

The Uruguayan leader gives away 90% of his salary, drives a 24-year-old VW and speaks to the press minus his false teeth

Miriam Wells and Pablo Melgar Montevideo

ALONG a dirt road on the outskirts of Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay, stands a ramshackle house with chipped walls and a 26-year-old car parked outside. This is the home of the man who runs the country.

Jose Mujica, a 77-year-old former left-wing guerrilla, is earning an international reputation as a pauper president who steadfastly refuses to accept any trappings of power.

"El Pepe", as he is known to friends and supporters, has never worn a tie, never owned a credit card or mobile phone and gives away all but £500 of his salary of £5,000 a month.

Since winning a landslide victory in elections almost three years ago, Mujica has shunned the presidential palace in favour of a farming co-operative that he and his wife share with three other couples, growing chrysanthemums to sell at local markets.

His most prized possession — and his most valuable, according to the official list of presidential assets — is his 1987 blue Volkswagen Beetle, valued at £1,200. Also much cherished is Manuela, a three-legged mongrel bitch who remains devoted to her owner despite having been run over by his tractor a few years ago.

"Four legs is a bourgeois ostentation, if you can live with three," said a 2011 song celebrating the relationship between the president and his loyal pet.

For Mujica, an ardent leftist who fought the Uruguayan state during the 1960s and 1970s in an insurgency inspired by the Cuban revolution, life has one simple truth.

"Those who are poor are those who need a lot to live," he said in an interview with The Sunday Times. "I'm not trying to act like a beggar; I'm not disguising myself. I'm living as president the same as I lived before and the same as I will live afterwards."

Born into a poor farming family, Mujica joined the Tupamaros, an urban guerrilla movement that emerged from the economic decline, mass unemployment and sharp drop in living standards suffered by Uruguayans during the 1950s.

The right-wing government employed brutal tactics in response. In 1973, after the army defeated the guerrillas, a military dictatorship was installed.

Mujica was shot six times during an operation to capture him. He was deeply affected by 14 years of harsh imprisonment, more than 10 of them in solitary confinement.

Kept in a hole in the ground for two years, he was forced to drink his own urine and says he narrowly avoided going mad by befriending ants and frogs.

Uruguay became known as the "torture chamber of Latin America". Not until 1985 was



President Jose Mujica uses a borrowed phone at his home where he makes tea for visitors, below centre. He took office in 2010, below right

I'm not just a peasant – I am also the president

democracy restored and all political prisoners freed.

"I thought about a lot of things during that time and I came to realise that life is short, and to spend time buying things is to waste it," he said. "My concept of austerity goes hand in hand with liberty."

The president's water comes from a well in a yard overgrown with weeds, where stray dogs seek shade.

Inside the four dilapidated walls of his little farmhouse is a kitchen with a wood stove and an old red chair. Diaries of Che Guevara and other revolutionaries are among the books on the shelves.

He and his wife, Lucia, a fellow former guerrilla who is now a senator, do their own chores, inviting visitors to share a communal cup of mate herbal tea, or a nip of rum, when the president is in the mood.

To live in an official presidential property would mean servants, Mujica said, "and then, goodbye intimacy". He wants to

do everything possible to make the presidency less venerated, he claimed, and it is hard to imagine he could do much more. He has been known to greet journalists in his pyjamas, give press conferences without his false teeth and wear worn-out leather boots to international meetings.

"These aren't the best shoes to wear to a summit," he

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LIFE IS SHORT, AND TO SPEND TIME BUYING THINGS IS TO WASTE IT

admitted to advisers as he flew to meet his Brazilian, Venezuelan and Argentine counterparts in Rio de Janeiro last year. "But I feel comfortable."

On another occasion a trip to a hardware store to buy a lavatory seat led to an impassioned speech to a second division football team, who spotted him from their headquarters nearby. After addressing the players on the importance of humility and the dignity of poverty, Mujica promised them a donation if they managed to get promoted — all with lavatory seat in hand.

Last Wednesday the president flew to Caracas to attend a rally in support of the ailing Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez, a close friend.

But while Chavez's firebrand leftism has dominated Latin American politics, Mujica has been quietly advancing some of the most radical policies in the region.

Last year Uruguay became the only Latin American country, apart from Cuba, to

legalise first-trimester abortions, and plans are under way to formalise gay marriage and legalise marijuana.

Unlike Chavez, Mujica disapproves of presidents who seek re-election. "The best leader is the one who leaves behind a group of people who can outdo him when he goes," he says. "I hope that's how things go in Venezuela."

The legend goes that the guard at Uruguay's House of Representatives was concerned when a dishevelled man in a black anorak and jeans pulled up on a Vespa outside the gates in 1994.

"How long do you think you'll be here?" the guard asked. "If I don't crack first, five years," replied Mujica, arriving for his first day's work as an elected politician. Nineteen years later he still has not cracked, and neither has his informal style.

Not everyone likes it. Gerardo Zambrano, the owner of a large agricultural company, said: "Bragging about having

the world's poorest president doesn't just make me cringe; it makes me really ashamed. I saw an interview where a Brazilian journalist got on a tractor with the president, who had rolled-up jeans — this is nothing but unproductive populism, and he should have better things to do."

His dress sense has been called a "gross insult" by Luis Alberto Lacalle, the former president and an election rival.

Luis Heber, the leader of the opposition National party, says Mujica's "austerity" is a media gimmick. "He impoverishes himself much more than what is real," says Heber, who lives in Montevideo's most expensive district. "He flaunts all this to try to make a point about the political system."

Never, says Mujica. "I am trying to fight for equality and I live like the overwhelming majority of my people. I would not feel comfortable otherwise when I don't have a magic wand to make their lives better."

