

Political Thinking Meeting Report No 31

Chiltern U3A 'Political Thinking'

Meeting No 31 Monday 18th February 2019

Topic; Documentary “ Revolution in Ruins; the Hugo Chavez story.” BBC2 January

Introduction

This documentary is an account of the events following the election in 1998 of a left wing president in Venezuela, an oil rich country in Latin America, and his attempts to introduce more socialist policies. Venezuela in 2019 is suffering rampant inflation after his demise and death and consequently the wisdom and efficacy of such policies is being questioned

Summary

Some 10 members attending had watched the documentary and all found it interesting, others unable attend the discussion were pleased to have viewed it

No one felt it possible to conclude that the documentary gave clear support to the view that socialist policies inevitably fail.

Interesting parallels were drawn between the leadership styles of Chavez and others with a similar personal style from Hitler to Trump.

Dominance of the media of the time seems to have been a key factor in the political success of these leaders. .

Discussion

Some considered the content to be incomplete and patchy; very little content concerning other political figures.

The extent of American involvement was felt to have been understated. Denials of US support to the opposition were felt to be hollow; the effects seem to have been counter-productive particularly in respect of the attempted coup and the later elections

Parallels were drawn with other oil rich countries, some of which seem to have success in distributing oil wealth widely such as Norway, Kuwait, Oman, and others of which have concentrated wealth in hands of a controlling elite notorious for conspicuous expenditure.

Most, whatever their political hue, seem to have achieved better long term results in terms of living standards for the population than was achieved in Venezuela.

The term “free money” was put forward to describe the bonanza that oil wealth brings to a state, and it was noted that other forms of natural resource are unequally distributed in different countries with similar effects. The issue of whether natural resources should belong to the world as a whole, rather the individual countries where they happen to be located, was raised. But policies for redistribution between countries seem off the agenda.

The importance of personality was emphasised in the documentary, and the comparison between Chavez and his successor, who is a poor imitation with none of the charisma, was evident.

Some other comments:

- Democratic processes do not necessarily have beneficial results. Chavez was democratically elected, despite US orchestrated attempts to prevent, and his motivation and intention to introduce genuinely socialist policies were supported and do not seem to be in doubt. Poor management is perhaps part of the explanation of the eventual failure.
- The attempts to by-pass parliamentary institutions and appeal directly to the people have resonance; the Brexit referendum for example.
- Direct appeal to the people by way of new media by a charismatic leader appears to have been very effective; social media today offers a way of targeting voters directly, but with tailored messages, so the potential of such a medium as a very powerful political weapon should not be under-estimated.