

Report on the ODEPLAN/IDS Roundtable: La Via Chilena

by Dudley Seers*

At the invitation of the Chilean Government, IDS, in cooperation with the Chilean National Planning office (ODEPLAN) organised a round table conference on "The Chilean Road to Socialism", held in Santiago from 23 March - 1 April 1972. This conference was almost unique in the range of its participants. This was obviously true in terms of political zones (one does not often see Soviet and American citizens, or East and West Germans, together at non-official conferences in the social sciences); it was also true in the sense that it brought in a number of younger people not usually seen on the conference circuit. A third important feature was the fact that many Chileans outside the Government attended, some of them distinctly critical of its policies.

The Round Table came at a most interesting moment, which will probably appear to the future historian as the end of the first phase of the Unidad Popular Government. The mining and banking sectors have been almost fully nationalised; a big step further has been taken in agrarian reform; a large part of manufacturing industry has been taken out of private hands. The combination of wage rises and price control has sharply shifted the distribution of income and helped to raise industrial output, employment and consumption, while restraining inflation. Recently however, Congressional opposition to nationalisation has hardened; the exchange reserves have largely disappeared (partly due to a fall in the price of copper), while heavy servicing charges are due on past debts; inventories have declined and investment in industrial equipment has been low; some consumer goods have become scarce. Some issues are now due for decision, and the way in which these decisions are made will shape the characteristics of the second phase.

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The first two and a half days of the Conference, with sessions, chaired alternately by Gonzalo Martner, the Minister of Planning, and Emanuel de Kadt, were devoted to the problems inherited by the Government, the constitutional situation, the organisational changes made and the pattern of recent economic developments. Highlights were speeches by President Allende, the Ministers of Economics and Agriculture (Vuskovic and Chonchol respectively) the President of the National Defence Council (Eduardo Novoa) and the former Presidential candidate of the Christian Democrats (Radimiro Tomic).

The following two days were devoted to visits. The conference broke into 4 groups, visiting mines, factories, farms, and schools and hospitals. Participants were able to see conditions at first hand (and compare for example, private farms, land reform settlements and the new 'land reform centres').

The remaining 3 days, chaired by myself, were devoted to raising fundamental questions about what was happening and where it would lead to. Studies on the international situation facing Chile and on the experience of other socialist societies had been prepared at the request of IDS by experts from Europe and the U.S. These were drawn on during this discussion.

After a slightly discursive start on the role of the public sector, during which the East Europeans were brought into the discussion, there was a series of good sessions - divided into more clearly defined themes on 'participation', planning and the foreign exchange problem. Participants from overseas had grasped enough of the situation to be able to make effective, often trenchant, contributions themselves, and most of them seemed to feel that with each hour they were getting new insights. There was some murmuring that officials were being over-defensive, but in my view most government participants were on the whole quite forthcoming, considering the somewhat tense political atmosphere.

In retrospect, that was probably the peak of the conference. Although there were many fascinating contributions in the final sessions, on income distribution and inflation, on 'political consciousness' and on the impediments to the "Via Chilena", there was some tendency to repetition. A certain weariness was also noticeable. It is tiring to follow a discussion partly in a foreign language (whether or not you rely on interpreters), day after day for more than a week, and although the 2 days of field trips had been planned as a break, we probably should have had one day completely free.

Still there were no dropouts. The foreign participants and a large number of Chileans sat all through a final 5-hour session on a hot Good Friday afternoon. I did not sum up, and I think it would have been a mistake to attempt it. We were not there either to praise or to bury the "Via Chilena", but to understand it. Naturally coming from such a wide range of countries and with so many different political preconceptions, participants interpreted what they heard and saw in many different ways - and will need a little time to digest it all. The Chileans, I hope, will feel not only that some foreigners now do have a better understanding of the situation, but also that some of the comments have helped them themselves to see a number of their problems in a new light.

The conference could not have taken place without the generous financial help of the Swedish International Development Authority, the Ford Foundation, and the Royal Institute of International Affairs. And the conference machinery functioned perfectly. A great deal of the logistic success was due to Adriana Peric and Ann Zammit, the conference officers from ODEPLAN and IDS respectively, both of whom had done months of preparatory work (and to David Lehmann who handled part of the work at the Sussex end).*

* I have discussed some of the substantive issues raised at the Conference in "Chile, is the road to Socialism blocked?", *The World Today*, May 1972, pp. 202 - 209.