

## 'Presidents' Club' On the Move

by Valerie Rush and Dennis Small

Argentine President Néstor Kirchner telephoned Chile's President-elect Michelle Bachelet after learning that Bachelet had swept the polls Jan. 15 with over 53% of the final-round vote, soundly defeating billionaire Harvard-trained fascist Sebastián Piñera. Accepting his hearty congratulations, Bachelet assured Kirchner that she considers relations with neighboring Argentina "strategic" to her country, and that she will travel there shortly.

Kirchner, for his part, confirmed he will attend Bachelet's March 11 inauguration, with his wife, Senator Cristina Fernández, who is a close personal friend of Bachelet.

Although Bachelet has stated that she will maintain Chile's allegiance to free trade economics, there is more than a little nervousness on Wall Street over what she will actually do once she becomes President, and over the new political geometry that has begun to take shape in South America under Kirchner's leadership. That new geometry, which has emerged as the Cheney-Bush regime has grown progressively weaker in Washington, was forcefully displayed at last November's "Summit of the Americas" in Mar del Plata, Argentina, where Washington's free trade agenda was given a sound drubbing. Argentina's Kirchner led that summit with backing from Brazil.

Bachelet, a pediatrician and single mother of three, who was tortured in one of Chilean dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet's jails, lived abroad as a political exile, and has headed both the health and defense ministries under the current coalition government. She presents a "center-left" profile with a tough independent streak that clearly appealed to a broad spectrum of the Chilean electorate. While loosely endorsing Washington's Free Trade Area of the Americas initiative, Bachelet—a self-described socialist—has also made it clear that each nation must move "at its own pace" and "on its own terms." The *Washington Post* wishfully editorialized on Jan. 18 that the "urbane" Bachelet "doesn't question the foundations of her country's growing prosperity—which are the very free trade, foreign investment and free markets that elsewhere in the region are demonized as neo-liberalism." But that editorially betrayed more nervousness than conviction.

The simple fact of the matter is that the vote for Bachelet was an overwhelming vote *against Pinochet*, and those in Washington who put him in power back in 1971—such as

George Shultz, Henry Kissinger and Felix Rohatyn—who are the same forces today behind the Cheney-Bush regime, *and the Washington Post*.

Bachelet is not the only new President on the block in South America. In neighboring Bolivia, Evo Morales was elected in December elections, and will be sworn in as head of state on Jan. 22. Both the Morales and Bachelet inaugurations will serve as occasions for the region's other Presidents to gather and caucus—an institution which Lyndon LaRouche once characterized as a kind of informal "Presidents' Club." Indeed, regional diplomacy will flourish around the two inaugurations.

For example, Bolivian President-elect Morales took the occasion of the Bachelet victory to invite her as well as current Chilean President Ricardo Lagos to his inauguration. Lagos's attendance, in particular, is viewed universally as a diplomatic breakthrough, given the adversarial relations that Chile and Bolivia have maintained since the 19th century War of the Pacific.

On Jan. 17, Argentina's Kirchner met in Buenos Aires with Morales, just prior to the Argentine President's first state visit to Brazil, where he held in-depth meetings with President Lula da Silva, proposed the inclusion of both Chile and Bolivia as full members of Mercosur (they are currently only associate members of that regional trade bloc), and told the Brazilian Congress that a "paradigm shift" was occurring in their region, and in the world.

Kirchner noted that both Argentina and Brazil had just paid off the totality of their outstanding debts to the International Monetary Fund, and that this had allowed them to shed the straitjacket of IMF conditionalities. "More importantly," he added, "we are recovering our total autonomy to decide what to do with our resources." No longer, said Kirchner, is South America the "Cinderella of the world. . . We don't want to be the backyard anymore. We want to take an active part in building the new times that await us."

On Jan. 19, Kirchner and Lula were joined in Brasilia by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, where the focus was on major new infrastructure projects designed to foster continent-wide integration. A 5,000-mile natural gas pipeline, extending from Venezuela through Brazil into Argentina, is currently on the agenda. Another meeting of the three Presidents will be held in Argentina, just prior to Bachelet's March 11 inauguration.

Other countries in the region are starting to take note of which way the winds are blowing—in Washington, and regionally. Ecuador's Government Minister Alfredo Castillo, for example, recently declared that dollarization has had a negative impact on that nation's economy, and a visiting mission from the IMF was told Jan. 18 by Finance Minister Diego Borja that "We don't need the approval of the Monetary Fund, nor the monitoring of the Monetary Fund to define our policies. . . . Ecuador has defined a responsible and sovereign economic agenda; the country's decides its own economic priorities."