

## UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 8TH JULY 2014

By Kevin Bruton



There were two abdications on Wednesday, 18th June – the abdication at midnight of King Juan Carlos and the abdication just over one hour before of Spain's World Cup Crown when they lost 2-0 to Chile. It was not difficult the following day, 19th June, the day of the 'coronation' of Felipe VI, to discern which abdication meant more to Spaniards.

It is valid to make this assertion in spite of many thousands of people lining the streets of Madrid on 19th June and in spite of wall-to-wall sycophantic coverage by Spanish TV. In truth the crowds watching the drive past and military parade of Felipe and Letizia were nowhere near the level of people who had watched their wedding ten years previously and neither were the crowds as multitudinous as a few weeks earlier when Atlético Madrid Football Club paraded their Spanish League trophy nor when Real Madrid paraded their Champions' League trophy through the streets of Madrid.

Felipe was proclaimed King, swearing loyalty to the Spanish Constitution and, indeed, swearing ON the Constitution. In his speech to the combined Houses of Parliament he promised, in the headline of "El País" of 20th June, "A crown upright, honest and transparent". He pledged a monarchy which would "seek closeness with the people and seek to gain their respect, confidence and esteem". He referred to the current situation in Spain saying he wanted "to transmit my solidarity with those citizens hit so hard by the crisis that their dignity has been wounded" and that "we have the moral duty to work to reverse this situation and offer protection to the persons and families most vulnerable".

He made mention of the different nations of Spain, saying that "we are unified and diverse" and "cabemos todos" ("we all fit in"), an obvious reference to separatist sentiments in Cataluña. He finished by saying "thank you" in Spain's four languages, Spanish, Catalan, Basque and Galician. A number of commentators believe he should have said more in these languages.

The speech overall probably said most of the right things and was well received by the entire press with the possible exception of "El País". One article in this newspaper on 20th June termed the King's statement "a neutral speech" and another article called it "a lost opportunity". There were two literary references in Felipe's speech. He briefly quoted Cervantes at the end but he also mentioned by name four poets – Machado, Espriu, Aresti and Castelao, ie a Spaniard, a Catalan, a Basque and a Galician poet. The reference was most curious since all four poets belong to the "Other Spain", ie the Spain that lost the Civil War, and indeed the Galician Castelao took an active part in the government of the Republic before and after 1939.

On 19th June, the authorities banned any Republican demonstrations either along the route of the parade or in the Puerta del Sol which was not on the itinerary. TV pictures clearly showed police removing Republican banners and flags, sometimes violently. Kettling of Republican protesters also took place, perhaps the first recorded use of kettling in Spain. One young woman was seen attempting to break through a police cordon saying "I want to go home" and was told she could not leave without removing a Republican lapel badge she was wearing.

Within days of the new King's proclamation, PP moved to legislate to grant ex-King Juan Carlos judicial immunity post abdication. PSOE abstained but now Juan Carlos joins the extraordinary total of ten thousand

notable people – ex judges, politicians, senior civil servants etc – who are free from prosecution. The furor over this, rightly, has not diminished.

Felipe and Letizia's official visits in the next few months include Portugal, Morocco, France and Belgium while in September Felipe will travel to New York to deliver a speech at the United Nations. Their first visit, at the beginning of July, to the Vatican seems a curious choice when millions of Spanish women are facing a draconian anti-abortion law which PP want to introduce, a law which will take Spain back to the dark days of Franco.

Currently, the Spanish Socialist party is electing a new leader. In a one-person-one-vote election, all PSOE members, 198,000 in total, will be able to cast their vote on Sunday 13th July. There are three candidates: Eduardo Madina, a Basque, 38 years of age and a long-time potential leadership candidate; Pedro Sánchez, 42, from Madrid and someone unknown to most Spaniards a few weeks ago; and a left-wing candidate, José Antonio Pérez Tapías, 58. On 7th July at the PSOE headquarters in Madrid, the three candidates debated for almost two hours before 99 party members, 33 chosen by each candidate. 40 journalists were present but no TV channel covered the debate in its entirety.

