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Is this the world's most radical president?

Uruguay's José Mujica lives in a tiny house rather than the presidential palace, and gives away 90% of his salary. He's legalised marijuana and gay marriage. But his greatest legacy is governing without giving up his revolutionary ideals



Uruguay's president, José Mujica, at home on the outskirts of Montevideo. Photograph: Luiz Maximiano/laif

Giles Tremlett

119 comments

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Emo Mannise was just 16 when he met Uruguay's current president, José Mujica. On a spring day in 1969, Mannise was at home alone with his sister, Beatriz, when the future president burst out of the lift outside their penthouse in Montevideo with a pistol in his hand. "Turn around, shut your mouth and keep your hands above your head!" he barked. Mannise immediately recognised the pinched eyes and thick, wavy brown hair of one of the most notorious members of the daring, [violent Tupamaro guerrillas](#). After his initial sense of panic subsided, he recalled, he felt strangely calm. "I remember telling the young gunman who was with him not to worry, that I wasn't going to do anything," the 62-year-old travel agent told me when we met in his favourite Montevideo bookshop, a short distance from the murky waters of the immense River Plate. His sister, who suffered from polio and used a wheelchair, was taken off to another room. "Don't worry *viejita*," Mujica told her, "you'll be fine, this has nothing to do with you." The colloquial, affectionate *viejita* - "little old lady" - was a typical Mujica touch.

Mannise's stepfather, José Pedro Púrpura, was a notorious judge, with ties to Uruguay's far right and a stock of pistols. After the gang had left, taking documents and weapons, Mannise told his relatives that he was only upset that the Tupamaros had stolen a typewriter he used for his schoolwork. The following day, the phone rang. "It is us, the same people from yesterday," a voice said. He suddenly felt scared again. Somehow they knew about the typewriter. If he wanted it back, the voice told him, he could find it in the lobby of a nearby building. "Sure enough, it was there," he said. "They had left a typed message in it for my stepfather. 'Careful *doctor*,' it read. 'We are watching you.'" The following year, a Tupamaro unit sprayed their building with machine-gun fire in an attempt to assassinate *doctor* Púrpura.

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Five years ago, in Uruguay's last presidential election, Mannise cast his vote for Mujica and his Broad Front party, a coalition of leftwingers that first displaced the dominant Colorado and National parties in 2005, with the election of Mujica's moderate predecessor, Tabaré Vázquez. "I might be expected to feel bitter about him," Manisse told me. "But he is the only one who practices what he preaches." A former

revolutionary who still professes anarchist ideals has run Uruguay's government and its booming economy ever since. Mujica remains popular, but presidents cannot serve consecutive terms: the next election, on 26 October, will nevertheless represent a referendum on his pragmatic leftwing government.

He has gained international renown as a truculent truth-speaker: speeches lambasting rampant consumerism at the [Rio+20 conference](#) in 2012, and at the United Nations in New York the following year, have garnered 3 million YouTube views. "What would happen to this planet if Indians had the same number of cars per family as in Germany?" he asked the audience in Rio. "How much oxygen would be left?" At the UN, he told the delegates to stop going to wasteful, expensive summits that achieve nothing. Some call him Latin America's Nelson Mandela, recalling his 13 years in jail.

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Others see a groundbreaking social liberal, who has introduced the [world's most innovative cannabis legislation](#) as well as gay marriage and legal abortion. Mostly, though, he is famous for the way he lives. The man who most Uruguayans call El Pepe drives a 25-year-old Volkswagen Beetle, lives in a tiny house on a rural smallholding, and gives away 90% of his salary. His deliberately coarse but pragmatic style delights Uruguay's poor, but also works for part of its middle classes - a trick that other populist Latin American leaders, invoking the great liberator [Simón Bolívar](#), have conspicuously failed to turn. His critics claim that Mujica is more style than substance - a charming old man who put aside both his gun and his revolutionary ideals. In a continent that has become the world's biggest laboratory for alternative leftwing regimes, each claiming to have found the magic formula, many still cannot decide whether he is a hero, or a sellout.

In the summer of 1969, a police officer knocked on the door of a small Montevideo investment bank, which was partially owned by a government minister. The employees let him in, only to discover he was a Tupamaro. Several other guerrillas followed. They took the equivalent of \$100,000 in today's money, but also demanded the bank's account ledgers. One of the employees, Lucía Topolansky, had tipped off the "Tupas" that the bank was doing illegal currency deals; her twin sister, Maria Elia, was one of the guerrillas who conducted the raid. The Tupamaros dropped off the ledgers at the home of a public prosecutor - and some of those involved in the illegal trading were subsequently jailed. It was an example of their trademark "armed propaganda" style: violence was fine, but best when proven to do good.

