

WORLD AFFAIRS



Once elected, Jose Mujica donated 90 per cent of his state salary to build public housing and lived on his flower farm instead of the presidential mansion. MATILDE CAMPODONICO FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

RICÓN DEL CERRO, URUGUAY

The President seems wistful. He flings open the wooden door of his farmhouse, squints into the early morning light, mutters a gruff greeting. Two steps back into the gloomy interior and he sinks into the seat of power: an ancient black vinyl chair from which he does much of the governing of the Oriental Republic of Uruguay.

Jose Alberto Mujica has only a few months left as the head of this country. The constitution prohibits him from consecutive terms; once he hands over power, he plans to grow flowers, and teach young people to farm. At 79, after a life packed full of drama, he is due for a rest. He has accomplishments to savour.

And yet he leaves his country's highest office without having accomplished all he had hoped. The President sees himself as a fighter in an epic struggle – for justice, for equality, for liberty – and that fight, by any measure, is not won. So, Mr. Mujica admits with a shrug, he may keep one hand in the game of regional diplomacy.

He retires as a man of some influence, a perhaps surprising amount for the leader of a nation of 3.3 million people tucked into the southern tip of Latin America, its very name a frequent synonym for obscurity. But in the course of Mr. Mujica's term, Uruguay has been the subject of unprecedented international interest.

Two things have sparked this attention: a law Mr. Mujica pushed making this the first country to regulate production and consumption of marijuana – and the President himself.

When he won the post five years ago, Uruguayans had some sense of what to expect from the man everyone calls Pepe. Elected to parliament back in 1994, he drove to the graceful stone Chamber of Deputies building on his Vespa – and to the consternation of security guards, parked it in the reserved spots out front. He was never seen in a necktie. He was – and remains – good friends with Fidel Castro.

So his citizens were not particularly surprised when Mr. Mujica was inaugurated but then refused to move into the elegant presidential mansion in Montevideo, opting instead to stay in a tumble-down one-bedroom house on his small chrysanthemum farm (where he would do his own home repairs and talk on a 1980s-era phone with a spiraling yellow cord). He kept his 1987 Volkswagen Beetle and drove himself around on weekends. He flew economy. And he started to donate 90 per cent of his state salary to a charity to build public housing.

He also periodically addressed his fellow citizens with thoughtful treatises, in an old-fashioned Spanish laced with obscure agricultural metaphors, about the need to rise above hollow materialism, to find satisfaction in their labour. This, for Uruguayans, was par for the course with Pepe. The outside world initially knew little of this President try-

# ‘If you want to change things, you can’t keep doing the same thing’

**Stephanie Nolen** sits down with the guerilla fighter-turned-President of Uruguay – who put his tiny country on the map by allowing the sale of marijuana and living modestly to fight poverty

ing to lead his people by humble example. But as Mr. Mujica took to stages at international gatherings, wearing battered leather sandals, deploring environmental degradation and pleading for peace and justice from Syria to Guantanamo, he began to garner wider admiration. Eventually, he featured in a *Buzzfeed* list, that ultimate modern accolade, as “the best president ever.” Mr. Mujica appeared to be an antidote, in an age in which politicians everywhere seem to engender scorn and mistrust.

“It’s totally genuine, it’s really him,” Tomas Linn, a political columnist with the newspaper *Busqueda* who has followed the President’s career, says of his ascetic lifestyle.

“But he’s not unaware of how the image helps him – it’s who he is, *and* he uses it.”

## The power of asceticism

Mr. Mujica is the son of lower-middle-class farmers. His father died when he was seven, prompting him to pitch in to earnest with the family flower business. But as a teen, he was drawn into a new movement of socialist thinkers and leaders who called themselves the Tupamaros, after the legendary Incan revolutionary Tupac Amaru II.

“I was very preoccupied by social justice and the class struggle and the fact that liberal democracy established that we were all equals but in reality there were those who were more equal than others,” he explains from his creaking chair, drawn near a woodstove that glows in the South American winter.

The Tupamaros began to embrace violence, to rob banks and stores, and redistribute their loot to the poor, and then to carry out political kidnappings. Among his comrades-in-arms was Lucia Topolansky, a guerilla 10 years his junior whose fierceness equalled his own; they began to live together. The government responded to the Tupamaros by suspending

civil liberties and launching a brutal counter-insurgency. The authorities went looking for Mr. Mujica, and found him in a pizza restaurant; asked for ID, he drew a revolver with the words “These are my papers!” and wounded a police officer.

He was, in turn, shot six times, and nearly bled to death on the sidewalk. In a lucky twist, police took him to a military hospital where the surgeon happened to be a clandestine Tupamaro, and saved his life.

He survived to face 14 years in prison, many of them spent in solitary confinement in a hole in the ground. He was brutally tortured (a subject he rarely discusses). He was part of two different and wildly daring prison escapes, but in both cases recaptured.

