

**UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 9TH DECEMBER 2014**  
**By Kevin Bruton**



This past weekend has seen two 'fiestas' or national holidays in Spain – on the 8th, the Immaculate Conception and, on the 6th, Constitution Day. This last date is homage to the 6th December 1978 when the vast majority of Spaniards, in a Referendum, approved a written democratic Constitution, something, of course, which the UK does not have. On 7th December 1978, the Guardian Editorial called the Spanish Constitution "One of the most advanced and progressive documents in the Western world".

Now, thirty-six years on, Spain's Constitution is in question. The on-going head-to-head between the central government of PP under Rajoy and the pro-independence regional government of Cataluña under Artur Mas has raised all kinds of constitutional issues. The failure under central government to protect the rights of citizens enshrined in the Constitution – the right to work, to

education, to health, to justice and to social provision – all these diminished rights call into question the adequacy of the 1978 Constitutional document. There are those on the left who prefer the 1931 Constitution of the Second Republic.

In the newspaper "La Razón" (a rabidly right-wing national daily), an opinion poll on 7th December showed that 72.3% of Spaniards support reform of the Constitution. Almost all political parties in Spain also support reform and it is fair to say that the campaign has been led by Pedro Sánchez, the new leader of PSOE, the Socialist Party. Sánchez has been pressing the government in Parliament and outside to set up a parliamentary sub-committee to examine how reform may be carried out. Rajoy, using PP's overall majority, refuses point blank to do so and warned Cataluña, for example, in his visit there on 29th November (his first, incidentally, since 31st May) that "The pro-independence cause does not speak in the name of all Catalans" and accused them of ignoring two out of three Catalans. Two out of three Catalans, of course, did not vote in the 9th November "consultation" which only finished on 25th November.

Sánchez has been pushing Rajoy on this for months, arguing that a new road-map leading to a properly federal Spain is the best way to satisfy the aspirations of most Catalans. Rajoy's intransigence is a way of securing PP's core vote supporters who are vehemently against what they see as the break-up of Spain's historic 'unity'. The "La Razón" poll of 7th December, paradoxically, also bears this out, since 60% of Spaniards reject any special deal for Cataluña.

In the last nine days, astonishingly, Spain's two largest-selling daily newspapers (sports papers apart) ie "El País" and "El Mundo", normally at loggerheads, have both supported Pedro Sánchez in his quest to reform the Constitution. The centre-left "El País", in its 6th December editorial, headed "Sin miedo al cambio" ("Without fear of change") argues persuasively that reform is essential to, in a sense, re-democratise Spain and argues also for the second chamber, the "Senado" (which is effectively a talking-shop, revising chamber like the House of Lords) to become a Federal Chamber, with more powers, representing Spain's 17 Regions (akin therefore, to the Bundesrat in Germany) and to be based, perhaps, in Barcelona.

More surprisingly, on 30th November, in the right-wing daily "El Mundo", the new editor, Casimiro García-Abadillo, argued that reform of the Constitution is a "sine qua non" and that the system and the Constitution are "agotados" ("exhausted" or "run their course"). There is fear also in "El Mundo"'s editorial heading "La segunda Transición o la 3 República" ie "A second transition to democracy " (which "EL Mundo" wants) or "a Third Republic" (which, of course, it does not).

No update these months, or years, can avoid the issue of corruption. The end of November CIS poll showed that, again, at the top of Spaniards' major worries is unemployment (77% said so). Corruption once more is in second place, with 64%. This figure, however, is twenty percentage points higher than in October. On 26th November, the examining magistrate, Pablo Ruz, announced two things. Firstly, he concluded that PP had indeed used an illegal slush-fund, a hidden "B account", to finance their operations and that 43 people initially would face charges, including two ex-treasurers of PP, Luis Bárcenas and his predecessor Alvaro Lapuerta. He also stated that the Secretary of State for Health, Ana Mato, had benefitted from this corruption via her husband, Jesús Sepúlveda – luxury cars, flights, holidays, birthdays parties, gifts etc. A previous Update reported on this in February 2013 and many think she should have resigned then.

Ana Mato DID in fact resign on the evening of 26th November, primarily because, on the following day, 27th November, the PM Rajoy was proposing in Parliament a series of measures to counter corruption. The session was a farce since most opposition parties consider Rajoy to be the Nixon of Spain's Watergate. He proposed 70 anti-corruption measures almost all of which, according to "El País", were first put forward a year or 18 months ago and none of which have been progressed since.