The Topolansky sisters were from a well-off family in the upmarket Pocitos district. "Uruguay has *riquillos*, not *ricos* - people who are well-off, not rich," Lucía told me in her office at the parliament in Montevideo, where she is now the senior senator. Silver-haired with beaming brown eyes, she has a remodelled nose given to her by a Tupamaro surgeon who tried to change her appearance after she broke out of jail. She married Mujica in 2005, after 20 years of living together - and 13 years of separation, when they were imprisoned in separate jails. When he became president, it was her task to swear him in. "The army regiment that had arrested both of us stands guard at the legislative assembly building," she said. "Our friends were there, laughing and shouting: 'It's about time they honoured you!'"

Topolansky's girlhood nickname was *la Flaca* (the skinny one) but the

Tupamaros called her *la Tronca* (the log) because she was so tough. Mujica was raised by a similarly strong-willed woman, his mother, *Doña Lucy*. His father died in 1943, when Mujica was only eight. Soon he was delivering for a local bakery in the semi-rural Paso de la Arena neighbourhood, and selling Arum lilies cropped from the creek behind their house to help the family make ends meet. Uruguay had a dazzling start to the 20th century, sending wool and beef to hungry, war-torn Europe; by 1930 it was one of the world's dozen wealthiest nations by per capita income. Tiny [Uruguay](#) enjoyed enlightened social legislation, with eight-hour working days and maternity leave: some called it the Switzerland of Latin America. It even won the World Cup in 1930 and 1950, though its population has never gone above 3.5 million. But as Mujica grew up, the miracle began to collapse.



The president in the grounds of his humble smallholding. Photograph: Ines Maria Hiriart

As a young man, Mujica went to work for Enrique Erro, a popular leftwing politician, but had a political epiphany when he met Ché Guevara in post-revolutionary Cuba. As much of Latin America fell victim to crisis and decline, it was a Uruguayan writer, Eduardo Galeano, who penned a new bible for the continent's left wing, *The Open Veins of Latin America*. "The human murder by poverty in Latin America is secret," Galeano wrote, in 1971. "Every year, without making a sound, three Hiroshima bombs explode over communities that have become accustomed to suffering with clenched teeth."

With Uruguay suffering rampant inflation and a stagnant economy, Mujica and his comrades decided to follow Cuba's example, destroying the old order and trying something new - though it was never clear what that should be. Uruguay had no mountains to hide in, with the city of Montevideo dominating a fertile plain full of sheep and white-faced Hereford cattle, so they became urban guerrillas, taking their name from an 18th-century Peruvian rebel, Túpac Amaru II. The Tupamaros were a broad movement - one section was led by a priest - and unafraid of experiments, even costly ones. Trial and error, rather than dogma, would mark their history. It still does.

