

UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 8th Oct 2013

by Kevin Bruton



After a hot summer, the political situation in Spain this autumn is still on a knife edge. The tensions in the Government and in PP, the party of government, are high and for a number of reasons. The spectre of Bárcenasgate haunts the corrupt politicians who lead the country. While nothing of any note has happened in Bárcenasgate in the last month, the Prime Minister Rajoy's refusal to appear in Parliament to explain why he lied when he said on 1st August that Bárcenas was no longer in the Party when he became PM as well as his refusal to clarify other multiple inconsistencies – all this has prompted the Socialist party to decline to co-operate with PP in the Government's hypocritical attempts to introduce a Law on Transparency.

This proposal, first mooted in January 2012, is now effectively side-lined. In the meantime, secessionist calls from Cataluña following the Catalan national day on 11th September, have intensified even when, as has been reported previously in this Update, there is NO chance of Spain's democratic Constitution or undemocratic PP government allowing an independence referendum.

Rajoy is currently preparing the annual Budget which, in November, will mean more pain and austerity for Spaniards. This Budget will include further cuts to Spain's 17 Regions to the tune of 4.7 billion euros, in an economic climate where already increased taxes, both direct and indirect, have meant reduced incomes. For those not in work who are pensioners, nine million in Spain, the government's current proposals are equally horrendous. Despite a long-standing agreement between PP and PSOE dating back to the mid-1990s, called the Pact of Toledo, an agreement never to allow the purchasing power of pensions to fall, PP are now breaking this pact and cutting the pensions pot by 38 billion euros in the next eight years. This means an increase in pensions of only 0.25% in the next year, in a context where inflation has been 2.0% or higher (and sometimes much higher) every year since 1996. The Socialist opposition say this will mean that Spanish pensioners will lose 20% of their purchasing power in the next decade. PSOE also counter by saying that in their last two terms in office (March 2004 to November 2011) they increased public sector minimum pensions by 50%.

Further pressure on beleaguered pensioners has come from the government's vicious announcement that those in hospital with chronic or serious illness must pay 10% of the cost of each medication, up to 4.20€ per item. This may sound minor but for those obliged to take, for example, five different types of medication this would mean 21€ extra per course of pills – for those often on minimal incomes. Moreover, independent studies suggest that the administrative costs of introducing this part payment, or "copago", far outweigh any savings.

PP are running scared, both from published opinion polls which show them losing 12 percentage points over the November 2011 General Election and from private party polls which suggest there will be huge losses in the Euro Elections 2014 and, more worryingly for PP, the possible loss of their flagship regions of Madrid and Valencia in the Regional Elections of May 2015. PP's fear is turning into a "slash and burn" policy as they run further away from campaign promises made in 2011 – "Education is safe with us", "We will never cut Health", "Pensions are secure" etc, etc. The only defence mantra of PP leaders is to talk up what most see

as a non-existent recovery from the recession with the repeated words – “Salimos de la crisis” or “We are leaving the crisis behind”. This inevitably conflicts with the diurnal reality of most Spaniards.

It seems incredible that the media is already talking about candidates for the 2014 Film Academy awards or Oscars in March of next year. The present writer has a Spanish candidate from the last month – not “The King’s Speech” but “The King’s Health”! King Juan Carlos has just had his fifth surgical operation in the last 18 months. He may need half a year to recover and resume his usual duties. He will miss the “Día de la Hispanidad” or “Columbus Day” military parade in Madrid on 12th October, the biggest public ceremonial day of the year in Spain. He will also miss, for the first time, the Hispano-American Summit in Panama on 18/19th October. Controversially, the King chose a private hospital for his latest hip operation. Many in Spain are calling for abdication and, indeed, Spain’s democratic Constitution allows for it, with article 59 stating: “If the King is unable to exercise his responsibilities and Parliament approves, the Heir to the Throne will become Regent”. This would mean Prince Felipe taking over. The King, predictably, refuses to budge and his obstinacy places the institution of monarchy into greater disrepute in a climate where confidence in the institution has gradually eroded in recent years.

The Spanish Constitution of 1978 also recognises the right to peaceful protest by citizens. But on Saturday 28th September, 1500 republican protesters gathered outside the Royal Palace in Madrid, with some media reports saying they were outnumbered by police. What we do know, however, is that two coaches from Valladolid bringing republicans to the demonstration were boarded by police and prevented from reaching the Plaza de Oriente. 60 young people from Legazpi, on the outskirts of Madrid, were also detained by police and prevented from joining the demonstration. The present writer wonders how the authorities and the police forces they control will respond to the growing protest movement in the north of the Valencia Region against the off-shore Castor Project.

In the past month, more than 400 earth tremors have been felt along the north Valencia coast, with readings of up to 4.2 on the Richter scale. Central government has now officially acknowledged that the reason for this is the natural gas reserve of the off-shore Castor Project where the fracturing of undersea rocks is the likely cause. The government is paying the company which operates the reserve, Escal, 700 million euros up to 2038. Local people are terrified. Already there have been reports of vibrations of furniture, pictures falling off walls etc. One resident said – “You hear what sounds like thunder or a storm. If you are on the sofa, the sofa moves, you move, the TV moves!” The chief executive of Escal claims, incredibly, that this is a natural phenomenon which occurs every 50,000 years and which happens to be occurring now!

The massive protests on the streets show that the population does not agree. Every day more and more people demonstrate as, for example, on 3rd October, when 2000 people protested in one of the towns most affected, Vinaros, a demonstration attended also by the PP mayors of Vinaros and the nearby towns of Benicarló and Peñíscola. Already tourist trade is suffering in a coastal area which depends heavily on internal Spanish tourism. The Geological Mining Institute of Spain says that there is a potential risk of earth tremors of up to 7.1 on the Richter scale and that structural damage can occur from 4.7 upwards.

On the same day as 2000 people protested in Vinaros, Spain’s Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy, was visiting the Fukushima nuclear reactor in Japan as part of an official governmental visit. He said, to the obvious delight of the Japanese PM, that “Fears of any problems from Fukushima” were “unfounded”. On the same day, however, the company which operates Fukushima, Tokyo Electric Power, detected a new leak of radioactive water from one of the nuclear storage tanks and noted a possible leak into the sea.

Continuing to jump between Japan and Valencia and continuing with the disconnect between what political leaders say and what people know or believe to be true, it is worth highlighting a report by the regional newspaper "Levante" on 19th September about the President of the Valencia Region, PP's own Alberto Fabra. Fabra has constantly preached that he is Mr Clean and has constantly repeated the right-wing mantra that "We must tighten our belts", "We're all in it together" etc, etc. "Levante" revealed that Fabra personally has 16 advisors, 3 drivers, 2 secretaries, and 1 personal cook. Furthermore, he has 21 people working for him in his Press Office which, according to "Levante" is more than any newspaper in Spain.

Returning to Japan to finish, the present writer's personal highlight, politically, in the last month was seeing Rajoy on TV being welcomed by a high-ranking Japanese delegation. It is apparently the custom in Japan to welcome a distinguished visitor with a flower, normally by pinning a rose to the lapel. Rajoy's acolytes were duly pinned with a small white rose and then Rajoy, to his obvious consternation and confusion, was pinned with an enormous socialist red rose!