Commentary: Salvador Allende: his role in Chilean politics

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From medicine to politics

Salvador Allende Gossens was born in 1908 and died in the coup against his government on 11 September 1973. He was four times candidate for the Presidency—unsuccessfully in 1952, 1958, 1964, and finally successfully in 1970. He qualified as a medical doctor in 1932 but from his student days he was also active in politics, helping to found Chile’s Socialist Party in the same year as his graduation. He was elected to Congress as a Deputy in 1937, but his rise to political prominence came with his appointment as Minister of Health in the administration of the Radical President Pedro Aguirre Cerda, who formed a Popular Front government in 1938.

Chile was one of only three countries to form a Popular Front government in those turbulent times—the others were France and Spain. This gives some indication of the importance of left-wing radical politics in a country about as far remote from Europe as it was possible to be. Chile had had a powerful left-wing movement since the days of communist and anarchist agitation earlier in the century. In 1912 a Socialist Workers Party was formed in the mining port of Iquique, and it soon laid firm roots in the country’s northern mining areas and provided a radical leadership for a fast-growing labour movement. Chilean politics was profoundly affected by the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and by 1920 the party had re-named itself the Chilean Communist Party and joined the Third International. However, submission to Soviet leadership led the Communist Party into divisive support for Stalin’s purges and committed it to a narrow class-oriented strategy that eschewed alliances with middle sectors and left it politically isolated.

The inflexibility of the Communist line meant that when the Great Depression hit Chile, it fell to a different group on the Left to take the political initiative. In 1932 the government was overthrown by a left-wing military officer, Colonel Marmaduke Grove, who for 100 days established a ‘Socialist Republic’ in Chile, implementing a series of progressive measures that captured the popular imagination amid the economic crisis. Although short lived those involved in the experiment went on to form the leadership of the Socialist Party, founded a year later by a group that included the young Salvador Allende. More ideologically eclectic and less internally disciplined than the Communists, the party offered a home to an odd coalition of Trotskyists, anarchists, and social democrats, who found a unity of purpose in their opposition to Stalinism. Grove’s own populist style enabled the party to reap electoral benefits as the impact of the depression hit home, giving the Socialists a mass appeal that spread across both the working and lower middle classes. Thus by the mid 1930s, almost uniquely in Latin America, Chile had developed a strong partisan Left divided along similar lines to the communist and socialist parties of Western Europe.

If the political formation of Chile resembled in some ways that of Europe, the social system was that of an under-developed country. Infant mortality was high, health conditions were poor and health services inadequate, malnutrition was common, and employment conditions were far from safe or healthy. In this context a radical doctor like Allende would find plenty of reason to enter politics to try to shape policy in a new way to benefit the poor. It was a year into his appointment as Minister of Health that Allende published his book \textit{La Realidad Medico-Social Chilena}, a text that reveals not only Allende’s humanitarian concern for Chile’s poor, but also his political judgement that only radical structural change would rid the country of the social causes of ill health. The book argues that the poor lack sufficient incomes to clothe and feed their families, that workers lack protection against harsh climate and employment conditions, that working families lack decent housing and sanitation, and that these conditions lead directly to intolerably high levels of infant mortality and ill health.

Allende concludes the book by setting out a number of immediate measures that might alleviate some of these conditions, such as better-coordinated health services and compulsory employer-funded work accident insurance. However, he also stresses that in order to truly tackle the nation’s social problems there is a need for radical structural measures such as agrarian reform and the nationalization of foreign-owned firms so that profits from the sale of the nation’s natural resources could be spent on social welfare. As a minister in a coalition government there were obviously constraints on Allende’s ability to advance this broader social and economic agenda. He did, however, manage to introduce a number of innovative measures such as the so-called ‘milk bars’ in Santiago which provided low-cost milk and dairy products to the poor. He sponsored a public exhibition in Santiago with the aim to demonstrate and denounce the poor housing conditions in the country.

While the Popular Front was active in promoting the state-led industrialization of the country, in expanding public education provision, and in democratizing many aspects of political and civil life, the compromises of office eventually took their toll on the Left. The Socialists contested the 1941 elections independently and, following divisive internal debate, eventually abandoned the government. Under pressure from

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the US with the onset of the Cold War, Radical President Gonzalez Videla banned the Communist Party in 1948. The move was backed by a minority sector of the Socialist Party, leading the party to split with the majority faction (including Salvador Allende) forming the Popular Socialist Party, which opposed the anti-communist legislation and further collaboration with the Radicals in government.

