



A Two Party System?

LETTERS FROM AMERICA



By John Loofbourow, MD

This is another in a series of letters sent from Chile a year ago. It seems particularly appropriate in the wake of our own two-party election.

Dr. Loofbourow sent a series of letters to the magazine last year during the annual family trip to Chile. Our deadlines precluded their timely publication; his second letter about Christmas, for example, would have run in March. We are beginning to print them now, when they better coincide with the season.

Jan 10, 2000. When we visit Chile, there is often an interesting or unusual event, whether political, economic, cultural or even physical, as in a *terremoto*, (earthquake). Usually these are merely more moderate *temblores*, although in 1985 a grade 7+ quake struck the port area of San Antonio with much structural damage, and in 1951 a grade 8+ earthquake altered the course of the Bio Bio River, carrying thousands of people to a watery grave.

The year we bought our beach house, the chimney was toppled through the roof into the living room. We were here in 1980 when a political quake, a new constitution, was solidly approved by plebiscite. It is still in effect; though not completely "democratic" because, like the English House of Lords, some senators are "designated" rather than elected. These include all ex-presidents, supreme court retired chief justices, and one senator from each military branch. Nonetheless, it appears that during a dangerous transition from military junta to democracy, the constitution has contributed to stability.

In 1981, we were here during an economic *terremoto*; the economy collapsed. One Thursday the banks were seized; many bad loans had been made which could not be repaid to foreign banks. In that case, the government would lose credit, or would need to make good on the loans. So the banks were closed, and the "pirañas" who had taken out the loans and sent the proceeds abroad ~ and then claimed bankruptcy ~ were jailed, (as some were in the U.S. in similar circumstances).

However, in a Machiavellian Chile, they were simply not freed until the money returned. The economy recovered, but that required several more difficult years. The result was, at least for a while, an economy neither in the hands of traditional politicians nor the super rich.

Perhaps this event, and the opening of Chile to world markets during a rapid movement toward a free economy, has been the most important economic achievement of the past quarter century here.

It seems to be the nature of collectivist, paternalistic government to require citizens to spend much of their lives in long lines, like those that were characteristic of the USSR. At the head of these lines is a single, modestly endowed public servant who stamps, separates and stacks papers: copies of originals.

To some extent, that employee is still here today, with a computer at his side, but he is not empowered to use the computer actively to meet any extraordinary needs of citizens. He still must use his terminal like a stamp, if he uses it at all. Should there be the slightest

irregularity, neither this poor employee nor his on-site supervisor is allowed to act in any helpful manner, excepting to refer the petitioner to another line at some distance.

To pay a utility bill, to cash a check, to collect a " *bono*" (subsidy for health or welfare costs), one must travel periodically to some quarter of the city, often centrally, and stand in line. This, I suspect, contributes to the continuous churning peregrinations of city people in such countries.

The immortal public servant and the miasma which emanates from him, has been here for most of the last century, unmoved by the military, or the communists. After so many years in lines, the ordinary citizen tends to meekly accept such treatment. Here one can get a feel for the problems facing Eastern Europe, at least in this respect.

These attitudes, this enervating mentality, is so pervasive, and so wearing, that even the wealthy or powerful, who can evade these problems to some degree, may elect to live elsewhere whenever possible. Fortunately for the visitor, tourism is generally free from such travails, and our visits, with few exceptions, are hassle-free; to be a visitor in Chile is to have the best of both worlds.

We have experienced several other political earthquakes during the last 25 years. In 1989 a plebiscite ousted the military government which had ruled for 17 years. (Who ever heard of a dictatorship asking for voter approval? Yet it happened, obviously calling into question the nature of the dictatorship.)

The plebiscite was followed by an election, which was won by a coalition of Socialists and Christian Democrats who had defeated the military junta by ballot. Many in this coalition had been exiled during the military government, or had been members of the socialist/communist party of former president Allende. This amalgamation of politically experienced and capable people have now ruled effectively for the past ten years, unwilling or unable to dismantle the economic changes erected by the dictatorship.

This year's political *terremoto* is of a different sort. The coalition of the left (the *Concertación*) failed to win a majority in the presidential election, and will face a coalition of the right (*Alianza Pro Chile*) in a runoff Jan 16, 2000.

