

Sent Nov 21, 1974
Weekend
Mag -
Canada

Malcolm and Betty Bow - Canada's First Family in Cuba

by Lionel Martin

FA 61

Canada's top representative in other countries is the Ambassador. It is a post of high responsibility, that of representing Canadian interests overseas.

Malcolm Bow is the Canadian Ambassador in Cuba. He is a quiet spoken and unassuming man that has made the foreign service his career, more than a quarter of a century as an officer of the Ministry of External Affairs.

Malcolm Bow likes to think of himself and his wife, Betty Bow, as a team. She is gracious and she does with expertise what every Ambassador's wife is expected to do - organize official receptions at the Canadian Ambassador's residence, accompany the Ambassador to receptions at other embassies and ensure that the larder at the residence is stocked for every kind of contingency.

During their long and varied life as a diplomatic family, the Bows have raised four children. Cuba is their first post in which none of the children are with them. Paul, now twenty-eight years old, was born in Canada and is an air force pilot stationed in Nova Scotia. Jane, who was also born in Canada, is twenty-five. She is a journalist in Toronto. Michael, twenty-one, was born in England and is a student at the University of Alberta. Neil, seventeen years old, was born in Spain and is now in his last year of high school at Alberta College in Belleville, Ontario.

Malcolm Bow's foreign service career has kept him and his family on the move since it began. His first year was spent in Ottawa. Then he was posted in New York for three years, 1950-1953, at the Canadian Consulate General and at the Canadian Mission to the United Nations. It was back to Ottawa and then in 1956 to Spain for three years at the Canadian Embassy in Madrid. It was there that the Bows mastered the Spanish language. Bow moved back to Ottawa in 1959 and was then sent on his first mission to Cuba in 1961 as *chargé d'affaires* in Havana.

On returning to Ottawa, Bow became the Special Assistant to the Secretary for External Affairs, Howard Green, in the Conservative government. After the defeat of that government, he served in the same post for Martin under the Liberal government and later became the Special Assistant to Lester Pearson on foreign policy. In 1964 he was appointed Canadian Ambassador to Czechoslovakia and in 1965, concurrently, as Canada's first post-war Ambassador to Hungary.

In 1968 Bow was called back to Ottawa to become the director of Arms Control and Disarmament Division of the Ministry of External Affairs. In 1971 he became the Director of the Latin American Division of the Ministry. He was appointed Ambassador to Cuba in October 1973.

Betty Bow still speaks with traces of an English accent. She met Malcolm Bow when he was serving in the Canadian forces in England during the Second World War. In 1946, the newlyweds went back to Vancouver where Bow became a journalist and in 1948 they travelled Europe together. It was in this year that Bow took courses at the Academy of International Law at The Hague..

When Bow took his examination for the foreign service, Betty Bow was enthusiastic. "It seemed like a wonderful opportunity to get to see my family in England more often since I envisioned us being posted in Europe."

Malcolm Bow was attracted by other considerations. "My father was, more than anyone else, my inspiration to give my life to public service," Bow told me. Bow's father is Dr. M.R. Bow who is now eighty-seven years old and who lives in Edmonton, Alberta. Dr. Bow devoted his entire working life to public health administration and served latterly as Deputy Minister of Public Health in Alberta until his retirement many years ago. But Dr. Bow continues to be active, especially with the young people. He does work with the Junior Red Cross and he has set up a successful program called Volunteens which engages teenage girls and boys in assisting in the rehabilitation hospitals. It has been a great success throughout Alberta and has now been extended nationally.

II

We were sitting in the large sun parlor of the Ambassador's residence sipping lemonade made from lemons picked by the Bows only minutes before. It was a Saturday and they were both in casual clothes. They had spent the morning pruning ~~and~~ ^{the} luxurious tropical plants that grow around the residence.

"We miss the children badly," Betty Bow told me. "But they come down during the holidays and we all enjoy being together."

"Yes," put in Ambassador Bow. "When our children come down we all join in some activity such as a day cutting sugar cane in the country."

"It's ~~was~~ a family thing," Betty Bow interjected. "We want our children to see a side of life here that helps to balance the fact that we live in such an elegant house. It might seem strange to think of an Ambassador's wife cutting sugar cane but, you know, I'm a farmer's daughter from Sussex, England."

Ordinary Cuban city folk are accustomed to giving some of their weekend leisure time to working voluntarily on a construction site or in a sugar cane field. Ambassador Bow firmly believes that the Cubans appreciate it when they see an Ambassador of a foreign land working side by side with them. "It shows that we Canadians are just plain people and that goes a long way towards cementing Canadian-Cuban people-to-people relations."

