

MDD-8

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

A Boring Prospect of Dolphins.

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Bogotá, Colombia.

Mr Richard H. Nolte,  
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Dear Mr. Nolte,

Mariano Ospina, a former President of Colombia, postponed a projected journey to New York. 'The Walking Statue', as he is called, cultivates the demeanour of an elder-statesman to add weight to political activities more strenuous than most elder-statesmen undertake. The situation was grave. But after three days he was able to leave his people: "I can leave with tranquil mind", he said at the airport, "knowing that the Country and Democracy have been saved." This aristocrat — worthy, as was said to compliment one of his forbears, President a hundred years ago, to sit in cabinet among the Lords of England — was referring to the dismissal of the Minister of War, General Alberto Ruiz Novoa. The circumstances and manoeuvres surrounding that dismissal must have left many other elder politicians in need of rest.

The government had accompanied its partial devaluation of the peso with austerity measures, one of which, an ill-explained and politically ill-conceived sales-tax, began to gather unpopularity and attract suspicion out of all proportion to what its effects would probably have been. It was a tax of some three per-cent on sales, excluding necessities, but even before it was to come into operation it was rumoured that prices were rising, in anticipation, and that they were rising very much more than three per-cent. The government was taking an inch, the unscrupulous a mile. The sales-tax became the focus of opposition, and the leaders of the labour unions called for a general strike to take place on January 25.

Curiously, the Convención de Trabajadores Colombianos, in the past the most militant organisation, dropped out, leaving the originally confessional Union de Trabajadores Colombianos to persist. The latter has acquired some very unconventional political advisers, and the church some unconventional priests. One of these political

advisers, the ex-communist José Gutierrez, is a preacher of techniques of non-violence that appear exceedingly optimistic in this violent country but which he clearly wants to try out. Moreover, with every day that the U.T.C. held out longer than the C.T.C. its relative popularity grew: thirty-five locals changed their affiliation.

The U.T.C. found this intoxicating. The government took a foolish stand on its dignity. The National Association of Industrialists otiosely declared itself against strikes. Agitators of all colours prepared to exploit the coming chaos: posters appeared calling for the formation of 'Committees of Public Safety'. (Poor Colombia — her revolutionaries are out-of-date.) The President made one of his wilder speeches prophesying lootings and burnings, and foreign residents in the rich northern suburbs of Bogotá looked to their weapons. 'Nobody knew what was going to happen.' This mood of expectancy heightened until on the Saturday before the Monday fixed for the strike the government yielded to the U.T.C.'s demands and abrogated the sales-tax. Nothing happened on Sunday, nothing on Monday. The army and the police took heavy precautions. Uninvolved observers, the irresponsible waiting for a spectacle, murmured hopefully to each other that it was too quiet, and slowly admitted that it was merely quiet. A mood of expectancy is made up of people expecting other people to do something: if everyone is expectant nothing will occur.

So nothing much did. The U.T.C.'s demands were accepted, the President's striking of attitudes was forgotten, The U.T.C. had won a moral victory, one more striking in form than in content, over the government, and had gained popularity and numbers from the C.T.C. in doing so. A 'High Commission' of forty so-called 'wise men' had been set up to examine the country's ills, and its tortuous wranglings towards a diagnosis have been confusing and exasperating all conscientious readers of the press ever since.

It was two days after the date fixed for the strike that General Ruiz was dismissed. The atmosphere was propitious: his enemies could mark him down as a frustrated plotter, a sinister influence whom circumstances had at the last moment failed to assist. The tense days before January 25, and then the sudden relaxation of the tension, left his sympathizers distracted and without momentum. To dismiss him on January 22 would have meant a riot, of uncertain proportions but a riot nonetheless. After having the consolation

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1. This is no exaggeration: they do quite often, as they have no idea what the rest of the city is like, let alone its inhabitants. Their favourite topics of conversation are bag-snatching and burglary, and they now boast knowledge of plans of mass attack formulated in distant worker districts. Probably rubbish, but it remains true that the militants exaggerated their influence over a populace that knew not one of their names, and that some sort of riot was far more likely than some sort of revolution. They should ban Trotsky before anybody reads him.

of knowing that the Minister of War was loyal and efficient during the days when the strike threatened, certain oligarchs could now get rid of him for holding inconvenient opinions and thereby acquiring some popularity. Once the threat had passed, in the anti-climax they could do so without anyone shouting a viva in his name. Agility was not on the side of the Left: Ruiz himself was the victim of a far better-laid plot than the imaginative Gutierrez or any of the would-be members of the phantom Committees of Public Safety could ever have arranged.

