

## UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 10TH MAY 2016

By Kevin Bruton



This Update starts with a well-known quotation: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair”. This quotation, the opening lines of Charles Dickens’ “A Tale of Two Cities”, describing the times prior to the French Revolution, could be applied to any period of political or social turbulence. In Spain, at the moment, though, - ungovernable, increasing voter disaffection towards politicians, widespread corruption and new elections with no resolution of Spain’s problems in sight – the words of Dickens seem particularly apposite.

There has been no new government in Spain since the General Election of 20th December last year, with the major parties unwilling and/or unable to coalesce to form a government. As a result, the last meeting of the Spanish Parliament took place on 28th April. One newspaper said it was “like the orchestra on the Titanic”. At midnight on 2nd May, a new General Election was declared for 26th June. Mutual recriminations fly around between the main parties as to who is to blame for the present vacuum of power. The feelings of most Spaniards (as is known from opinion polls) are perhaps best summed up in a letter published by “El País” newspaper on 28th April from a Seville resident, José Rojas Blanco. The present writer feels certain that he will not object to a translation of his letter: “We citizens have done OUR job, which is to vote. But the elected politicians have not done THEIRS, which is to form agreements and form a government. I propose two measures to prevent this situation arising again. First, that all elected politicians receive only the minimum inter-professional wage of 655€ per month until they form a government. Also, no expenses, no travel or accommodation costs, no official cars, no pension plans, no latest generation i-Phones or i-Pads provided free nor any of the innumerable present privileges . . . And, if after three months, they still cannot constitute an Executive, we may perhaps conclude that they are not fit for the task of governing and, if further elections are necessary, that none of these politicians should be allowed to stand for elections again.”

A further complaint of many voters is the cost of staging a General Election. Last December cost 136 million euros in overall administration, plus 31 million euros spent by the parties themselves. The parties have met in the past week to discuss how this overall sum might be reduced for the 26th June General Election. And, wonder of wonders, they have failed to agree so that a further 130 million plus euros will come out of the public purse.

Commentators such as the present writer feel bound to say that only the Socialist Party,PSOE, and Ciudadanos have made any attempt to break the deadlock with their 200-measure pact for government. PP have done nothing and Podemos have done nothing. It is interesting to record that this viewpoint is shared by the famous writer and historian, Ian Gibson, author of lives of Lorca, Machado, Dalí and Luis Buñuel. In an interview published in “El País” on 26th April, Gibson said that the opposition to PP has had a golden opportunity to throw PP out of government and form “a sensible, reasonable, reforming, civilised and open-to-dialogue alternative in favour of change”. He further said “It all reminds me of the chaos of the Left in

the Second Republic". Gibson also castigated "the messianic nature of Pablo Iglesias" claiming that if he were really thinking of Spain he should have done a deal with PSOE and Ciudadanos.

Currently, Spain is in a pre-campaign mode with the official General Election campaign only occupying the two weeks before 26th June. Will things change in terms of the General Election result? Obviously, the major parties will go up or down somewhat but an overall majority for any single party looks highly improbable if not to say impossible. Opinion polls show in any case that two out of three voters prefer the multi-party system and do not want to return to the two-party politics of PP and PSOE. Polls also show that eight out of ten voters would have voted in exactly the same way at the General Election last December even if they had known the uncertain outcome.

A quick summary of the state of the parties is appropriate. All will contest 26th June with the same leaders and, mostly, the same names on the same party lists. Rajoy for PP says he will not stand down whatever happens on 26th June and Ciudadanos will not enter into any agreement with PP while Rajoy is leader. Pedro Sánchez of PSOE will not and cannot form a coalition with PP and may be forced to resign as leader if PSOE do worse in June than last December. Rivera, leader of Ciudadanos, is hopeful of increasing seats but worried that his agreement with PSOE might induce voters to switch or switch back to PP. Meanwhile, Pablo Iglesias of Podemos says that once Podemos win the General Election, he might offer the deputy PM role to Pedro Sánchez! Disappointingly, and/or amazingly, Podemos say that now they are a party they will not offer any official support to the five-year commemoration of the 15-M street movement of 2011 which was one of the main factors behind the formation of Podemos. The Communist Party of Izquierda Unida, with only two seats in the outgoing parliament, have just negotiated a joint party list with Podemos in the hope of securing more seats. A more likely outcome in the long run is political suicide for the Communist Party in Spain.

A more uplifting item of news is that 4th May saw the 40th Anniversary of the founding of one of the world's great newspapers, "El País". On 4th May this year, "El País" produced a wrap-around copy of its first front and back pages – Tuesday, 4th May 1976, Year 1, Number 1, Price 10 pesetas. The first edition came out in another period of chaos and uncertainty in Spain – less than six months after the death of Franco and a full thirteen months before the first elections on the basis of direct universal suffrage since the Republic were due to take place. But, no-one knew this on 4th May 1976. Franco's repressive and hierarchical institutions of government were still in place as were Franco's police and armed forces. It was unclear whether a military coup might happen at any moment. Political parties and trades unions were banned and the only political activity allowed was within Franco's fascist National Movement. It is interesting therefore, as Britons continue a highly insular and solipsistic debate about whether the EU is good for Britain or not, that the first front-page headline of "El País" 40 years ago (and nine years before Spain joined the then Common Market) reads as follows: "Official document of the European Parliament on Spain – Recognition of Political Parties, an essential pre-condition for integration in Europe". It is interesting then and obvious to those who have followed Spanish politics for decades that, in the eyes of most Spaniards, then and now, Spain's political Transition to Democracy and Spain's current democratic system are inextricably linked to membership of the European Union.

This Update finishes on a lighter note with another letter. The present writer confesses to being an avid fan of a well-known HBO TV series which has just started its sixth series. The letter reads as follows: "I feel that newspapers are giving too much coverage to the activities of a group of unlikely characters competing for the throne of a fantasy kingdom, so could we please have less politics and more Game of Thrones?".