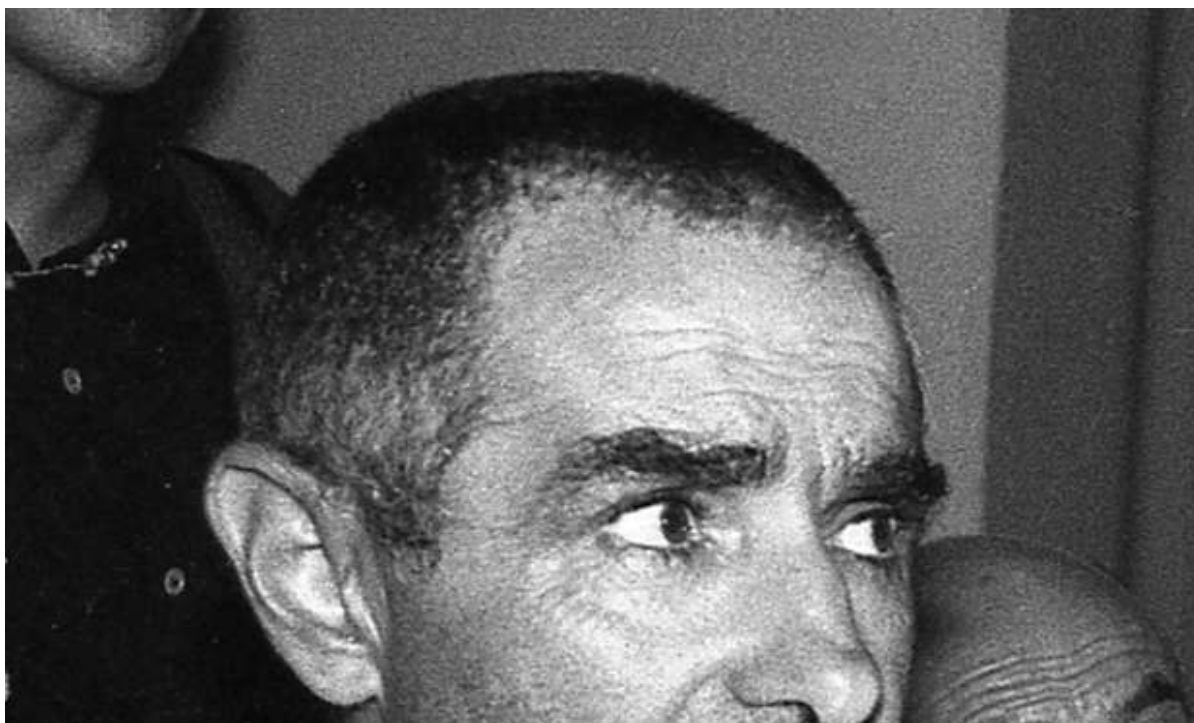
They soon gained a reputation for daring theatrics. A raid on the town of Pando saw them ride down the main street disguised as a funeral procession. After a heist at the Casino San Rafael in Punta del Este, a plush resort town, they sent back the employees' pool of tips. Time magazine dubbed them "the Robin Hood guerillas". But people with guns end up using them. Six people died in the Pando raid. In March 1970, Mujica was identified by a policeman in a bar. El Pepe drew his pistol: two police officers were wounded, and Mujica was shot six times. He was sent to Punta Carretas jail - which would later be turned into a glitzy mall looking out over the River Plate from Montevideo's southernmost point. Mujica broke out of it twice. Impressionable teenagers like Mannise joined student demonstrations, hurling stones at the police as protest spread across what had long been regarded as the region's most tranquil and moderate country.