His attitude to the strike was correct. Sympathize with its objectives he probably did; he is a friend of Gutierrez, but there is nothing sinister in that; for there are few progressives in Bogotá, which is a small city where, for the sake of society, people talk to their political enemies as well. But no allegations have been made, in any of the many attacks on him since his fall, that in the event of the strike taking place he intended to do anything except keep order and avoid shooting: professional to the last, a few days before the 25th he lectured his subordinates on modern techniques of riot-breaking used in Japan.

He was removed ostensibly at the request of half-a-dozen other colourless but senior generals, whose grounds were that his opinions were 'dividing the Armed Forces'. Their spokesman, General Rebeiz, now Minister of War, went to President Valencia and told him that unless Ruiz was dismissed they would resign. Ruiz was called to the Palace, spoke privately for half-an-hour with the President, then resigned. I am told that the President offered his own resignation 'if it would help the situation' — he was loyal to his Minister of War; unfortunately for this weary head-of-state, it was not clear how it would.

Ruiz's resignation was announced to certain provincial garrisons some time before his own decision to resign can have been made.

Orders were given to confine troops to barracks without his knowledge. These and others, as the intent of those who gave them was to force the retirement of a senior officer, were contrary to the spirit of any military discipline. They may have been irregular in a more technical sense — I am not qualified to pronounce on that.

The President seemed as surprised at the generals' ultimatum as was the Minister. Not one of the generals was previously known to hold any opinion whatsoever. General Rebeiz boasts a stolid and unspectacular career, much of it passed in the provinces, of no apparent military or intellectual distinction. His wife called his new appointment 'the culmination of a spotless record', and indeed the

record is so clean that nothing can be deduced from it at all.

It is possible, but it is not likely, that he and the other generals who backed the ultimatum thought it up for themselves. It is unlikely because their first protest was their last — they had done nothing before to disassociate themselves from the Minister, and several had publicly supported him. They may have been jealous, and it is clear now that Ruiz was not as careful to flatter and convince his senior colleagues as a more ambitious and less ideologue general would have been. An old officer who looks a potential leader of a young officer's movement should beware of those without ideas, and try and persuade them that they have some too. But from the departure of Ruiz others had more to gain, and more initiative to gain it. 'Cui maximo bono?' — 'To whom the greatest benefit?' — is a question few Colombians find it hard to answer.

The explanations are all delightfully 'Machiavellian', but they are not all the same: when a stumbling-block to the oligarchy is removed it is often difficult to know which section of it did the work.

One frivolous opinion is that it was all done by President Valencia, hiding deep cunning behind a dated and rhetorical persona. His public and private professions of loyalty and friendship to Ruiz, the duck-shoots they went on together, the final show of surprise and hurt at the generals' ultimatum — these were to lull the Minister, and then to soothe him into silence. The dismissal was a show of strength and decision that would revive the President's prestige. Some do try to believe this, for the office of President has its mystery, and it is humiliating to have to admit that this President was not in control of the situation. However, it remains a fantasy. Valencia was not working against Ruiz, but in the curious partnership with him that I described in my last letter. And the ousting of Ruiz has not increased his poor reputation for strength and decision, but made him appear more at the mercy of what its opponents call 'El Sistema', the system that imposes one style of politics to the exclusion of all others, the oligarchic manoeuvre.

Ruiz, who was his most popular minister, faces enormous disadvantages as a civilian politician. His words no longer get the automatic attention given to the Minister of War, and he has no press of his own to combat the combination of little tactical charities and relieved indifference with which the big papers now treat him. He is not well-connected. He did not do much to organize his support in the army he was 'dividing', and a few discreet changes of post can soon disorganize it still further. Still a man of strong convictions, he has become a pawn too dangerous to be used.