But Malcolm Bow is impelled by other reasons also. He likes physical work and from his youth he has been imbued by what he calls "the work ethic." Bow's biography in ^{the} Canadian Who's Who lists gardening and stone masonry among his hobbies. When the Bows were back in Edmonton, he and Betty pruned a truck load of branches and twigs. His daughter came to visit with her boy friend. "That's my father's work ethic," she remarked. "Now he'll want us to help him load that mountain of wood." She was right!

Ambassador Bow likes to stay in good physical condition. That's another reason he likes to work hard. Lately he's taken up jogging again in the early morning hours.

III

Betty Bow spends a morning each week working with children at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Home for Mentally Handicapped Children in Havana. I accompanied her there one morning. As she entered, several of the children ran towards her and embraced her.

The school is run by the Cuban Ministry of Public Health. It used to be for the rehabilitation of polio victims, a cause with which FDR's name is associated. When polio was liquidated in Cuba following the revolution in 1959, it was converted into a "Medical Psycho-pedagogical Home" for mentally retarded children.

Mrs. Bow's interest in working with children began five years ago when the Bows were living in Ottawa. "I had raised a family and now I particularly wanted to develop my own thing," she told me.

"After going through the war years in England and then coming to Canada, I just wanted to settle down and be a housewife and have a family. And I found that being a diplomat's wife abroad was career enough. When we went back to Ottawa, suddenly switching from 'mink to ^{sink} zinc' as they say, I found it was all I needed to look after the house and the family and be a housewife again. But in 1968, with the children grown, I decided to strike out on a career of working with retarded children."

Over a period of five years, Mrs. Bow took a course a year at Saint Patrick's, a little college attached to Carlton University. She took psychology, sociology and philosophy courses and has now finished her freshman year. "I would like to go on to graduate.

Bow...5

I don't want to be the only dumb bunny in the family. I hope to get my B.A by the time I'm sixty, my Master's when I'm sixty-five and my PhD when I'm seventy," Betty Bow says with a twinkle in her eyes.

Concurrently with her studies, Mrs. Bow did volunteer work in Ottawa, first with the Headstart Program working with underprivileged four year olds and later with older Canadians, people who were considered "unemployables" mainly because they had never learned to read or write. When Malcolm Bow was posted in Cuba, it was natural for her to continue her work in her newly chosen profession and she feels that her work at the Roosevelt Home helps to further Canadian-Cuban relations. Recently the Canadian government made funds available for new equipment for the school. Dr. Aida Jordan, the director of the Roosevelt Home told me that Mrs. Bow's work and the Canadian aid is highly appreciated.

IV

What is the status of Canadian-Cuban relations?" I asked Ambassador Bow. It's a question that cuts to the heart of Malcolm Bow's main purpose in Cuba. He didn't hesitate; the answers were on the tip of his tongue.

"The Cuban people and their government have not forgotten that Canada, through thick and thin, maintained relations of all types with Cuba over the years. We have earned great respect and goodwill here in Cuba."

Bow affirms that since he took over the Cuban post in October 1973, there have been many positive accomplishments. Purchases by Cuba in Canada have jumped from 58 million dollars in 1972 to well over 100 million in 1974. "I expect this rate

Bow...6

of growth to continue in 1975 and 1976," Bow says...and adds:

"Cuba represents an opportunity for a break-through in the diversification of Canadian export markets and in addition to our traditional sales of agricultural and primary products, we are now selling ships, diesel locomotives, complete processing plants and a wide range of manufactured goods."

Trade has led the way but there is a concerted effort to build a better balanced Canadian-Cuban relationship. Canada has launched a development assistance program involving closer cooperation with Cuba in agricultural sciences and technology and aid in sectors of education, public health, and fisheries. It is not generally known, but Canada, through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO) directs the Master's Degree program at the University of Havana Engineering School.

During the year 1974, a Canadian parliamentary delegation made a highly successful visit to Cuba, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet performed in Havana and an exhibition of Eskimo art came to Cuba. There has also been a dramatic rise in tourism and it is expected that during the present winter season, 15,000 Canadians will have the opportunity to bask in the sun on Cuban beaches. Also, a part of the Canadian Olympic team will come to Cuba from December 26 to January 6 to train and acclimatize itself for events leading up to ~~the~~ the Pan American games in October 1975 in Mexico.

V

The Ambassador and Mrs. Bow have settled down to as routinized a life in Cuba as an Ambassador's family can have. Several evenings a week they attend diplomatic receptions. "However,"

Bow...7

Ambassador Bow declares, "we do not do a lot of diplomatic partying. We do not find that very profitable unless there is some good reason or some real Canadian interest involved."

