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Nothingland—or Venezuela?

A STRANGE DICTATOR, this Hugo Chávez. A masochist, with suicidal tendencies: he established a constitution that allows the people to get rid of him, and then took the risk of this happening in a recall referendum, which Venezuela is the first country in history to have held. He was not punished: 5,800,629 Venezuelans voted for him to remain president, with 3,989,008 against—a margin of 19 per cent. This was the eighth election Chávez has won in five years, with a transparency of which Bush could only have dreamed.

Faithful to his own constitution, Chávez accepted the referendum called by the opposition, and put his presidency at the disposal of the people: 'You decide'. Until now, presidencies have been interrupted only by death, putsches, popular uprisings or parliamentary proceedings. The Venezuelan referendum has ushered in an unprecedented form of direct democracy. An extraordinary event: how many leaders would be brave enough to do such a thing? And how many would remain in power afterwards?

This tyrant invented by the mass media, this fearsome demon, has just given a tremendous vitamin-injection to democracy, which, both in Latin America and elsewhere, has become rickety and enfeebled. A month prior to the referendum, the 81-year-old former president Carlos Andrés Pérez, that flawless democrat whom the media so adore (despite his impeachment on corruption charges), openly called for a coup d'état. In an interview from his Miami base—in which he also argued that Chávez should 'die like a dog'—he stated in the plainest terms that 'the path of violence' was the only possible one for Venezuela, and discounted the referendum because 'it is not part of Latin America's specific character'. Our specific character or, in other words, our precious heritage: a deaf and dumb populace.

Until only a few years ago, Venezuelans went to the beach when there were elections. Voting was not, and still is not, compulsory. But the country has gone from total apathy to total enthusiasm. The

torrent of voters, standing in the sun for hours in enormous queues, overwhelmed the structures that had been put in place by the electoral authorities. The turnout was 70 per cent, up from an average of 55 per cent in previous elections. The democratic flood also made it difficult to use, as had been planned, the latest technology for preventing ballot fraud, in this country where the dead have the bad habit of turning out to vote, and where some of the living vote several times.

'There is no freedom of speech here!' protest the TV screens, radio waves and newspaper front-pages, with absolute freedom of expression. Chávez has not closed a single one of the mouths that daily spew forth insults and lies. A chemical war, aimed at poisoning public opinion, is being waged with impunity. The only TV channel that has been closed down in Venezuela, Channel 8, was a victim not of Chávez but of those who usurped his presidency for a couple of days in the fleeting coup of April 2002—the coalition of business, media and church interests that had, fittingly, tried to install employers' association chairman Pedro Carmona as head of state. And when Chávez returned from prison on 14 April and once more assumed the presidency on the shoulders of an immense multitude, the principal Venezuelan media blotted out the event. Private TV stations spent the whole day showing Tom and Jerry cartoons.

Such exemplary TV coverage apparently merited the prize that the King of Spain awards to the best international journalism. Juan Carlos bestowed the award on a film containing footage of those turbulent days in April, showing vicious *chavistas* firing on an innocent protest by unarmed oppositionists. The footage was a sham. The demonstration did not take place, as has since been irrefutably proven. But such details are obviously of no importance, since the prize was not withdrawn.

After decades of rule by Carlos Andrés Pérez and his like in the oil paradise of Saudi Venezuela, the official census recorded 1.5 million illiterate people, and 5 million Venezuelans without papers or civic rights. These and many other invisibles are not prepared to return to Nothingland, the country where nobodies live. They have taken control of their country, which had been so foreign to them; this referendum has proved, once again, that they are there to stay.

25 August 2004