundance. This was done. The Luis Munoz Marin Administration in Puerto Rico and Ralph Paiewonsky in the Virgin Islands were able to formulate new development models in both societies. Their models included tourism and industrial development. In the Virgin Islands, the Paiewonsky era meant a rapid expansion of tourism to the point that Charlotte Amalie became a shopping mecca for Cruise Ship tourists. It was a premiere cruise destination. St John was included as an integral part of the tourist product as a National Park that drew beachgoers. St Croix developed a modest tourist product that attracted mainly overnight guests.

Second Cuba had to contend with comprehensive sanctions. One fatality of these sanctions is the lost of steady, honest news about Cuba. Very few Americans and even fewer Virgin Islanders visited Cuba. The news about Cuba was heavily colored by the Cold War and many distortions, misunderstandings, and out right misinformation ensued. Sadly, some of the analyses that I read in the Hearing has shown that there are lingering misinformation and with this incorrect understanding we here in this Territory at this unique time and place may very well make unnecessary errors. So let us look at the objective conditions of normalization and let us look at our current situation here in the Virgin Islands.

Cuba never ended its tourism during the Cold War. I visited Cuba during the Special Period---legally for the record. The Cuban official assigned to tourism informed the group that I was a part that Cuban tourism turned inward during the period of close alliance with the Soviet Union, that is between 1960-1990. Tourists were mainly Cubans traveling within Cuba for vacations. Other tourists were European and Canadian tourists who become more numerous after 1985. The Cuban tourism product remained modest until the beginning of the 1990's during the Special Period. This unique phase began the liberalization of the Cuban economy and re-introduced capitalism in a major way. The Cuban government commissioned studies on tourism and it was a political consensus to recapture the pre-Revolution market share of approximately 5 million tourist arrivals per year. This decision was made by 1992. Since then Cuba has steadily rebuilt its infrastructure, human capital, laws, and cultural norms to recapture its place. It is clear that it will occur regardless of what we in the Virgin Islands think or do. In the Virgin Islands, we have negligible impact on US foreign policy on Cuba, especially as it relates to Cuban tourism.

In fact, to be brutally honest with everyone, our political status and lack of strategic assets as a Caribbean society that is so small in geography and population, we are constrained in our capacity to block major changes in our region. However, we have the unique capacity to benefit from Cuban normalization. As a few of the other presenters indicate, Cuban normalization means competition. In capitalism competition is seen as healthy as it forces various societies to strive for comparative advantage. Cuba will get millions of visitors by virtue of its Diaspora, there are millions of Americans of Cuban origin. They will visit the island for family and cultural reasons. We cannot stop that and nothing we do can attract these types of visitors to ignore Cuba and visit the Virgin Islands or any other Caribbean society. That is an objective reality. The Cuban tourism product is much more diversified than what I have seen mentioned in the presentations. Again, we cannot compete with diversity of product because do not have the geographic size, population, cultural traditions, and capacity to add as much larger islands. Thus, we are forced to review our present tourism product and ask ourselves how do we improve what we have? And what can we seriously pursue that is unique to our society? Where can we in the Virgin Islands go to seek out new markets for our renewed tourism products?

Clearly, as others stated, we must improve our infrastructure, hotels, and our service culture. But we have to reduce crime in every respect. We have to find creative ways to attract our people to become deeply involved in the tourism industry. Yet, how can we improve our branding? One arena that we have not fully invested in would be the time shares industry and villa rentals. In St John, villa rentals are booming. But in St Croix why haven't we seriously created a villa industry similar to St Barths which is a fraction the size of St Croix. We have toyed with the idea of making St Croix a sporting capital. Again what happened? Why isn't St Croix a premiere golf course, triathlete center, baseball training center, basketball tournaments, swimming center, tennis center, horse race capital, and cultural

mecca? Why hasn't the Jazz Concerts expand into a regional center of Jazz? Why hasn't our marina industry become rebuilt? Our regatta, our fishing contests, and water sports? We have been absentminded and irresponsible with our tourism industry. These weaknesses can be overcome with thoughtfulness and responsible leadership. Cuban normalization will force us to bring our A Game to the global economy.

I recommend that this normalization process be the impetus for the Virgin Islands People to rise to the occasion. We need a political system that is responsive to external and internal changes. Madame Chair, this topic is yet another example for us to revive the Political Status and Federal Relations Commission or a Commission of Self Determination which will inherently be entrusted with the task of studying big issues, educating the policy makers of future trends, and preparing the people to assume greater responsibility over local development. My comments are rooted with the deep held beliefs that all of our problems can be addressed by our People and we become better educated and organized for progress.