From the Popular Front to the Presidency

Allende held many prominent political posts in the period after the collapse of the Popular Front until his election as President in 1970. He became a figure of national importance for the Left, largely because of his popularity with Chilean voters. He stood for the Senate three times, each time in different parts of the country, each time pulling off surprise victories that cemented his position as a credible Presidential candidate with a national profile. He showed considerable political courage by twice standing in parts of the country (Valparaiso in 1961 and Aysen and Magallanes in 1969) where his chances were thought to be slim. The impressive victories he achieved demonstrated his ability to reach out to the electorate in a way no other figure on the Left could. On this basis he was selected three times as a Presidential candidate and in 1958 and 1964 came second as the figurehead of a rejuvenated Socialist/Communist alliance.

In some ways, however, Allende was a lonely figure in politics. He was not popular with many sectors of his own party though they reluctantly recognized that he was the only credible Presidential candidate that they had. The Socialist Party during this period divided, often bitterly, over a variety of ideological and personal issues. At times it favoured a moderate line, at others a very radical one. Its relations with the Communist Party were uneasy though it eventually recognized that only a coalition of the two forces of the Left had any chance of gaining power. Allende had little time for the prolonged, inconclusive, and often irrelevant debates that occupied the time of many Socialist militants. His personal relations with members of other parties were better than those of many of his colleagues, and they viewed with suspicion his obvious liking of the good life, his prominence in the freemason movement, and the ease with which he circulated in elite circles.

But Allende was no socialist dilettante. He was a passionate defender of the Cuban Revolution, became a good friend of Fidel Castro, and lent his name to a number of international revolutionary movements. He travelled to Vietnam in 1969, where he met Ho Chi Minh, and as President of the Senate he personally escorted Che Guevara's defeated guerrillas from Bolivia through Chile, so they could seek asylum in Cuba. There is no doubt of the sincerity of his belief in radical socialism, and of the need to address the real issues of poverty and deprivation that were still common in Chile in the 1960s. His chance to put his ideas into practice came in 1970 when he won the Presidential election with a little over one-third of the vote in a three-way contest with a Christian Democratic and a right-wing candidate.

Allende as President

Allende's government—the Popular Unity (UP)—took power with an ambitious programme. It was going to nationalize the commanding heights of the economy, implement a massive programme of income distribution, end the dominance of the large farms, transform the political system through the creation of a unicameral legislature, develop popular participation in the running of the economy and the political and legal system, and pursue an independent foreign policy. Yet all this would be achieved within the existing constitutional system: the Chilean road to socialism would be legal and peaceful.

How could this be done? The UP never clearly answered the question, not least because it was a coalition of six different parties all with their distinct ideas about tactics and strategy. Moreover the President never really controlled his own Socialist Party, which generally advocated more radical measures than Allende himself thought possible. But most serious of all, the UP lacked a majority in congress. In the senate it had 18 seats but the opposition had 32: in the lower house it had 57 to the 93 of the opposition. The gains that the UP made in the 1973 elections only narrowly reduced the opposition's majority.

A successful economic policy might have overcome these problems, but after a year of growth, the economy began to deteriorate. The price of copper, Chile's major export, fell, and to compound the difficulties on the external front, traditional credit sources dried up, and as a result of increased living standards, the import of food rose sharply causing balance of payments problems. As workers seized factories, employers in general refused to invest. A black market grew up in response to government attempts to control the distribution of basic necessities. Daily life was a round of queuing for goods in short supply. Inflation went out of control.

Economic collapse and political intransigence interacted and reinforced each other. The famous Chilean constitutional system proved too weak to contain political conflict in Allende's Chile. Neither government nor opposition were prepared to make concessions in order to safeguard that system. The opposition indulged in a whole series of measures designed to obstruct the executive: measures which if not illegal certainly violated the conventions of the congressional system. The government too employed measures of dubious legality. Such actions re-enforced mutual suspicions and made it difficult to see any way out of the impasse.

With both government and opposition lined up against each other in bitter confrontation, with the economy out of control, with the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces resigning after his failure to mediate, with the Church unable to bring the sides together, with increasing violence, there was little prospect of a peaceful solution. In addition the Allende government had faced US hostility from the beginning and undoubtedly the US helped the plotters. But the reasons for the coup were primarily internal. The end came with a violent military coup on 11 September 1973, with the bombing of the presidential palace, with the death of Allende, and with the murder of thousands of Chileans.

