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. Tiny Uruguay enjoyed enlightened social legislation, with eight-hour working days and maternity leave: some called it the Switzerland of Latin America. But as Mujica grew up, the miracle began to collapse.

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, so they became urban guerrillas. The Tupamaros were a broad movement - one section was led by a priest - and unafraid of experiments. 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 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. "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."

> "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

▲ **The president and his 25-year-old VW Beetle**
Credit: Ricardo Ceppi/Corbis

▶ **José Mujica casts his vote during the presidential election in 2009**
Credit: Miguel Rojo/AFP

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 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 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. "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."

"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 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."

▲ **The president in the grounds of his smallholding**
Credit: Ines Maria Hiriart

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, and disappearing into a sea of flags waved by supporters.

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