The significance of this runoff is that there has never been an effective "right," either in Chile or in the rest of South America, which could seriously challenge the "left" in a clean election. Governments have almost, therefore, always been different shades of "left," and corrupted by uninterrupted decades of power. The usual relief from this kind of democratic dictatorship has been the intermittent and undemocratic or illegal coup from the right. Examples include not only the military governments of the 70's in Brazil, Argentina and Chile but the ongoing problems in Peru, Ecuador and Columbia.

In Chile itself, the highest percentage of votes ever achieved by that sector we call conservative, (but they call liberal) was the 43 percent accorded to Pinochet when the military junta was voted out in 1988-89. In December 1999, only 10 years later, that mark was broken when the left and right coalitions virtually tied at 47 percent, with 3 percent going to the Communist party candidate, and another 3 percent divided among two "green" candidates and blank or null ballots.

For the first time, there may be a viable, newborn two-party system here. In this regard it doesn't matter who wins the January run-off.¹ For us in the USA, this may not be impressive, but here, it is a political *terremoto*.

Why? There has been a long, almost democratic tradition in Chile. It was interrupted by the military junta, at the insistence of the great majority of the people in 1973. Though anti democratic, the accomplishments of the military government were very significant and obvious to Chileans. The economy has been bad for two years in this small country which had done so well for so long.

Where elections are open and honest, economic hardship leads to the fall of the government in power, whether it really responsible or not. Speaking objectively, the world economic crisis was probably not caused by the current Chilean government! The current government has been relatively prudent, and effective, in historically comparative terms, and has built broad support among the electorate.

Nonetheless, candidate Lagos had acted arrogantly at first, confident of history, the polls which continued to echo the predictions of the coalition until the very day of election. No president was elected at first because the constitution requires an absolute majority, or in its absence, a runoff between the top two candidates. In preparation for the runoff, candidate Lagos wisely has cooled his rhetoric, and moved deftly toward the center. There is a frantic scramble to defer or delay a scheduled rise in gasoline taxes², until after the election, and a renewed interest in improving health care, which may allow the current rulers to remain in power. Doesn't it sound familiar?

Chilean elections are very transparent. The system is simple, but it works.

People are encouraged to register to vote. Approximately 8 million are registered this year, of whom more than 7 million voted in December. While registration is optional, once registered, voting is not. A registered voter who does not vote may be fined or jailed. The only acceptable excuses are a police verification that the voter is more than 200 km from his voting site, or has a medical verification of illness.

Elections are always holidays, when all stores are closed, and no alcohol can be purchased legally. Voting is done from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. at some 30,000 tables (mesas) scattered throughout the country. Each table serves approximately 250 voters. Each table can be assigned observers from the various political parties. Five "vocales" are assigned by lot to each table, from the list of registered voters assigned to that table. These vocales run the voting and counting of results. There is no pay for vocales, although that has recently been proposed. Each voter is assigned to only one table.

Each voter is identified by *photo ID, as well as fingerprint and signature*. It is exceedingly unlikely that the dead can vote once, let alone twice. By 4 p.m., or earlier if all assigned registered voters have voted, the votes are tallied one by one, aloud, by the president of the table, as witnessed by the other vocales and by any citizen who cares to observe.

Generally, a crowd of people surround the voting table, leading to a sometimes raucous count, where each vote is simultaneously cheered and booed as it is announced, and difficult decisions by the vote of vocales are often argued by onlookers. Nevertheless, by 8 or 9 p.m. almost all results are tabulated, collected and announced, and the election is over.

I am always in admiration of this process, which is so simple, yet so efficient despite the fact that it would not work in California because of our complex ballots. The only objections I have as an observer are that the process still sometimes requires long lines, and some people do not register simply because they don't want to run the risk of being chosen as a "vocal," in which case they would have to put in 8 long hours at a table, as a civic duty, without other recompense. (This reminds me of a revealing feature of our own jury system, where ordinary citizens on the jury are required to sacrifice as a civic duty, while everyone else in the process steals all s/he can.) It is too early to conclude that a two party system will survive here, but at least one can celebrate its birth during the current political *terremoto*.

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1. The socialist coalition candidate, Ricardo Lagos, defeated his opposition, Joaquin Lavin, by less than 2 percent of the votes. The win set off wild abandon and a 24-hour celebration by "Laguistas," as if each had won the lottery.
2. Nine months later it was, in the words of Yogi Berra, "déjà vu all over again." Truckers mounted a long protest march, like that of the French and British, to protest high gasoline taxes.

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