

Why Canada Should Support Chávez

by Maria Paez Victor, Ph.D.

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The legitimate and democratic government of Venezuela has been under attack by a wealthy and violent opposition that tried to overthrow it first with a military coup and then with a two month lockout. The opposition controlled the main TV stations and newspapers and used the power of the media to relentlessly distort events, to deliberately misinform, and to advocate violence. The Government of Canada should have, in no uncertain terms, upheld the democratic government and institutions of Venezuela, and should not have treated the crisis as if it were a matter of "negotiating" with two equal entities. Canada could have a very significant, and much needed, role in supporting the democratic institutions and processes in this Hemisphere.

A clear majority elected the Government of Venezuela in two legitimate elections (1998, 2000) and a referendum witnessed by Jimmy Carter. This democratic government is being attacked by a wealthy and violent opposition that led a military coup against it in April 2002 and a deliberately devastating oil lockout in December of the same year. At the centre of all this is President Hugo Chávez, who has been disdainfully referred to in the press as "a populist", "strong man" and other questionable epithets. Here are a few reasons why the Canadian Government and people should look carefully at Hugo Chávez and support his government:

- Venezuela and Canada both share a strong yet difficult relationship with the USA. Venezuela, like Canada, has been an unfailing ally to the US,

its main trading partner, to whom it sells most of its petroleum. Canadians understand how difficult it is to govern oneself and relate to the world as a sovereign nation without undue US pressure.

- Canadians and Venezuelans value their social safety net. Chávez has invested, not in luxury projects like previous governments that left 80% of the population in dire poverty, but in health, education, and housing, services dear to Canadians too. According to the UN Human Development Index and the World Bank, in under four years the Chávez government has: increased GDP and income per capita and decreased inflation from 27% to 7%: significantly decreased infant mortality, invested fourfold in health to bolster crumbling hospitals and assure free health care; added 3000 new schools allowing 1 million more children to attend in a country where the drop out rate was 70%; has built more good quality, affordable houses than had been built in the previous 20 years.
- Canadians cherish democratic values; Chávez has enacted the most democratic constitution in Venezuelan history. An assembly of different sectors drafted a constitution that guarantees for the first time the human rights of women and children; of Native Peoples to their culture, language and lands; and of communities to participate in local planning decisions. The presidential term was extended from four to six years, but a mid-term assessment through referendum can call for earlier elections. Never before has such a referendum been available. Ordinary people are reading and discussing an easy-to-read Constitution that for

the first time addresses their concerns.

- Canadians uphold the rule of law. There are no political prisoners in Venezuela, no refugees, no displacement of populations and no "disappeared" people. Before Chávez, people were charged first and a judge both investigated and sentenced afterwards. It took at least 4 years to be sentenced; in 1998, 75% of the country's inmates had not been sentenced. Chávez reformed this cumbersome and notoriously corrupt justice system, introducing elements of the Anglo-Saxon system, as six other Latin American countries have successfully done. Today, only 43% of inmates await sentencing and public prosecutors now investigate first and charge afterwards, as in Canada. Chávez has championed the rule of law in Venezuela.
- Canadians hold crown corporations accountable to the government and the people of Canada. In Ontario, the Conservative Government overruled excessive salaries that Hydro One management had awarded itself. It also backed out of plans to sell this main transmission utility and fixed the price of electricity once it realized stable pricing could not be guaranteed. In Venezuela, the government-owned oil company, PDVSA awarded itself salaries and benefits outrageously higher than any other industrial sector. Top managers refused to be accountable. Having planned with the previous government to sell the company to foreign oil interests, they were in line for huge personal gains from privatization. One of Chávez' campaign promises was to stop the privatization plans. Oil managers were key players in the April

military coup d'etat, and having failed, they led a lockout in December, which crippled the economy. They sabotaged installations and computer systems, sunk ships and planted booby traps. In Canada, such actions would have led to arrests and jail terms. These people are living freely in Venezuela and still urging the overthrow of the government.

- Canadians value and safeguard the environment. Canada and Venezuela are both beautiful countries with forests, mountains, beaches, and an incredible diversity of wildlife. Chávez's policies to protect biodiversity and ecosystems have won the support of the Green Parties of Europe. By giving Native People's the right to be consulted and to approve any development on their lands the endangered Amazon basin and forests have been protected. Again, the empathy that Canada should have for Venezuela is obvious.
- Canadians value diversity and uphold laws to combat racism. President Chávez is being personally attacked by the elitist opposition for the colour of his skin and his humble beginnings. He is a highly educated man, a military engineer, with a masters degree in political science, but he has always proudly acknowledged his background. Canada should condemn this racism as it condemns racism everywhere.

Canada and Venezuela have much in common, not least a shared commitment to democracy. It is time Canada supported a president who is striving to bring the rule of law and prosperity to the disadvantaged in his country, that happen to be the majority.



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