

Beetlemania

15 December 2014



The only difference between Brazil's presidential election (see my September blog) and Uruguay's, which were both held in October, will be that President José Mujica (described as the sage of Montevideo) cannot be re-elected because the country's constitution does not allow a second consecutive term. In both cases a run-off has been necessary, and as Marina Silva's defeat has illustrated, anticipating the result is a role of the dice.

I will have written this blog before the result in Uruguay is known, but whatever the outcome, I don't expect any significant changes. Tabaré Vázquez, who won 48 per cent of the vote in the first-round, has been here before. He was president from 2004 to 2009 and remains one of Latin America's most popular politicians. It also helps that he is a member of Broad Front, the centre-left party to which José Mujica belongs and who is very well-liked both at home and overseas. Luis Lacalle Pou will face Mr. Vázquez in the run-off on 30th November and represents the right-wing National Party. The 41-year old lawyer is the son of a former Uruguayan president and he has secured the endorsement of the third-placed candidate Pedro Bordaberry of the conservative Colorado Party.

There is no question that Mr. Pou presents both a youthful and fresh approach but in a very conservative country such as Uruguay this can also work against him. Many worry that his privileged background will mean that he will not be able to connect with the ordinary Uruguayan; certainly not in the way that President Mujica has been able to and whose presidential "limousine" is a 1987 VW Beetle.

Seemingly a Pope Francis of politics because of his unpretentiousness, the septuagenarian has eschewed the trappings of office and lives humbly in his small ranch house rather than the presidential palace. He donates 90 per cent of his salary to charity and has said that "those with the highest [political] responsibilities should live like the majority do, not the minority". Western governments could do with a dose of Beetlemania.

Ticket to Ride

During the presidential elections Uruguayans were also voting for their choice of members of parliament and the Broad Front retained its majority in the senate and the chamber of deputies. President Mujica was elected a senator and will doubtless still be an influential political figure, so even if Mr. Pou holds the winning presidential ticket, the young lawyer may encounter difficulties when attempting to introduce legislation.

And it doesn't follow that a triumphant Tabaré Vázquez will have a smooth ride either with the strong-willed outgoing president who, after all, despite public resistance, legalised abortion, gay marriage and marijuana. There could be a few bumps along the way. Whoever wins, however, this will be an election in which those dice are most certainly not loaded because Uruguay continues to be a shining light of democracy in South America, standing apart from state-controlled Cuba and Venezuela, autocratic Ecuador and Argentina's populist president.

President Mujica's distinctive, democratic beliefs were forged during tough years when he was leader of an urban guerrilla movement and then spent 14 years in prison (ten of them in solitary confinement). It is difficult today to recognise the man who originally wanted Uruguay to become like Cuba (he keeps a photo of Fidel Castro and a plaque of Che Guevara in his study). Still, some of the strands of the past sit alongside his beliefs today. He declares himself a libertarian but also accepts Che Guevara's definition of socialism's aim, being the abolition of the exploitation of man by man. He also accepts that democracy is neither clearly defined nor perfect, but that it promotes unity and an acceptance of differences between cultures. Like John Stuart Mill he argues that democracy needs to be fashioned carefully and then kept in good working order by regular maintenance.

That said, this little republic (closer to the size of Florida in the United States of America) is the continent's most egalitarian society (despite a military dictatorship between 1973-1984) and I believe that democracy is in a good state of repair, regardless of who next year's president will be.