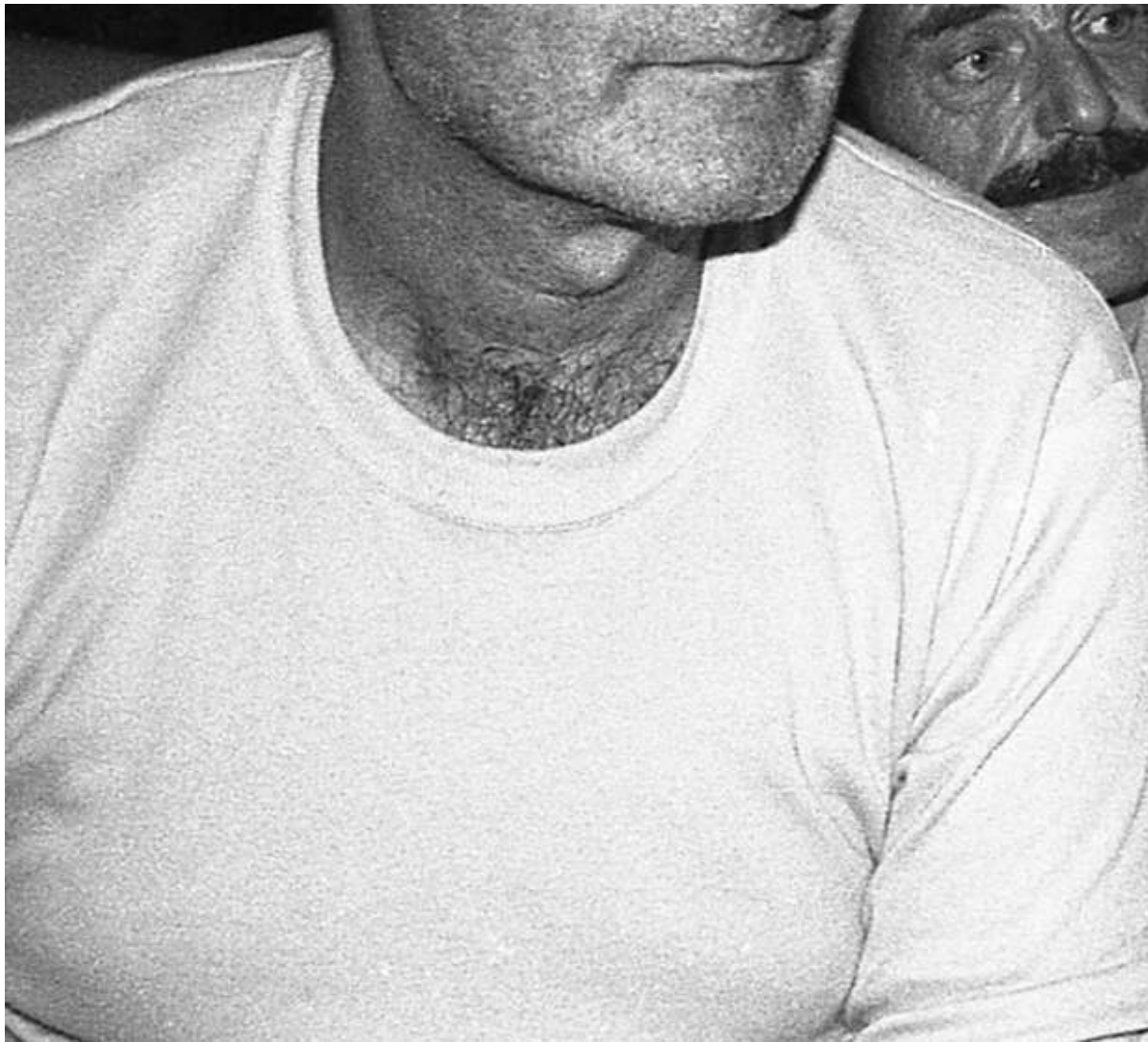
Then it all went wrong. Kidnappings, bombings and cold-blooded executions left the Tupamaros' romantic reputation in tatters. The army was called in and, in under a year, the Tupas were annihilated. Mujica was one of the last to be caught, in August 1972, while sleeping rough with an Uzi machine-gun and a grenade under his coat. In June 1973, an authoritarian cattle-rancher president, Juan María Bordaberry of the Colorado party, led a civilian-military coup, closing down democracy. Many blamed the Tupamaros.

Nine Tupamaro leaders were removed from their prison cells and sent to army camps as hostages - to be killed if the group sprung back to life. The poet, novelist, and playwright Mauricio Rosencof spent 11 years in a tiny cell next to Mujica. For many years, Rosencof told me, the hostages could only communicate by tapping morse code on their cell walls. Allowed to use the toilet just once a day, they urinated into their water bottles, allowing the sediment to settle and drinking the rest - because water was also scarce. It was even worse for Mujica, whose bullet wounds had seriously damaged his guts. Solitary confinement drove them half-mad. Pepe became convinced that a

bugging device was hidden in the ceiling. Its imaginary static deafened him. “He would put stones in his mouth to stop himself from screaming,” Rosencof, now 81, told me. Mujica fought to obtain the one item he needed most - a potty. Hostages were allowed occasional family visits, so *Doña* Lucy brought him one, but the guards refused to give it to him. One day, when his jailers held a party, Mujica began to scream for it; the commandant, embarrassed in front of his guests, relented. Mujica clung to his sole possession, a symbol of victory over his jailers, each time they were moved to a new army camp. “He refused to scrub it clean,” Rosencof recalled. “We all have tics left from that time. When Pepe came out, he came with all that baggage.”

The main road leading out of Montevideo towards Mujica’s chacra, or smallholding, takes you through industrial suburbs, over a polluted river and past flat expanses of small, squat homes. They are poor, but not decrepit. There are relatively few signs of the aching poverty that afflicts other parts of Latin America, though a developing world debt crisis drove many to penury at the beginning of this century. Old nags are tethered to the roadside, nibbling at the wide green verges. A rough, hand-painted sign on a tin shack beside a potholed asphalt road points to the dirt track leading to the farm. An excited pack of dogs rushes out to meet visitors, then rushes back to chase a van delivering gas bottles. Cocks crow and partridges strut through nearby fields, food for stealthy farm cats. Men in white rubber boots cut chard in a field belonging to the farm.