PSOE refused to support any cross-party co-operation with the government. Rajoy's assertion to Sánchez that PSOE members in Andalucía had also been guilty of corruption was countered by Sánchez with the acknowledgement that this may have been true of individuals but that PP's corruption was structural. Rajoy, in the Congreso, was directly accused several times. "You are the problem. You cannot be the

solution" was one comment and an MP from ICV (a small pro-independence green party in Cataluña) said to Rajoy in relation to corruption "Usted es el Capo de la Familia" or "You are the Capo of the Family". The other big corruption case covered exhaustively by the media in the past month is Rodrigo Rato, latterly Head of Bankia, a failed bank which was rescued by the government in 2012. Rato has history. A PP Cabinet Minister before 2004, he then became Head of the IMF prior to the discredited Dominique Strauss-Khan and the incumbent Christine Lagarde. When Bankia went public in July 2011 under Rato, 347,338 small investors bought shares at a price much higher than their real value. Except for those who sold quickly, the majority lost most or all of their investments. Now it turns out that Rato falsified the accounts before flotation of Bankia, that the auditors Deloitte were incompetent, that the Bank of Spain was also incompetent in its supervisory roll and that the Stock Market Commission overseeing the flotation also misled the public. That makes four entities at fault so far. If you add in the fact that the European Commission, the IMF and the European Central Bank authorised an injection of 18 billion euros into Bankia based on fraudulent accounts then you have seven malefactors or, as the present writer terms them, (as a Western fan), the Maleficent Seven!

With capitalist organisations like this in charge one might think a socialist response is the only possible one. And, here in Spain, the main response has come from PSOE under Sánchez, and from Podemos which, interestingly, refuses to categorise itself as a left-wing party. In the present writer's opinion, Sánchez has made a good start and there are two proofs of this. The first is that he is alienating a number of the regional "barones" or old guard, especially former PMs González and Zapatero, by going too fast too soon. A further proof is the Metroscopia opinion poll published in "El País" on 6th December which, for the first time in half a decade, put PSOE in first place with 27.7%, Podemos in second with 25% and PP third with 20%. Podemos, however, will take heart from an earlier poll, "El Mundo"'s Sigma Dos poll of 24th November, which put Podemos first on 28.3%, PP second on 26.3% and PSOE third on 20.1%.

Obviously, the political climate is volatile in a month when Podemos published a 60-page economic programme, proposing increased public expenditure, a big increase in public sector jobs, a slow-down or restructuring of Spain's debt repayments and a whole raft of basically social-democratic proposals with which few on the left or centre-left would disagree. The programme, in fact, bears comparison with the Manifesto of the Spanish Socialist Party prior to the General Election which first brought them into government in post-Franco Spain on 28th October 1982. At the press-conference which launched the programme, Pablo Iglesias, leader of Podemos, did not dispute the social-democratic nature of the proposals and said his model was based on the nordic countries, Sweden and Norway. One leading economist, however, called the programme "El País de Nunca Jamás" – "Never, Never Land". Another commentator, however, said that Podemos's programme was necessary to counter the land of "Ali Baba and the forty-thousand thieves".

Podemos have shaken up Spanish politics but face their own internal problems, especially in Madrid, but also over next May's local and regional elections in which Podemos say they will only contest 800 "ayuntamientos" or town councils under their own banner. Elsewhere they may or will align with other groupings. While it is known that Podemos are concentrating their efforts on the General Election of November 2015, it remains to be seen what impact their strategy in May will have on the national poll. It is obvious that PP and PSOE do not quite know what to make of Podemos. It is worth, therefore, paraphrasing a letter in "Levante" newspaper which broadly ran along these lines: "Two large rabbits found themselves pursued by dogs. As they were fleeing, one rabbit said to the other 'These greyhounds are going to eat us up', to which the other rabbit replied 'They're not greyhounds – they're whippets'. The rabbits continued to argue, losing more energy in arguing than in running . . . And they WERE caught!"

Two disturbing reports were published this month. The first showed that one third of all Spaniards IN WORK take home less than 645€ a month! The second was an ILO (International Labour Organisation) report published on 5th December. The ILO report was about inequality and only went up to the end of 2010. It looked at the disparity between the richest 10% of the population and the poorest 10% in the so-called 29 wealthiest countries in the world. In terms of the worst inequality, Spain came second behind the USA, with the UK in 15th position. However, in the period 2006 to 2010, the gap widened in Spain more than in any other country. When the PP in Spain or the Tories in the UK slag off the unemployed or the 'feckless poor', the present writer is reminded of that great defender of religious, civil and domestic liberties, John Milton when he wrote in the 1642 book "The Reason of Church Government", that those who have plucked the eyes out of the people then reproach them for their blindness.

Any resident of Spain in recent decades will have observed increasing secularisation. For example, this past weekend is now more often referred to as the Constitution weekend rather than the Immaculate Conception weekend. It is traditionally when Spain's Christmas economy takes off and people begin purchasing and setting up the "Belenes" or cribs (elaborate Nativity scenes often with multiple figurines and accessories). Many towns hold competitions between rival groups who design and make these "belenes". This year, for example, in the city of Valencia, 88 "Belén" groups will compete and one group, the Plaza de Sant Bult, is building a nativity scene that includes Sleeping Beauty's castle, Aladdin and Captain Hook, while the shepherds are the Seven Dwarfs and the Three Kings are Goofy, Mickey and Donald!