Allende as President made many mistakes. It was an error to invite Castro to Chile in 1972 and to allow him to stay for 3 weeks. Allende needed the support of the middle sectors and he failed to make overtures to them. But the odds were heavily against him. Such a radical programme as he envisaged requires a strong and united government, a weak opposition, broad national support, and a favourable international climate—none of these factors existed.
Allende’s Legacy

Very little remains of Allende’s Chile. Almost all of his policies were reversed following the military coup and the capitalist oriented counter-revolution that followed. General Pinochet’s regime returned most of the industries nationalized by Allende to their prior owners, slashed public spending, and repressed the trade union movement. However, a small number of Allende’s most popular policies remain to this day, such as the half litre of milk provided daily to Chilean school children and the state’s ownership of most of the copper industry. One lasting achievement was the elimination of the latifundios in the countryside, although ironically Allende’s socialist reforms in this sector, in removing the large land owners, paved the way for the capitalist mode of agricultural production established by the military after 1973.

In a broader political sense, the memory of the Allende period and the dictatorship that followed continue to divide Chileans to this day. For some, the 3 years of Allende’s government represent the only time in Chilean history when the working class and the poor gained a genuine stake in running the country and the economy. For others, it was a period of political and economic instability that drove the country to the brink of chaos and even civil war. Both the way Chileans vote and the nature of the political alliances that govern the nation continue to be structured by this Left/Right divide, even if the politics of consensus predominates.

Even for the Chilean Left, Allende’s legacy is a matter of some contention. The Socialists stress the social democrat in Allende who was committed to achieving greater social justice within the bounds of the existing democratic system. The main lesson they draw from the UP’s defeat is that any attempt to bring about social change needs to be based on a broad national consensus and an alliance between the Left and the Centre of the political spectrum. By contrast, the Communists blame the US and the Right for the coup and stress the continued relevance of the UP’s Marxist programme. They accuse the Socialists of abandoning Allende’s cause in their pursuit of consensus politics and gradual reform.

Salvador Allende was a product of his time. A distinguished parliamentarian from a bourgeois background, he remained steadfastly committed to the constitutional system of republican Chile. He was also a Marxist inspired by the Cuban Revolution and the political movements shifting the global agenda to the Left during the 1960s. His tragedy was that in his attempt to combine both his democratic principles and his belief in radical social change, he demonstrated the limits of the consensus underlying Chile’s much vaunted democratic system.

Commentary: Salvador Allende and the birth of Latin American social medicine

Howard Waitzkin

Succeeding generations have forgotten and then rediscovered the conditions of society that generate illness and mortality. Now, when disease-producing features of the workplace and environment threaten the survival of humanity and other life forms, it is not surprising that such problems receive attention. But there is a long history of research and analysis that has been neglected, despite its relevance to our current condition.

Salvador Allende, late president of Chile and a pathologist, helped establish the field of Latin American social medicine with his path-breaking epidemiological work, accomplished during the 1930s. Although social medicine has become a widely respected field of research, teaching, and clinical practice in Latin America, the accomplishments of this field remain little known in the English-speaking world. This gap in knowledge derives partly from the fact that important publications remain untranslated from Spanish or Portuguese into English. In addition, the lack of impact reflects a frequently erroneous assumption that the intellectual and scientific productivity of the ‘Third World’ manifests a less-rigorous and relevant approach to the important questions of our age. (Further information about Latin American social medicine appears in recent publications1–6 and a website: http://hsc.unm.edu/lasm.7)

Adherents of Rudolf Virchow’s vision about the social determinants of mortality and morbidity immigrated to Latin America near the turn of the 20th century. Virchow’s followers helped establish departments of pathology in medical schools and initiated courses in social medicine. For instance, a prominent German pathologist, Max Westenhofer, who directed for many years the Department of Pathology at the Medical School of the University of Chile, influenced a generation of students, including Allende, a medical student activist and future president of Chile. Allende’s experiences as a physician and pathologist shaped much of his later career in politics. Acknowledging debts to Virchow and others who studied the social roots of illness in Europe, Allende set forth an explanatory model of medical problems in the context of underdevelopment.

While the roots of Chilean social medicine date back to the mid-19th century, the most sustained activities began after the nationwide strikes of 1918. During that year, saltpetre workers in...