Mujica on the day of his release from prison in 1985. Photograph: Agencia Camaratres/AFP

Mujica emerged from his tiny house dressed in a fawn fleece and grey trousers with sandals over socked feet. The fleece is an improvement, which can be credited to his 2009 campaign team, who weaned him off tattered jumpers. Age has made his features both more pinched around the eyes and fleshier around the edges; his thick shock of greying hair was neatly brushed - another habit he acquired while running for president. Manuela, a three-legged mutt, hopped gamely along. The one-story house lies half-hidden by greenery, its corrugated metal roof resting on pillars around a narrow, cement walkway full of dusty crates and jars. Winter rain had highlighted the patchy plasterwork. "Mind the mud!" the president warned by way of greeting. The narrow, elongated front room contains a cheap office chair and desk, bookshelves, a small table with two uncomfortable wood-backed chairs, a roaring log stove and an ancient, immaculately restored Peugeot bicycle. "I've had that bicycle for 60 years," he said proudly, recalling his days as an amateur racer. The other two rooms in the house are familiar to Uruguayans, who have seen them on

YouTube: the president once showed a Korean television team his roughly made bed and the contents of an old refrigerator before inviting them to shots of Johnny Walker and Uruguayan cane spirit. Cobwebs, heavy with dead flies, hung above our heads. Mujica, sat stiff-legged on the office chair, easing his joints and ready for verbal combat.

Mujica could live in the presidential palace, a hundred-year-old mansion in the old-money Prado district, but he would rather be here. “We think of it as a way of fighting for our personal freedom,” he said. “If you complicate your life too much in the material sense, a big part of your time goes to tending that. That’s why we still live today as we did 40 years ago, in the same neighbourhood, with the same people and the same things. You don’t stop being a common man just because you are president.”

Mujica has a mouth to match his rusticity. At a speech to trade unionists in Montevideo the previous day, the audience hung on for the quickfire, crude phrases that he claims to have picked up in jail. “*Es la joda!*” – “What the fuck!” – provoked a squawk of delight from a woman behind me. “I know what our people are like,” Mujica told me. “Some more cultivated people have a stereotype and think *el señor presidente* has to be like a statue, totally inert. He cannot be like any other person. But I am an old man made of flesh and bones, with nerves and a heart. Yes, I put my foot in it a lot, but always in good faith.”

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“I wasn’t voted president because I had been a Tupamaro,” he said. “But I didn’t do this sneakily, hiding my past.” Even in his guerrilla days, he insists, he tried to keep violence to a minimum. He now professes a hatred for modern war, but also scorns “beatific pacifism”, and refuses to express remorse for his own violent past. “The only things I regret are those I could have done but didn’t,” he said. He doesn’t hold on to old

grudges – the men who jailed and tortured him, in his view, were instruments in other people’s hands. In one of those contradictions thrown up by their participative democracy, Uruguayans voted to retain an amnesty law protecting many involved in state repression on the same day they picked Mujica for president. “I suffered, but you can’t hold on to hatred,” he said. “I wouldn’t be the person I am if I hadn’t lived through those years.”

Fourteen other people live in small homes dotted around the *chacra*, many of them elderly. He does not charge rent. “We are a bit like an old folks’ home,” he

said. At heart, he is still an anarchist – or, as he puts it, a leftwing libertarian. “I am half, or even a lot, libertarian – as a dream, as a utopia. If ancient man could govern himself, then perhaps one day, in the future, men can govern themselves again.” After a lifetime of militancy, at the age of 79 he has found a way to balance his idealism with pragmatism, to the consternation of his critics on the left. “A leftwing vision of the world requires you to imagine a future utopia, but one doesn’t have the right to forget that the most important thing for every human being is the life they lead now,” he said. “The fight to make today better must become your central task.”

A presidential sash with the pale blue and white stripes of Uruguay sits in a glass-topped box in Julio María Sanguinetti’s book-lined, sombre study in a house on a quiet street near Punta Carretas. Cufflinks, shiny blazer buttons and a pastel green silk tie bolster an image of muted, patrician sophistication. “I am one of three Uruguayan presidents to have served two terms,” he informed me as a retainer brought us coffee. His Colorado party has lost voters to Mujica’s Broad Front coalition – which brings together ex-Tupamaros, socialists, communists and the country’s left-leaning Christian Democrats. Sanguinetti is bemused and outraged. “The dictatorship turned the perpetrators into victims,” he said. “Yet the dictatorship was triggered by the Tupamaros ... all the shots Mujica fired were against democracy.” Sanguinetti was banned from politics during the dictatorship, though he eventually helped negotiate its end in 1984. The hostages were released the following year, during his first presidency. By then Mujica had turned his potty into a tiny marigold garden. Rosencof recalls watching him step out of jail, proudly bearing his potty, and disappearing into a sea of flags waved by supporters.