The field is clear for properly-accredited políticos. The headlines announce that Carlos Lleras Restrepo, the official candidate for the next presidency, will speak in the Jockey Club: 'Carlos Lleras hablará en el Jockey'-- it is a sentence that, appearing after the troubles of January, proclaims at once relief, defiance and hope. Politics can once more be confined, politics will once more be confined, and Carlos Lleras will be the next President of Colombia. To the relief of the elders and the groom, in a little more than a year's time the marriage will take place.

But the candidate is politically unattractive. He is a competent economist, he has much administrative experience and in the past he has shown himself a cunning 'reform-monger'. In seniority of political activity, it is his turn. But he has yet to speak with any success outside the Jockey Club, and other members are eager to exploit his chronic lack of popular appeal.

His most prominent opponent, Alvaro Gómez, has been aptly named 'El Delfín' - 'The Dauphin'; the elegant and assured son of the former Conservative President Laureano Gómez, he was born for politics and probably for power. 'Delfín' is also the Spanish for dolphin, and with politics reduced to the merely tactical, it is dolphin-politicians who now attract what attention this bored and disappointed country is prepared to give. Alvaro Gómez emerges from the ~~deep~~ waters of the Jockey or the Gun Club or some other private place, flips a few hints with his tail, and then disappears again. Alfonso López, son of a former Liberal President and Gómez's opposite number among the dissatisfied Liberals, is about to surface after a long dive abroad. General Rojas Pinilla, military President of the mid-fifties, has not been visible for some time. Jorge Leyva, a prominent Conservative with whose assistance Gómez might secure a majority of the Conservative's seats in the next Congress and without whose assistance he might not, has no clear fin above water. Congressional elections are not to be held for another thirteen months, and none of these men are likely to make themselves much clearer before the ~~last~~ two or three months of this year. They will ~~gras~~ far as choosing an opposition candidate goes, swim around in the depths until then.

Ruiz lacked the finesse of a Gómez, a López or a Lleras, but he gave some content to the political debate and kept issues alive. None of the 'dolphins' I have mentioned above has a programme as well-defined as that contained in Ruiz's occasional speeches. Not ~~one~~, with the hopeless exception of Rojas Pinilla, is in his ideas any more interesting or progressive than Carlos Lleras: the opposition to the official candidate is personal and, in the case of Gómez, partisan and personal.

In the prevailing atmosphere of inarticulate discontent, this opposition will run a candidate against Carlos Lleras. I doubt if they will, and I doubt if they wish to find a candidate who will effectively draw on that discontent, for their influence is better served by sowing only a little wind. They will not agree on a candidate outside 'El Sistema', they will concentrate on returning a Congress hostile to Carlos Lleras rather than defeating him for the Presidency, both because to return a hostile Congress is easier and because to do so gives each element of the opposition further opportunities for private bargaining. A joint Liberal-Conservative dissident campaign against him is not to be taken for a fundamental change in Colombian politics. It is an old game, and it will be played in the old way.

The governors and the caciques are already putting their men in position for elections, and putting other peoples ~~man~~ out. This brings a real danger of a revival of political violence in the provinces, for though these changes may be made for remote electoral reasons, (and in a country of proud allegiances these do not seem as remote as they should), in any pueblo it matters far more directly in ways who is alcalde and who is not. A whispered cue from Bogotá can become something worse than a shout on a provincial stage. Sectarian politics have been repressed for seven years, but nothing new has yet appeared to fill the void. Gómez, López, Leyva are not new. Old excitements, old allegiances — in short, old politics are better than none.

No new initiatives will come from the present government. It is facing monetary difficulties with anti-inflationary convictions, and may have to devalue again. But it has learnt about sales-taxes, it has not even one general's opinions to fear from the army, and will probably not have to face another threat of general strike — the effort of calling the last one will not be repeated for some time. It will finish its term amid some nasty elections, handing over to an unpopular and perhaps hamstrung successor, after a year of inactivity. To clear the headlines for the official candidate is not 'to save the Country and Democracy' for very long.

Yours sincerely,

*Malcolm Deas*

Malcolm Deas.

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