When there is no evening reception, the Ambassador and Mrs. Bow usually spend a quiet evening at home. Upon his return from the Embassy, the two of them sit in the sun parlor, drink ~~an~~ before-dinner cocktail, read and converse. Supper is at about seven and afterwards they watch television for an hour or so "to help sustain and improve our Spanish." Then they read or listen to the Northern Service of the CBC which is heard clearly in Cuba on most mornings and evenings. They go to bed quite early.

The Ambassador considers Spanish ~~his~~ his second language. I reminded him that when the parliamentary delegation visited Cuba in early 1974 ~~he~~ ^{he} delivered his speech in Spanish when presenting a gift to Fidel Castro's older brother, Ramón, who runs a State farm stocked with Canadian cattle. "Ah yes," I remember," the Ambassador replied. "I had intended to speak in English so that the MP's would understand but somehow, because of the atmosphere and because the person to whom I was speaking did not understand English, it came out in Spanish...my switch doesn't work as well as it should."

On weekends the Bows try to get a bit of rest and recreation. They often drive off in their Fiat sports car into the countryside or to some beach resort near Havana. "We have enough to do with the diplomatic community during the week, so we like to get out on weekends. We don't think of a country as its capital city or its diplomatic corp. Havana is a beautiful city but it is not all

Bow...8

of Cuba," the Ambassador says emphatically.

While I was talking to Betty Bow one evening, the Ambassador came home from the Embassy. He announced that he had just received a telegram about the speedometer for Mrs. Bow's car that had been ordered from a Canadian firm. In the telegram, the firm apologized for not having filled the order more rapidly. The exact wording was: "Please excuse delay. I hope Mrs. Bow is still enjoying her car although she doesn't know how fast she is going."

VI

Betty Bow told me earnestly:

"There are terrible misconceptions about what ~~is~~ the life of an Ambassador's wife[?] ^{is like.} The whole idea of Ambassadors harkens back to the days when titled people with vast fortunes were sent abroad to represent their countries. and I suppose they did lead^a very elegant sort of life. But nowadays, we are civil servants, just ordinary people, and we don't live that kind of exotic life. We have a lot of work, a lot of problems, the kind of problems that people who stay in Canada all the time just don't understand.

"We really haven't had much of a home life. Just look at this house, this enormous house is my home but it's not permanent. But that's the story of our lives, the endless moving. It does present problems in raising children, their friends and how they are going to adjust and all that. It's very easy for them to get carried away by all the seeming affluence of

of large homes and servants and get delusions of grandeur - that's very bad for children.

"Even though we live in places like this, we have to maintain the standards of an ordinary Canadian family; to try to live our lives the way we do when we are back there in Ottawa. This is where we need a sense of humour, this is where a certain amount of healthy family teasing is very good. If somebody seems to be getting a little uppity, well, they just have to be knocked off their perch.

"That has been our philosophy and we think we've done a pretty good job with our children."

Betty Bow broached the subject of the woman's role in a foreign service family:

"There is a lot of feeling among foreign service wives on this matter. It is a very difficult situation. She is not officially recognized. I am the wife of my husband and even though I have to do many things on my own and make a lot of decisions - be ^{ing} responsible for spending a lot of government money, you know, for receptions for 200 people and be ^{ing} on call to do representational work - I get absolutely no recognition as an individual. I'm not ^{paid} ~~paid~~, not a thing. My work is expected. I feel that a lot of the younger foreign service wives, who feel much more strongly that they don't want to be taken for granted, are not going to be as accepting of the role. If some of the young wives want to get recognition for what they are doing...and some of the older

ones too, then it would have to involve some kind of official recognition, accreditation in some sort of capacity and payment for services rendered."

VII

Malcolm Bow has entered his second year as Canadian Ambassador in Cuba. I asked him his principal impressions of Cuba. Bow thought for a while before answering:

"I am impressed by the progress that has been made since my short stay here in 1961, just after the Cuban revolution triumphed. For example, an education has been made available to every child in Cuba; endemic diseases have been eliminated; public health and nutritional standards are such that you do not see starving, diseased and suffering children even among the poorest in Cuba. I may be mistaken but I know of no other Latin American country that has achieved these very human objectives.

"Conversely, I would be less than honest if I did not admit that there are, of course, some things that I do not like and that I do not understand yet about Cuba, just as there are about my own country.

"This is a very beautiful island and the most beautiful part of the scene are the colour-blind Cuban people. Racial tensions have practically ceased to exist. Recently, a little Negro boy sidled shyly up to my daughter when she was visiting us and told her that she was "mulatta" - a word which literally means a person of mixed blood but which

Page 10

The following is a list of the names of the persons who have been
admitted to the membership of the Society since the last meeting.

1891