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INTERVIEW WITH:
SENATOR ANTONIO GUERRA
BOGOTA, COLOMBIA
MAY 3, 2001

JOHN: How's it decided inside the party or the faction *(bancada*), what the *bancada's* position will be regarding a bill *(proyecto)* or a voting?

ANTONIO GUERRA: I belong to the *Partido Liberal* (Liberal Party); unfortunately, in the Congress of Colombia it doesn't operate as a *bancada* or as a party. On some occasions, the positions and judgments regarding a bill are discussed within the party; in general, each of the liberal Senators and Representatives have their own opinion and vote according to their convenience and conviction. And in exceptional cases, we reach an agreement to take an unified party position, but that's an exception and it's not the general rule.

JOHN: Then, generally, all of the copartisans don't vote together?

ANTONIO GUERRA: No, not always. Among other things, there's a political reform that's pending which seeks that those - in the Senate as well as those in the House *(Camera)* -, who belong to a party vote, from now on, in the same way or in the same sense.

JOHN: And is it possible that it will pass, that it'll be approved?

ANTONIO GUERRA: Fifty, fifty.

JOHN: On the occasions when the party meets and decides on a position, what would happen if a Representative or a Senator voted contrary to his copartisans? Are there sanctions?

ANTONIO GUERRA: He simply leaves a record of the way that he voted and the party doesn't take any type of sanction since it doesn't operate, at the present time, as a *bancada* but rather everyone acts individually.

JOHN: What are the most important factors [that influence on] why the Senators don't vote along with their copartisans? What are the most important factors that divide the parties?

ANTONIO GUERRA: Each one of us is an electoral microenterprise, we only use the party so it can facilitate our endorsement as a candidate, to register us and to be an aspirant. There are no sanctions in the party regulations for he who acts differently nor is there a party discipline, these are the reasons *(causales)* .

JOHN: And is it necessary, electorally, to be outstanding *(distinguirse)* from your copartisans for the electoral competition?

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ANTONIO GUERRA: Yes, at the present time due to Colombia's electoral system because here you don't vote for the party, but for the people [as individuals].

JOHN: Do stable multiparty coalitions exist in the Senate? In other words, [coalitions] that include legislators of several parties or movements.

ANTONIO GUERRA: Coincidentially, they [the coalitions] take place in the votings. Coincidentially, but perhaps what comes closer to the question, is the group of Congress members or Senators who belong to parties other than the traditional liberal and conservative [parties]; these are called independents, which are several political movements and generally they group together more.

JOHN: Sure, how interesting.

ANTONIO GUERRA: They group together more in decision making.

JOHN: Ironic, nice. What are the most important factors in the formation of legislative coalitions? Common ideology, the electoral advantage?

ANTONIO GUERRA: Sometimes the convenience, the personal advantage *(conveniencia)* , the electoral advantage and, as a third point I'd say, programmatic or ideological coincidences.

JOHN: When is nominal voting required or when is it used?

ANTONIO GUERRA: In the Senate any Congress member or any Senator can request it whenever [he wants].

JOHN: Is it done frequently or is it rare?

ANTONIO GUERRA: No, it's not very frequent. It's done nominally when a Senator wants the country to know how each [Senator] voted, or it's also done when there aren't very strong majorities in favor or against.

JOHN: In the very disputed *(reñidas)* or narrow margined votings?

ANTONIO GUERRA: Yes.

JOHN: How do you know how the Senators voted in non nominal votings?

ANTONIO GUERRA: It's unknown.

JOHN: It's not known. Then, how would it be in the narrow margined votings?

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ANTONIO GUERRA: Sometimes there are votings that are carried out with the ballot box, where a small piece of paper is secretly deposited. Yes, there are times when you can know how each person voted because in the nominal votings there's a roll call *(se llama a lista)* and each person is asked "yes" or "no". If it's "yes", it's in favor, if it's "no", it's against. Then there's a recording and you can hear how Senator Guerra or Senator so-and-so voted. By the recordings or the television, when the session's transmitted.

JOHN: And what are the factors that prompt the voting to be carried out nominally? The most important [issues] or what?

ANTONIO GUERRA: The most important or the urgent *(apretado)* [issues], as I said, perhaps that's what impacts the most.

JOHN: How would you characterize the relationship between the Representatives or the Congress members and the citizens? As strong, weak or how?