Meanwhile, the Tupamaros rebellion created not a socialist revolution but the space for a military coup that led to 12 years of dictatorship. Mr. Mujica and Ms. Topolansky were released only in 1985, in an amnesty that accompanied the return to democracy. (They married in 2005.)

The time he spent imprisoned, alone in the dark, caused his grip on sanity to fray at points, Mr. Mujica said later; today, he feels it shapes the way he governs.

“The rhythm of the life we have today causes us to lose sight of what is fundamental in life ... To be alive is a miracle and nothing is more important than life itself. And you can’t buy it. You can only spend it. It goes. So how I spend this miracle of a life I have is the most important question for every person.”

Mr. Mujica opted to spend his in politics – just as before, except without weapons, he says. He and Ms. Topolansky were elected to the senate. When the Broad Front, a coalition of left-wing parties, took power in 2005, he was named minister of livestock, agriculture and fisheries.

And in 2009, he won a landslide vote as the new presidential candidate in the next election. (Mr. Mujica did begin to comb his hair in a concession to his new office,

notes the columnist Mr. Linn.)

Adolfo Garce, a political scientist and the author of a comprehensive history of the Tupamaros, says that even those who disapprove of Mr. Mujica’s guerilla past cannot deny his commitment to justice.

“He was a romantic, like many in his generation. And he’s still a romantic, who dreams of repairing the world, who feels the pain of his people, and he’s moved by that passion.”

Mr. Garce notes that Mr. Mujica is not the first Uruguayan leader to eschew the trappings of power; there is a respect, here, for “the political power of asceticism,” he says. But this President takes it further: “To do politics we must live like the poor” – it’s the same thing he said as a guerilla,” says Mr. Garce.

In Mr. Mujica’s Uruguay, what it means to be poor has changed: Musing on his time in office, he says he is pleased with Uruguay’s progress on key social indicators – poverty has fallen by almost half, while unemployment is at a historic low.

“And we have succeeded in having a substantial redistribution of resources,” particularly given the sharply unequal countries in the region, he adds.

His party also has made Uruguay the most socially liberal country on the continent. He oversaw the legalization of abortion in the first trimester of pregnancy in 2012; a year later, he legalized gay marriage. And then came marijuana: In a move that 65 per cent of Uruguayans still say they oppose, parliament made it legal last year to grow marijuana, or to buy it from the state (it will soon be sold at pharmacies).

“If you want to change things, you can’t keep doing the same thing,” Mr. Mujica says, with the weary air of a man who has had to explain this too many times. “If you have 80 years of trying to suppress drug trafficking and more and more people in prison, and more and more evidence that you are failing, you are obligated to try something else.”

This is not some wild social experiment, but rather a classic Uruguayan social-welfare approach, he continues. “We are not promoting marijuana use or saying it’s good for health – but for us, drug trafficking is worse than marijuana. And since there already is an underground market in existence, our proposal is to fight against the drug traffickers, taking control of the market away from them, and at the same time to get the consumer out of hiding, to be able to help him when we see that he is too dependent on the substance.”

## Poverty of initiative

President Mujica will inevitably be best known for his pot law, which has attracted interest from many other countries (Canadian companies are here looking to invest, while U.S. and UN drug-trafficking officials have made their disapproval known).

But he is personally more preoccupied with trying to change the worldview of his citizens – to redefine development beyond just economic growth, to wean them from a hunger for material goods, to change how they define wealth. His housing program, for example, is called Plan Juntos, from the Spanish word for together; homeless and low-income people are given materials and support to build houses, but must invest four hours a day of sweat equity in construction.

“More than giving them a house, what’s important here is the change of attitude: the house is really a pretext – because real poverty is not just economic, not just empty pockets, it’s a poverty of initiative.”

That said, Mr. Mujica’s government has not deviated from the pro-market economic policies of his predecessors, which helped Uruguay emerge as one of the healthier economies in the region after the devastating 2002 crash. And while he has been a huge proponent of green energy, the country is wooing investors for offshore oil exploration.

Mr. Mujica acknowledges, with resignation, that his people may admire his austere lifestyle, but they don’t especially want to emulate it. Sitting in the cobwebby and cluttered study (a bust of old friend Che Guevara propped against a stack of briefing papers, Senator Topolansky bustling past as she readies for a day in parliament), he seems a bit despairing about his fellow humans.

“If I want to have a lot of things, I have to spend so much of life getting them and then so much time taking care of them and lots of time overseeing them – then I’m not free. I’m free in that part of my life when I do truly what motivates me.”

In his own case, he says, that has been public service. And now, perhaps, some Latin American diplomacy. And flowers.

“People have the habit of dying,” he says, looking out over his fields. So there is always a need for chrysanthemums.

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