

# Building a new Colombia

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For far too long Colombia has been best known in Britain for cocaine and kidnapping. Now there is a new Colombia known for winning the Nobel Peace Prize, for its economic dynamism, and for the extraordinary beauty of its mountains and coastline, newly open to tourism.

President Juan Manuel Santos deserves a huge amount of the credit for building this new Colombia over the past six years, often at great political cost to himself. I have worked closely with him during this period, lending lessons from the peace process in Northern Ireland on which I worked for a decade, and I have been deeply impressed by the selfless way he has striven to do the right thing for the country.

The main reason the Havana talks succeeded while previous attempts at peace had failed was that they were built on firm foundations. President Santos was determined to learn from the mistakes of the El Caguán negotiations from 1999-2002 when the guerrillas were given a DMZ the size of Switzerland, allowed to bring their guns to the negotiations, which took place live on television, and granted an agenda of 100 items, including the end of capitalism. He also wanted to learn from successes at making peace elsewhere, including El Salvador and Northern Ireland, and brought together a group of international experts to brainstorm the approach he would adopt in these negotiations.

The initial decision he took was to talk and fight in parallel, drawing on the famous words of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin of Israel: "To fight as if there were no negotiations and negotiate as if there were no war". That approach kept the FARC under pressure throughout to negotiate seriously rather than just to play for time. He also decided to reverse the policy of his predecessor and reach out to Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. This was crucial. The guerrillas used rear bases in the neighbouring state to maintain their conflict and Chávez was able to apply pressure on them to go to Havana.

The secret talks were often tense but the government was able to reach a framework agreement with the FARC to restrict the agenda to just five points rather than the 100 at El Caguán. By taking a hardball approach they also managed to persuade the FARC to include decommissioning of their weapons in the agenda – something they had never previously agreed to do.

The four years of public talks in Havana were difficult and drawn out. The public often lost faith that the

negotiations would ever conclude and opinion polls seasawed up and down. Different methods had to be tried to get to agreement – for example relying on three lawyers from each side to negotiate the fraught issue of transitional justice and the military sub-commission with the participation of the UN to agree on DDR. Many shibboleths of the past were broken in the process.

In August of this year the negotiators finally managed to conclude the agreement in Havana, to universal relief, and it was signed at an emotional ceremony in Cartagena. I sat next to the mothers of two victims amongst the nearly quarter of a million who died in this horrific war. Both wore pictures of their lost sons around their necks and were in tears as the choir of survivors sang of the suffering. When the guerrilla leader, 'Timochoenko', asked for the forgiveness of the Colombian people for what they had done, both jumped to their feet shouting in delight.

To everyone's – particularly the pollsters' – surprise the agreement was defeated by a wafer-thin majority in the referendum on 2 October. This was partly because of low turnout, partly because of a hurricane which suppressed the vote in the largely supportive Caribbean region, and partly because of misleading rumours about 'gender politics' in the agreement which alienated evangelical churches. Nonetheless, the 'No' vote also reflected real concerns about the agreement, particularly about the measures on justice. The FARC is much hated in Colombia and a majority wanted to see their leaders in jail. But it is very hard to persuade guerrilla leaders to sign an agreement if in consequence they are going to remain in prison for 30 years. This balance between justice for victims in the past, which must be assured especially since the advent of the International Criminal Court, and the need to avoid further victims in the future by ending the war, is one that occurs in every conflict. Colombia's solution on this question of transitional justice is ground breaking. But that does not make it popular.

President Santos is now labouring to build as wide a consensus as possible behind a new, amended agreement to allow the country to unite and move forward. Time is short because the FARC cannot remain in limbo in the jungle for long. The President has made it clear that he is determined to work until he secures that peace. I believe he will succeed. And if he does, he will more than have deserved the prize he has been awarded. **F**