ANTONIO GUERRA: It's strong with those citizens who help to elect the Congress member, but it's not strong with the rest of the public opinion. We want to make it stronger through the television transmission of the sessions, so that the citizens know how each one of the Congress members conduct themselves. Who speak, who present their opinions, who attend and who don't. This is a way [to improve the relationship]. The other way is to hold the sessions of commissions in the regions; that way, one can be closer to the region.

JOHN: And this is being done?

ANTONIO GUERRA: Yes, yes it's done.

JOHN: And do the citizens attend?

ANTONIO GUERRA: Yes, when they are public meetings *(audiencias públicas)* .

JOHN: And in general, what do the citizens know about the legislative activities?

ANTONIO GUERRA: Relatively little. They're aware when there are scandals, then they find out the bad things. But when good work is done it's not publicized, that's not disclosed by the media. The bulk of the citizenship only hears about the negative things that happen in all the Congresses worldwide, including this one.

JOHN: It's same in the United States. Do the legislators, in their majority, want to be re-elected to the Congress ? Or do they want other political positions, or what? Is there a parliamentary career where the legislators want to be re-elected to the Congress and they run for re-election?

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ANTONIO GUERRA: Yes, definitively yes. Every four years the number of legislators who are re-elected is greater than those who newly enter [the Congress].

JOHN: And what are the most important things that should done to be re-elected?

ANTONIO GUERRA: To have maintained credibility with the electorate, to have performed well in their legislative work; however, in Colombia, there are other other factors that help in the re-election: bureaucracy and the directing *(direccionamiento)* of budget funds *(partidas de presupuesto*) through the national government. The national government puts its nose into the Legislative's matters and helps certain Congress members with budget funds *(partidas presupuestales)* or budgets in their regions, so that they're secured.

JOHN: So, do the Congress members have control over the budget?

ANTONIO GUERRA: No, but since there's an Executive-Legislative relationship, the Executive knows who its friends are and it directs or guides part of the budget where that legislator wants.

JOHN: Then, does the Executive also know which of the Congress members vote for the bills?

ANTONIO GUERRA: Yes, they already know, totally.

JOHN: In your opinion, what effect would the adoption of the public vote have on the legislative process? Or would it not have an effect?

ANTONIO GUERRA: Yes, I would applaud the public vote. It seems to me that the public opinion is entitled to know how the persons it elected vote. For me, I would hope that all the votes, that all the votings, were public.

JOHN: And what do you think would happen if there was the public vote?

ANTONIO GUERRA: It would improve the Congress' image and the [public] opinion could channel its support in favor of certain people, according to their behavior in the votings.

JOHN: And in reaction, would the Congress members' votings change on specific projects or not?
ANTONIO GUERRA: Not necessarily, but yes it could influence [on them].

JOHN: And to finish, a bill to reform the electoral system has been proposed in the Congress. In your opinion, what would be the best electoral system for Colombia?

ANTONIO GUERRA: That is the million [dollar] question.

JOHN: I left the most difficult thing to finish up.

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ANTONIO GUERRA: No, because there's no perfect system, nor is there one that's the same. You know what occurred in the U. S. presidential election.

JOHN: Yes, of course.

ANTONIO GUERRA: The most perfect democracy in the world.

JOHN: Yes.

ANTONIO GUERRA: So, there's no perfect system. But we have commitment to make some changes in our country's political customs. We have the commitment to change some electoral mechanisms in order to modernize it [the system]; to make the mechanisms more practical, operative and transparent. And the *Partido Liberal* will support the political reform, it will support it because it will improve the parties' presence and organize the politics in Colombia.

JOHN: And is the single, open slate *(lista única, abierta)* the key to the proposed reform?

ANTONIO GUERRA: There are several things. There are the parties' internal consultations to make up the single slate.

JOHN: Like primary elections?

ANTONIO GUERRA: As primary elections to make up the single slate, by parties, because in Colombia the district *(consc ripción)* of the Senate is national, it's not by state or by department. It's a logic that should exist, in my opinion it should exist. So, for our culture the single slate is important, the obligatory vote; for a while the obligatory vote would be interesting. The State's funding of the Congressional elections is interesting so that money from other origins can be prevented from entering into the politics. I'd say that that's where the importance of the electoral reform lies.

JOHN: Thank you.