



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 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

"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 everyone is the life they lead now



brushed, and the teeth stayed in. Mujica became president, and his faction, led by Topolansky, became the largest component of the Broad Front.

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

▼ Mujica on the day of his release from prison in 1985



✚ Giles Tremlett is the author of *Ghosts of Spain: Travels through a Country's Hidden Past*, and *Catherine of Aragon*.

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, 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*.

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."

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. 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.