Sheen's party tweets put mayor in flap

John Harlow
Los Angeles

FOR Charlie Sheen, tweeting that your new best friend is a man "who knows how to party" is a high compliment.

But for Antonio Villaraigosa, the outgoing mayor of Los Angeles, who is trying to upgrade his image as a lover of beautiful women to that of a sober politician ready to serve President Barack Obama on the national stage, it has proved an accolade too far.

Angelinos take great delight in the achievements and troubles of their colourful mayor — the first Latino in more than 130 years to hold the post — but are surprised that he has let himself be sucked into the tabloid vortex by tweets made by Sheen, who has described himself as a tiger-blooded warlock born to raise hell.

Ill-tempered attempts by Villaraigosa to extricate himself from this public relations debacle have not impressed his prospective employers in Washington.

The heat started building two weeks ago when Sheen, 47, opened his new club, El Ganzo (the Goose), in the Mexican diving resort of Cabo San Lucas. The infamously sybaritic television actor invited celebrities staying in the area to the event. They included George Clooney and Jennifer Aniston, neither of whom appeared — perhaps fortunately, as he greeted his guests by calling them a "bunch of faggots".

Villaraigosa, 59, did turn up, though, to enjoy a hotel rooftop performance by Slash, the London-born former lead guitarist of Guns N' Roses. Sheen tweeted: "From Boyle Heights [a poor area of east LA where Villaraigosa was raised] 2 Mayor of LA! Antonio Villaraigosa knows how to

party!" He then uploaded a photograph of himself with his arm slung around the politician's neck.

When he returned to LA, Villaraigosa said in a TV interview that he had spent only two minutes at the party and allowed himself to be photographed out of politeness, as "I am in the handshaking, photo-posing business".

But Sheen told the celebrity scandal website TMZ that Villaraigosa had spent time in his hotel suite with him and "several hot young women, including a porn-film star".

He added: "I memorise 95 pages a week [for Anger Management, his TV comedy series] so the last thing I am is memory challenged."

Sheen and Villaraigosa apparently had much in common. Both are grandsons of Hispanic immigrants, both changed their names and both were expelled from school for low marks and bad behaviour. "He's a terrific guy," said Sheen, "a great mayor, and he drinks with the best of 'em: me."

Last week, though, reportedly under pressure from the mayor's office, the actor issued a correction: "The mayor was visiting friends who were at the opening of El Ganzo, where my share of the ownership is 100% committed to Los Cabos Children's Foundation. He was gracious enough to take a photo with me and spoke to many other people. I apologise if my words have been misconstrued."

Villaraigosa — whose colourful private life includes an affair that ended his 20-year marriage in 2007 and a high-profile relationship with Lu Parker, a former Miss USA — lost his patience with reporters. When asked, "Two hours or three minutes?", he dismissed the "bozo question".



Antonio Villaraigosa, seen with Lu Parker, his then girlfriend, visited a Mexican club owned by Sheen, inset

Blogger gets whiff of Cuba libre as curbs on leaving island are eased

Girish Gupta
Havana

FROM her flat overlooking Havana, Yoani Sanchez expresses her opposition to the Castro government in a blog that has won widespread acclaim, a risky enterprise on the tightly run island of Cuba.

Despite a string of awards that have brought her recognition abroad, Sanchez, 37, has not been allowed to travel overseas. A strict policy has made it difficult for Cubans to leave the island for as long as anyone can remember.

A law due to come into force tomorrow, however, will scrap the need for an expensive exit visa. Ordinary Cubans will now be able to travel freely with just a passport.

Sanchez's hopes are rising that one day even she may be allowed to leave the island. "We've been waiting for this reform for years," she said. "We're so pleased."

Regulations were put in place in 1961 to prevent an exodus two years after the revolution led by Fidel Castro, now 86 and suffering severe health problems.



Yoani Sanchez says she will try to get a passport to leave

infested waters to America, reflects their determination to be free. Images of cars on the water with empty oil drums attached as floats have circulated since the crackdown was introduced.

The reform means that Cubans will no longer have to apply for an exit visa or show a letter of invitation from abroad.

"I'd love to see more of the world," said Danis Montero Ascanio, 26, an artist in the faded, crumbling streets of old Havana. "I hope I can. I live a correct life with no political problems, so why not?"

Dissidents such as Sanchez, and professionals such as scientists and engineers, will still face travel restrictions in order to preserve the "human capital created by the revolution from the theft of talent by powerful nations", according to the law.

"National security" is another caveat that the government can use to prevent departures. Sanchez, who has been arrested twice, worries that this will allow "ideological filters" to remain. "The law does not directly give people the right to enter and exit this country," she said.

Earlier this year, the Brazilian government offered Sanchez a chance to attend the screening of a film that details Cuba's troubled record on human rights, but she was denied a visa.

Recent reforms have allowed small businesses such as restaurants and guesthouses to grow, although they are constrained by heavy taxes and regulation. Critics of the regime argue that the changes are not happening quickly enough.

"This government is trying to give the impression that it's changing, but the country is on the edge of a cliff," said Oscar Espinosa Chepe, a dissident economist in Havana.

"The problem is that the government is scared. They know that economic freedom is linked to political freedom." Espinosa Chepe, who was jailed by the regime for 18 months in 2003, also pointed out that the average monthly wage of £12 rules out travel for anyone not receiving remittances from abroad.

Sanchez intends to join the passport queues. "I don't want to feel defeated," she said. "I'll go to the office and try to get a passport. In the meantime, I'll enjoy the illusion that I can leave."

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