

UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 12TH April 2016

By Kevin Bruton



This will be a shorter Update than usual because nothing, or nothing much, has happened in Spanish politics in the past month. To summarise, there is still an impasse with four major parties unable or unwilling to coalesce to form a government. If this continues, and in all probability it will, until 2nd May, then a new General Election will be declared for 26th June, more than seven months since the last on 20th December 2015. The present writer is personally tired of the situation, a view shared by the vast majority of Spaniards.

Over a month ago the Socialist Party, PSOE, and the new centre-right party, Ciudadanos, signed a 200-measure pact, unarguably reformist and progressive but which, predictably, did not gain the support of the Spanish Parliament so as to invest PSOE leader, Pedro Sánchez, as Prime Minister.

The only significant inter-party development came on 7th April when negotiating teams from PSOE, Ciudadanos and Podemos met for trilateral talks. PSOE and Ciudadanos have kept their 200-measure pact intact, inviting other parties to subscribe or negotiate. Podemos came to the talks with a 20-measure package. The negotiations finished after only two and a half hours and are dead in the water. PSOE said they could approve 70% (or 14) of Podemos' 20 measures but Podemos came with one measure – “the right to decide in Cataluña and other regions”, ie a referendum on independence, which they knew neither PSOE nor Ciudadanos could ever accept. Ciudadanos started as an anti-independence party in Cataluña and PSOE, neither ideologically or politically – it would mean suicide for PSOE – can ever accept a referendum in Cataluña. Effectively it was a gesture from Podemos equivalent to NO Podemos.

An editorial in “El País” called the meeting a “fiasco”. Since then there have been mutual recriminations about who was to blame for the fiasco. Now it is possible that PSOE, Ciudadanos and PP will meet. Although there is no chance of PSOE joining a Grand Coalition with PP à la Merkel's CDU/SPD Government in Germany, the justification for a possible meeting with PP is that on 8th March, PSOE and Ciudadanos sent out a letter inviting any party other than Catalan Nationalists to add their names to their 200-measure pact. As yet there is no date for such a meeting and the fact that Ciudadanos will not accept Rajoy as leader of PP means a new General Election is almost certain. As an aside, not only will Rajoy not give up as leader of PP, PP as a party has no internal mechanism for electing a leader. Rajoy himself was nominated as successor by previous PP leader and Prime Minister Aznar in 2003.

Podemos are finally consulting their supporters on their rejection of the PSOE/Ciudadanos pact. Between 14th and 16th April, 393,000 supporters will be balloted with two questions. The first is “Do you want a government based on the Rivera/Sánchez (Ciudadanos/PSOE) pact?” The second is “Do you agree with Podemos' proposal for a government of change?”. Podemos' leader, Pablo Iglesias, has already said “no”, of course, to the first question and the second question is, in the opinion of the present writer, disingenuous since the numbers do not

add up for a mixed-party coalition of the left – 161 votes at most in a parliament requiring 176 votes for an overall majority.

Podemos have had serious internecine problems in recent weeks. Pablo Iglesias sacked the party's third-in-charge much to the consternation of the party's second-in-charge, Iñigo Errejón. Errejón, usually ever-present on Spanish television, disappeared from the media spotlight and when he was sitting in parliament he was given the Stalinist stare by other Podemos members. (It was said of Stalin that if you fell from favour you became a non-person and he looked straight through you.) Podemos' only significant success has been perversely the "Nuit Debout" movement in France –the new protests and encampments which follow the Occupy movement and the 15-M movement in Spain. Protesters in France against austerity and the Labour Reform Act have been holding assemblies à la Podemos and Podemos members living in Paris have been supporting "Nuit Debout".

Opinion polls show huge frustration with Spain's political parties. A Metroscopia poll of 3rd April reveals that 64% want parties to form a government rather than new elections. 85% think PP is not doing enough – they are, of course, doing nothing – and 75% think Podemos is not doing enough. 76% think a new General Election is inevitable and the poll shows there will be greater abstention at this election.

Paradoxically, greater abstention may help PP. A Sigma Dos poll on 4th April puts PP on 128 seats (5 up on the General Election of 20th December), PSOE on 90 seats (the same), Podemos on 49 seats (down 20), and Ciudadanos on 52 (up 12). The poll shows clearly that PP's solid vote will turn out come what may. A recent Spanish television programme was boasting that Spain does not have an extreme right-wing party unlike other European countries. In the opinion of the present writer this is because extreme right-wingers are either in PP or vote for PP which is the real successor to 'franquismo'. Many who support PP would have supported, or their families indeed did support, Franco in the Civil War and later.

With reference to the Civil War, on 28th February 2016, the last survivor of the Lincoln Brigade died in California at the age of 100. His name was Delmer Berg and, in the Spanish Civil War, he was one of 2,800 Americans who volunteered to fight with the International Brigades against Franco and Fascism. Most of them fought in the Lincoln Brigade and 200 gave their lives for the Spanish Republic, including their commander Bob Merriman, executed in Gandesa in 1938 and whose body was never found.

All this information is in a new book called "Spain in Our Hearts" by Adam Hochschild published recently and about to appear in a Spanish edition. While the Spanish Civil War still looms large over modern Spain, it is worth noting that Hochschild has revealed that while Franklin D Roosevelt observed the farcical Non-Intervention Treaty, along with Britain and France at the time, the head of the Texaco Oil Company actively violated the treaty and sent petrol to the Franco armies. Not only that, the archives of the Spanish oil company CAMPSA, reveal that Texaco also informed the "franquistas" about the movement of oil tankers that were due to supply the Republic so that Franco could attack them.

The last item requires that this Update finish on a lighter note. Spain now has a rival to the second "Wizards World of Harry Potter" theme park which opened in early April in the US.

Just over a week ago it was announced that the Lost Island of Atlantis has been discovered in Spain's Doñana National Park. As is well known, Atlantis was a legendary island said to have sunk in 9600BC following underwater convulsions. Plato wrote about it and it has been celebrated in myth down the years. Thanks to the Project "Doñana Atlantis", a Spanish/British initiative based in Huelva, tourists will soon be able to visit it according to the head of the Project Luís Bejerano. A word of warning is apposite – he made the announcement on 1st April!