

Kua hinga te totara i te wao nui a Tane –

the totara has fallen in the forest of Tane.

Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz
August 13th, 1926 – November 25th, 2016

There have been many fine obituaries on the passing of Fidel, some banal cheering from the fascists and the usual careful fence sitting by the liberals.

So, what can we add, from these southern islands?

We can remember the extraordinary achievements of this great man: the raid on the Moncada Barracks and the prophetic speech at the subsequent trial; the astonishing overthrow of a dictator and mafia-dominated regime by a small band of guerrillas and aroused populace; the turbulent putting into place of a new society in the face of US-backed reactionaries; the literacy campaigns leading to universal education; the breaking down of racial divides; the creating of a remarkable health system; the resisting of the perpetual violence of the US imperialists...

We can remember the international solidarity work, from Che's tragic attempts to repeat the scenario in other countries and other situations, to the exemplary role of Cuban doctors in developing countries or countries in crisis and the generous training opportunities offered. We can remember the Cuban role in overthrowing the apartheid regime in southern Africa and Cuba's progressive work in many international organisations, so that this small country is held up as a model of equality and sustainability, a country of remarkable vision which has survived the vindictive and unreasoning belligerence of its powerful neighbour.

Fidel and Cuba have been one. But there has been no personality cult. He has performed his role without self-aggrandisement, in fact he has filled the role with a quality which can only be named as tenderness. The visitor to Cuba is struck by the candour and energy of its children, celebrated to the extent that they guard the ballot boxes on election day. Emma Goldman wished to dance at the revolution. Cubans universally dance.

For those of a literary persuasion, Fidel is at the heart of one of the great books of the 20th century: *Fidel & Religion: Conversations with Frei Betto on Marxism & Liberation Theology*. In this extended conversation with a liberation theology priest he recounts his childhood, his coming of age politically, and his views on spirituality. It is a book of biblical dimension and should become more widely known.

So, this prophet passes. The liberal press points to Cuba's supposed economic failure under Fidel. Given the cruel embargo, there is no failure. In fact, the visitor notes that despite some scarcities, the Cuban standard of living could be universalised as a measure for a sustainable planet. International studies agree.

Fidel was Cuba; Cuba was Fidel. Cuba will be faced now with a new barrage of viciousness from the north and as the country enters the digital age, an inevitable need to incorporate identity politics without it leading to the fragmentation and narcissism of the so-called developed countries. When Fidel first became ill, a Cuban intellectual wrote that Fidel was Cuba's keenest critic, had been a one man think tank investigating and analysing the inevitable shortcomings of the society. The writer wondered how this role could be carried out once he passed.

Perhaps another whakatauki provides an answer, with which Fidel would have agreed: I orea te tuatara ka patu ki waho – *a problem is solved by continuing to find solutions.*

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