All three, crucially, committed themselves to Open Primaries in November to choose a prime ministerial candidate to fight the next General Election, probably in November 2015. This person does NOT have to be the same person elected on 13th July to be "Secretario General" or leader of PSOE in the country. Madina has said that if he does not win on Sunday, he will not stand in November. However, the calamitous path PSOE has taken under Rubalcaba has led to a possible bicephalous leadership of PSOE in 2015. The last time this happened was in 1999/2000 when José Borell was PSOE leader and Joaquín Almunia the prime ministerial candidate who fought Aznar at the general election. Given that the electorate generally does not appreciate divided parties, a predictable defeat ensued for PSOE.

Amazingly, the almost unknown Pedro Sánchez is favourite. He is popular in Andalucía, where a quarter of all PSOE members live, and, it has recently emerged, started campaigning for a leadership run almost unnoticed a year ago. Since then, he has travelled the country talking to PSOE meetings. The left-wing candidate, Pérez Tapías, has no chance and Madina, although well-known to the media and although to the left of Sánchez, is trailing. 13th July will reveal all.

Now that the Game of Thrones is over, the Spanish justice system is continuing to investigate the Noós case, the corruption scandal affecting Iñaki Urdangarín and his wife Cristina, sister of the new King. Cristina, by the way, was kept well out of sight on the day of Felipe's inauguration. On 3rd July, the accountant for the Noós Institute confessed outright that he had falsified accounts and fiddled contracts to secure public money at the behest of Urdangarín and his partner Diego Torres. The present writer smells a deal here since the accountant did not mention Cristina in his testimony. Her future will be decided by a Tribunal of three judges who are currently surveying files which reportedly add up to 130,000 pages. Two of the judges are known to be progressive and the other moderate but the decision to prosecute Cristina, or not, will probably emerge at the end of September. The other corruption cases nationally are concurrent and too copious to deal with fully in this Update.

A previous Update gave some examples of the criminalisation of protest which the PP government is pursuing. On 7th July, the leaders of Spain's biggest trades unions, the Socialist UGT and the Communist Workers' Commissions met the Justice Minister in Madrid to complain about the government's attempt, through the courts, to criminalise the right to strike.

Currently, 260 trades union members are facing jail sentences amounting to 120 years in total, merely for exercising their right to strike. For instance, Katiana Vicens, a trades union leader in the Balearic Islands, is facing a 4.5 year jail term for boarding a local bus during the general strike of 29th March 2012 and shouting "blackleg" at the bus-driver. Two swimming instructors in Pontevedra, Galicia – Tamara Vidal and Ana Outerelo – entered a swimming pool in February 2010 as part of a group of 50 protesters, shouting "blacklegs" at several employees. They were the only two arrested and accused of throwing red paint in the pool, something they vehemently deny. They have just been sentenced to three years in prison. Meanwhile, numerous other cases are in the courts.

On the economy, the government has been talking up a small improvement in the official unemployment rate but the OECD revealed a devastating portrait of wealth and poverty on 19th June when it produced a report about 30 countries. This showed that between 2007 and 2011 (and of course the situation has deteriorated further since) inequality in Spain had grown to be the most drastic in the OECD. The income of the poorest 10% of the population in Spain fell 7.5 times more than the income of the richest 10%, placing Spain in 30th and worst position in terms of the widening inequality gap. The UK, incidentally, was 21st in the OECD list.

The June Update outlined the outstanding success of the left-wing street protest movement Podemos in the Euro Elections, picking up 5 seats from nothing. As Podemos continue to attract huge numbers to their meetings all across Spain they have been denounced, damned and demonised by the right-wing. But, as an example of how far PP can go, one only has to look at the Region of Extremadura, run by PP. In a Bachillerato exam (ie equivalent to GCSE or Standard Grade) in June of this year, an English language exam paper posed this question to examinees:

"A friend of yours says he is going to vote for Podemos in the next elections. In no more than 80 words, tell him why he should NOT do so".