José Mujica casts his vote during the presidential election in 2009. Photograph: Migual Rojo/AFP/Getty Images

In the 1980s and 90s the governments led by Sanguinetti's Colorado party, and their traditional rivals, the National party, pursued a watered-down version of neoliberal reforms. Moderate Uruguayans did not want state companies privatised, at least not without proper guarantees, and said so at referendum; they are still in public hands. The Tupamaros, experimental as ever, saw no point in returning to violence, so they joined the Broad Front in 1989 and sniped at it from the left, warning against the evils of centrism. But many of them still believed that the rotten structure of neoliberal Latin America would collapse, and arms would be needed once more. Adolfo Garcé, a political scientist who has studied the Tupamaros' remarkable transition into electoral politics, told me that the old revolutionaries played a double game - participating in democracy while preparing to go back underground if necessary. "It can best be described as an organisation that was always ready to submerge and become clandestine," Garcé said.

Uruguayan elections are complex: voters don't simply select a party, but choose a faction within that party. They elect the two chambers of parliament, a president and, often, vote on referenda at the same time. In 1994, when the Broad Front came within a few points of winning an election, the Tupamaro-led faction was still a minor player, with only two deputies in the 99-seat parliament. But one of those was Mujica. He rode to parliament on a battered Vespa, wore everyday clothes and peppered his speech with slang. ("He thinks up clever phrases," Sanguinetti said. "But he has destroyed the language.") People learned that he lived in a tiny house on a *chacra*, that he grew flowers and didn't care about his appearance, his possessions, or whether he sounded like he was having a row at the counter of a Montevideo bar. Mujica the folk hero was born.

The day Lucía was due to swear Pepe in as president, his publicist Pancho Vernazza had arranged to meet him at 8am to go over the speech. Vernazza, a high-powered Montevideo advertising executive, was a few minutes late, and

found that an impatient Mujica had already wandered off. “He’d gone for a spin on his tractor,” Vernazza told me. Mujica hired him for a presidential campaign that started with a fight to win the Broad Front nomination against a moderate social democrat, Danilo Astori - who would eventually become Mujica’s vice-president, ensuring that his would be a business-friendly government. It was, Vernazza jokes, the meeting of a leftwing and a rightwing anarchist. Business acquaintances threatened to leave the country if Mujica won. “In 40 years of professional work, I’ve never met anyone with his capacity to learn and be flexible,” he said. “He is the least authoritarian of all the politicians I’ve known.” Vernazza also found him chaotic, unstructured and gaffe-ridden. But native political intelligence and a talent for improvisation saw him rapidly mutate from a rebel in ripped jerseys to a serious presidential candidate. They tried to make doubters less afraid of a man known for his bruising vocabulary and tousle-haired television outings without his false teeth. Above all, Pepe sold himself. The Tupamaros always had a keen marketing sense, and Mujica’s flashes of roughhouse wit made perfect soundbites. “He was trapped in his own stereotype,” said Vernazza. “So he changed his personality, showing he was far more politically flexible than people had thought.” The hair was brushed, and the teeth stayed in. Mujica became president, and his faction, led by Topolansky, became the largest component of the Broad Front.

Poor girls are not well-treated by our society. For me that is one of the most important battles for fairness

Mujica’s progressive social reforms have boosted his global fame, but he is less impressed by them than his admirers. “They fit our sense of freedom and human rights, but they don’t solve the basic problem, which is the difference of class,” he said. Campaigners say he is not a natural social progressive. “He’s a bit Cro-Magnon, really,” said one sexual health activist, who is nevertheless grateful for a law legalising abortion in the first 12

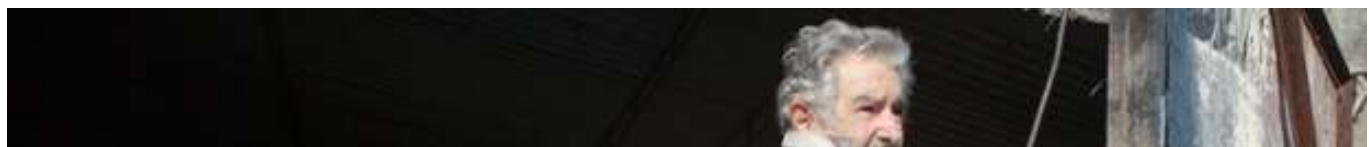
weeks of pregnancy; Vázquez, a devout Roman Catholic, had vetoed a similar law during the previous Broad Front presidency. Sergio Miranda and Rodrigo Borda, the first gay couple to marry last year, do not give Mujica most of the credit. “A lot of people fought for this for many years,” Miranda told me at the small offices of their gay tourism business. For his part, the president still refers to gays and lesbians as “sexually ambivalent”.

