

ALEIDA GUEVARA

Daughter of the Revolution MS

Aleida Guevara attracts interest wherever she goes. Fascination with her father Che plays a part, but it is her ability to candidly argue the case of Cuba's revolutionary endeavours that endears her to audiences.

In London at the invitation of the Cuba Solidarity Campaign to support the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the triumph of the revolution, she spoke to the Morning Star about her own perspective on Cuba in 2009.

Guevara is unassuming and laid-back with impressive powers of persuasion which owe as much to her personal sincerity as to a sharply analytical mind and rigorous intellectual discipline.

As a paediatrician specialising in childhood allergies, she has also been involved in medical support for a community in the flooded area around Rio Cauto in eastern Cuba and she plans to work on the Island of Youth which was devastated by recent hurricanes.

Guevara emphasises that her role is to publicise the revolution. However, she doesn't speak in order to win people to her point of view. She believes that "this is not possible in such a short time. It is more about how you present your case, allowing the other person to draw their own conclusions."

Guevara refers to her father as a source of inspiration. She mentions his writings and that she finds his diaries particularly helpful for their political insights and emotional maturity.

"It goes without saying that I would have loved to have sat down with him and discussed my concerns and doubts, but he isn't here and will never be," Guevara says.

"My dad's writings are like those of Jose Marti - the values they encapsulate are everlasting, beyond fads or fashions."

Reading them, she finds herself occasionally exclaiming: "Caramba! If only we'd put in practice this or that suggestion we would be in a better position now."

Guevara recalls the time she worked in Angola as part of a Cuban medical mission. "I managed to save many children's lives, but sometimes I just couldn't. The sorrow and regret stay with you forever.

"The impotence felt at the time motivates me to act against racism, the exploitation of human beings and the frequent indolence of those who accept things as they are," she says.

Che said once that he didn't want his children to be special, "just worthy members of their community." And this more than anything characterises and motivates his daughter.

Guevara takes issue with those who see their future away from Cuba, arguing that the island offers unique opportunities for self-fulfilment in the service of a wider community.

"Here we clearly failed in our objective to convince such persons of their importance to our society," she admits sadly, adding: "We should do better."

This infectious insistence on continually trying to perfect all aspects of the socialist society by learning from mistakes is as characteristic of Guevara as it once was of her father.

When asked which areas she considers ripe for corrective intervention, she utters a single word. "Housing.

"Life in Cuba isn't and never was easy", she says, "but we can and should do more to improve housing conditions, particularly in the countryside."

Urban transport is next on the list for a major overhaul. For her, "a highly developed and effective urban transport system is an environmental necessity that would arrest the unsustainable desire for private car ownership.

"We have one of the best education systems in the world," she continues, "but when we had a deficit of teachers, we encouraged everybody to become one.

"However, not everybody is suited to be an educator. Not everybody has the capacity to inspire, to motivate and support a child in the classroom. By solving one problem, we created another which in turn has to be solved now."

Guevara believes that new appointments at ministerial level, including an education minister, demonstrate a new and reinvigorated resolve to achieve qualitative change.

"Agriculture is another Achilles heel," she says.

"In a rush to form a working class capable of leading the revolution, we overplayed our hand and by 1985 the urban population outnumbered those in the countryside, unbalancing an economy predominantly based on labour-intensive agriculture.

"Improvements had to be made and this year I have seen the most astonishingly plentiful harvest of top-quality fruit and vegetables that left me marvelling at it all," she enthuses with a childlike smile.

Still, transporting these from the producers to warehouses and markets is a constant headache as the ageing Soviet trucks are now falling apart and are fuel-inefficient.

A deal with an Italian engine manufacturer fell foul of the infamous US blockade, but China and Korea have now stepped in to fill the breach.

According to Guevara, with her medical expertise, bad eating habits and overconsumption have been a persistent problem.

A sustained consumer information campaign reversed the negative trend of frowning on fish and vegetables and their consumption has increased markedly.

As a rank-and-file communist, Guevara puts to rest a commonly held misconception about the role of the Communist Party of Cuba.

The party does not field candidates in any elections. Those are freely put forward locally by the community, she explains, adding with a chuckle: "Had Cuba's enemies been more intelligent they could have used the openness of our system to their advantage."

Changes in Cuba are fast and furious. Some of the catalysts for change are receiving a lot of media attention and Mariella Castro Espin, who like Guevara is a daughter of prominent revolutionaries, is one such case.

She's fronting a campaign aimed at "combating the still entrenched 'machismo' in our society," says Guevara.

"This will be a sustained process of popular education promoting varied sexual relations as among the most beautiful of human experiences," she explains.

"Homosexuality was, over the centuries, stigmatised by the Catholic church as a biological aberration and a sin to boot. This will take time to correct.

"But change does come. Mariella's mother Vilma Espin worked with the Federation of Cuban Women in the 1960s and '70s to alter sexist attitudes. Today, 60 percent of Cuban professionals are women - a great achievement of the revolution," says Guevara proudly.

Then there is the contentious issue of tourism.

"On the one hand, we were all of a sudden exposed to consumer societies which brought the malaise of prostitution, drugs and corruption," she admits.

"But on the other, visitors have been learning about us and now take a critical view of the media barrage against us. In economic terms, it has provided a vital income during the 'special period' era."

What she says about serious attention of President Obama deserves.

"His problem is that he begins things that he doesn't actually finish," Guevara says. "Look at the Guantanamo naval base prison - it is still there despite all kinds of promises.

"And what about the illegality of the occupation of Cuban land? The last agreement was signed in 1904 and these, in international law, become void if not extended after 100 years."

She is outraged further by the US Supreme Court's hypocritical refusal to review the case of the Miami Five, who acted in good will against US-based anti-Cuban terrorists.

Guevara passionately believes that the only way forward is to demonstrate utmost unity and cohesion in the face of US aggression and obstinacy. □□□

[Source : *Morning Star*]