

Different countries, much in common

By MALCOLM DEAS

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MALCOLM DEAS is an emeritus Fellow of St Antony's College, Oxford, where with the late Sir Raymond Carr he was one of the founders of the University's Latin American Centre. He first visited Colombia in 1963, and the country's history and politics has been his main field of study ever since. He now has dual British and Colombian nationality, and in retirement divides his time between Oxford and Bogotá.

Colombia has been in the news: President Santos narrowly lost a plebiscite designed to endorse his peace accord with the guerrilla group *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, or FARC, but was nonetheless awarded the Nobel Peace Prize a few days later. The first surprise gives his government something in common with that of the United Kingdom: the Brexit vote has been much referred to by Colombians, and musing on the pitfalls of plebiscites brings together London and Bogotá.

Beyond this coincidence our two countries share many more characteristics than their citizens might suspect. In the two centuries that have elapsed since most of Latin America gained independence, the political traditions of the republics have diverged. With no implied disrespect to the others, Colombia is the nation whose system most resembles our own. It is obstinately civilian: the years of military government in the country's history can be counted on the fingers of one hand, and the doctrine of the Armed Forces is profoundly constitutional. Elections occur with unflinching regularity and it is usually impossible to predict with any certainty who is going to win. With the familiar complaints about the ownership of the papers and the defects of the television companies, censorship is unheard of, comment is free – as a constant listener to Colombian radio, I can testify that it is a good deal 'freer' than the BBC. A multitude of universities – state and private, religious and irreligious, metropolitan and provincial – guarantees the pluralism of intellectual life. The broad tradition is reformist, not revolutionary. Politics has always been a career open to talent, and the intensity of political competition has limited the appeal of aspiring populists: populisms commonly arise when there is a vacuum to be filled, and in Colombia a vacuum is unlikely to occur.

Colombia, which now has the third largest population in Latin America after Brazil and Mexico, is a vast country with many defined and self-conscious regions. Its society is complex, and there have been profound changes in the last half-century: rapid urbanisation, the emergence of a vast new middle class, the transformation of the status of women, and with travel and the revolution in communications an end of the old sense of distance from the rest of the world. Though there has never been a large British community in Colombia, there is now a substantial

Colombian community in Great Britain, industrious and discreet, and British universities attract an important flow of Colombian students.

A State Visit is an opportunity for questioning stereotypes and recognising common values. It is also an occasion for a better understanding here of Colombia's current problems, and the meaning of the dramatic series of events of the last month.

To say that Colombia has suffered fifty years of civil war is an exaggeration. Colombia's guerrillas have their origins in the violent sectarian rivalry of the 1940s and 1950s between the then dominant Liberal and Conservative parties, and in the inspiration and incentive for revolution through armed struggle provided by Fidel Castro's taking power in Cuba in 1959. Nonetheless the guerrillas were few and marginal until they began to expand in the 1980s, an expansion fuelled in good part by resources from the drug trade. The conflict is anything but simple, as can be seen from the twelve different versions of its history and causes produced as part of the recent peace negotiations, by six authors chosen by the FARC and six by the government team. Among the causes are conditions in parts of rural Colombia, the rank and file of the FARC being made up of rural youth with little education and few prospects. The costs in deaths and forced displacement have been very high.

Successive governments have attempted to reach peace agreements since the early 1980s, and have had some success with groups smaller than the two surviving guerrillas, the FARC and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional*, the ELN. This was even the case with President Santos's predecessor, President Álvaro Uribe Vélez, whose military success in reducing FARC numbers and driving the guerrillas to the periphery was an essential prelude to serious negotiations. The peace process initiated by President Santos has been the best planned and conducted to date: a limited and defined agenda, the discretion provided through having the talks in Havana, the participation of the army and the police, and the support not only of Cuba, Venezuela, Chile and Norway but also of the United States. The UK has helped with experienced advisers: there are of course many differences between Colombia's problems and those of Northern Ireland, but there are similarities as well, not the least being the extraordinary patience and attention to detail that

successful peacemaking demands. One recalls too the (perhaps apocryphal) message sent by the Provos to the British government: “We want to end this, but you have to help.” It is hard and risky for a guerrilla leadership to abandon its aims, and the easiest course is usually to carry on the fight, which maintains the discipline and provides the resources.

Why then did the ‘No’ win, why did the plebiscite not approve the accords? An over-confident and unfocused campaign that addressed itself too much to the converted and underestimated the chief proponent of the ‘No’, former President Uribe, who has sustained a high level of popularity since leaving office in 2010, especially outside Bogotá; the hatred and distrust of the FARC, many of whose methods, especially kidnapping, have cost them dear; the failure of the polls, which without exception predicted a win for the ‘Yes’ by a good margin, thereby encouraging abstention, always high in Colombia; with that, the indolence of the machinery usually used to get out the vote; difficult economic times, and the low popularity of the government... ask the people one question, and you risk them answering a different one. As after Brexit, there have been innumerable post-mortems.

What next? All is not lost. The de facto peace with the FARC, apparent for some months now, has held and the official bilateral ceasefire has been extended. The FARC have repeated that they have no intention of resuming the armed struggle. Álvaro Uribe and other leaders of the ‘No’ campaign have reiterated that they are not against peace, merely against certain parts of this particular accord. They have produced detailed proposals of their own. Talks are also scheduled to begin with the ELN, whose leaders in the past have been a great deal harder to negotiate with than the FARC. There have been many demonstrations and marches in favour of peace, strongly supported by the young. Just how far the Santos government, the opposition and the FARC are prepared to moderate their declared positions remains unclear, but what is clear is that nobody wants to begin the fighting again. The ball is in no one particular court: it is in all the courts.

And President Juan Manuel Santos himself?

He knows the United Kingdom very well, having spent nine years of his early career in the London office

of the *Federación Nacional de Cafeteros*. He is the only Head of State who can play the Scottish bagpipes, an accomplishment he picked up while serving briefly in the *Infantería de Marina*, who acquired the pipes from a Royal Navy mission in the 1930s. One of his colleagues in the Federación office was Néstor Osorio, his Ambassador here now. Two more confirmed anglophiles would be hard to find.

President Santos left his career in journalism for a career in public life, and has served a long and varied apprenticeship for the highest office as Minister for Foreign Trade, Minister of Finance and Minister of Defence. His style is un-strident, he is known as a good delegator, and he is unfailingly courteous. This hides his determination, the determination that justifies his Nobel Prize, and what is from time to time his audacity. He has another characteristic which one hopes can still be considered English, though the words are French: his *sang froid*. He has never been known to panic. Losing the plebiscite was indeed a hard blow, yet his television speech on that evening was a fine and graceful example of that quality: the people had voted freely, the ‘No’ had won, the cease-fire would continue, he would continue in office and would consult all in seeking a new national accord.

Though the times of British dominance in trade with the republic ended with the First World War, investment is more substantial, and collaboration with the Colombian government has remained close since Mrs Thatcher gave timely aid to President Barco against the threat from the Medellín cartel. There is every good reason to welcome President Juan Manuel Santos and María Clemencia, and to express our solidarity with the Colombian people. E



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The hand of history: President Santos and ‘Timochenko’ at the signing of the Peace Accord in Cartagena on 26 September. The witnesses (pictured) include UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto, Cuban President Raúl Castro and former King Juan Carlos of Spain