“All we are doing is recognising something as old as humanity,” Mujica said. “The best thing is that people can live as they want to live.” He sees those twice punished by poverty and intolerance as the real victims. “Those who are

sexually ambivalent have a real problem if they are poor. If they are rich they are tolerated. That sounds crude, but it's the truth as I see it," he said. "And the women most discriminated against are those in poverty. Machismo hits hardest at the lowest levels. Poor girls are not well-treated by our society. There are women who end up abandoned with lots of children. For me that is one of the most important battles for fairness." During the presidential campaign he was caught moaning about "intellectual women who think they are downtrodden", or who talk about their "*compañera*" cleaning lady, "when she is really the servant". Almost all of the 90% of his salary that Mujica gives away goes to single mothers.

Mujica has never smoked marijuana, but he is addicted to tobacco: visitors have often found themselves sneaking a smoke with the president, who rushes to put out his cigarette at the sound of Lucía's car. "Prohibition has proved itself a splendid failure," he said. "If you want change, you can't carry on doing the same things. We opted for regulating the sale of marijuana and that, naturally, has to be done by the state. We want to take users out of hiding and create a situation where we can say: 'You are overdoing it. You have to deal with that.' It is a question of limits," he said. Opposition parties see an experiment that will blow up in the Broad Front's face at election time. Most Uruguayans dislike the law, and it will be struck out if Vázquez, who is standing again as a candidate, does not win next month's vote.

The real reason for the marijuana law can be found near Mujica's birthplace in Paso de la Arena, where the asphalt turns to dirt and the houses are small and poor. Gangs of youths stand around in the dusk. "This is when the *pasta base* kids appear," Walter Pernas, an investigative journalist and construction worker's son, explained as we bumped down backroads. *Pasta base*, a toxic product of the cocaine-purification process, with effects similar to crack cocaine, is spoiling Mujica's attempt to take people out of misery. It is arguably Uruguay's biggest social problem, exacerbating poverty and fuelling crime. More than 1% of Montevideans are users. That number rises in these poor, fringe barrios - where the *bocas*, or drug markets, start trading after dark. Mujica wants to take marijuana profits away from traffickers, while freeing up police resources. In a country with such dramatic economic growth, popular concern is no longer about jobs, poverty or the economy, but about violence, insecurity and *pasta base*.





The president and his 25-year-old Volkswagen Beetle. Photograph: Ricardo Ceppi/Corbis

“It is a lost generation. They are so brain-damaged that they can’t even understand enough to keep a job,” Pernas said. Fear of violence is real and growing. People who used to carry rubbish to the street bins at night now wait until morning. Once, poverty drove people to the bins to eat, and housewives carefully placed leftover food in separate bags. Now pasta-base addicts take them. Juan Abbate, the owner of the family bakery where Mujica worked as a boy, described how he had once been prevented from making a delivery by a gang of teenage pasta-base hoodlums. “They pelted my car with stones, so I had to leave,” he said. At the next elections in October, Uruguayans will vote on a referendum to reduce the age of adult criminal responsibility from 18 to 16. When Mujica returns here, he sees a society that is both wealthier and weaker. This is partly an old man’s lament for innocent childhood days spent gathering wood, selling flowers, and chasing fish in the creek, but also part of his discourse against consumerism, egoism and what he calls “mental poverty”. “Our life has been made much easier,” he said. “But that is eliminating creativity.”

A bust of Che Guevara peers down from a bookshelf in Mujica’s farmhouse. “He was unforgettable, a mould-breaker,” the president said. “He marked our entire youth.” Yet the man who, inspired by Guevara, once blew up factories owned by foreigners now offers them tax breaks. “I need capitalism to work, because I have to levy taxes to attend to the serious problems we have. Trying to overcome it all too abruptly condemns the people you are fighting for to suffering, so that instead of more bread, you have less bread,” he said. Not all

Tupamaros have accompanied Mujica on his journey to soft, pragmatic socialism. “They left their ideals in their prison cells,” the former hostage Jorge Zabalza proclaimed recently. “Some old *compañeros* won’t understand,” Mujica said. “They don’t see our battle against people’s everyday problems, that life is not a utopia.”

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As in other countries in the region, an economic boom largely fuelled by China’s growing need for food has lifted vast numbers out of poverty, down from 40 to 12% in a decade. Acute poverty has declined tenfold over the same period. The boom has coincided with the presidencies of Mujica and Vázquez, when the economy has grown by 75%, and public spending increased by almost 50%.

Uruguay’s wealth gap has also closed, not least because Vázquez’s government introduced the country’s first income tax. Social spending has surged, targeting the poorest. All Uruguayan schoolchildren have free laptops, though parts of the school system remain dysfunctional. But there has been no radical change to the basic social or political structure of Uruguay, partly because a complex institutional system discourages it. A land tax proposed by Mujica, for example, was struck out by the courts. Uruguay’s democracy has so many checks and balances, the political scientist Garcé said, that presidents must govern through dialogue, inoculating the country against the populism that has wreaked havoc elsewhere on the continent.

The newly pragmatic Mujica no longer fights the globalisation which, by linking Chinese dinner tables to Uruguayan farms, funds this remarkable transformation. “It is like when I look in the mirror and see my wrinkles,” he told me. “I don’t feel sympathetic towards them, but they are inevitable. I have to fight to administer it as best I can, because if I start wailing like a baby I am not going to change it.” Globalisation’s glaring failure, Mujica said, is a lack of political oversight. “It is bad because it is only governed by the market. It has no politics or government. National governments are only worried about their next elections, but there are a series of global problems that no one deals with.” That does not mean capitalism has won outright. “I don’t think it inevitable that the world should live in capitalism,” he told me. “That is the same as not believing in man, and man is an animal with many defects but also with startling capabilities.”

Mujica still believes in class warfare. (“And yes,” he said. “This is definitely war.”) But that war, stripped of revolution and rained on by reality, is now fought on a very narrow battlefield. Salaries and union rights excite him most. Garcé told me that Mujica has been hamstrung by his faction’s minority status within the Broad Front coalition. “The extraordinary thing is that we have a group of revolutionary socialists who didn’t believe in democracy, then turned themselves into expert vote-seekers but eventually do only minimal reforms to the system,” he said. Yet, the minimum wage has jumped 50% during Mujica’s term, suggesting that radical reform may not have been needed to take big steps down the road towards his impossible utopia. Indeed, when I asked Uruguayans how much Mujica had changed their country, some replied that it was Uruguay – and its traditions of moderation and dialogue – that had changed him. “His transformation,” the economist Ernesto Calvi told me, “is basically a triumph for liberal democracy.”

The former Tupamaros I met often mentioned Don Quixote. Mujica told me that Che Guevara embodied the spirit of Cervantes’s mad, honour-obsessed knight errant. One young writer even suggested that the president had been deliberately marketed as a modern-day Quixote. The refusal to compromise personal honour – exemplified by his simple *chacra* lifestyle – certainly fits that narrative. With their utopian dreams and their past love of “just” but ultimately futile violence, the Tupamaros know all about tilting at windmills. But Mujica’s determination to keep experimenting has seen him square idealism with pragmatism. And where austerity is inside the president’s home, rather than outside it, accusations of selling out can only ring hollow.

After our talk, the president donned muddy boots and showed me the farm buildings. The powder-blue VW Beetle sat in a dusty garage with rusting, sheet-metal doors. “It rarely breaks down, they virtually give away spare parts, and the insurance is cheap,” he said. His post-presidency dream is to set up an agricultural school for young people in an empty barn beside the *chacra*. “Since I devoted myself to fixing the world when I was young, I didn’t have children,” he explained. As we left, I asked a chard-picker about the president. “He’s an ordinary man,” he said. It sounded like an accolade.

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18 Sep 2014 15:35

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I do like this mixture of pragmatism and ideology, exemplified with a trial and error method. If this world was governed by this simple way, following the ideology of fairness, equality at birth and sustainability, most problems the human race is facing would be solved in ten years, despite errors and false start.

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Any politician who stands for justice & love is very radical.

"No addiction is good. I include alcohol. The only good addiction is love. Forget everything else." JM

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