

UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 10th Dec 2013

by Kevin Bruton



It is now eleven months since “El Mundo” and “El País” newspapers revealed, by publishing documents belonging to the former treasurer of the governing party PP, Luís Bárcenas, that the party had for many years been funding itself and its leaders and its election campaigns illegally through receiving monies from construction and other companies in return for the awarding of multi-million euro contracts.

PP have consistently denied this but, on 22nd November, the investigating magistrate or “juez”, Pablo Ruz, confirmed that there were “continuous receipts and payments in PP over a period of time” that were illegal. Ruz demonstrated that the architect Gonzalo Urquijo, responsible for the refurbishment of PP HQ in Madrid between 2005 and 2011, was paid in “dinero negro” or illegal slush-fund monies which correspond exactly to the entries listed in the Bárcenas papers. This latest proof is in addition to the 55 previous verifications of entries in the Bárcenas ledger. On 3rd December, it was proven that illegal funds were used by PP to finance local and regional elections in 2003, not just in Valencia and Madrid but also in Cataluña and Andalucía.

The latest denial by PP of the corruption which the vast majority of Spaniards in successive opinion polls recognise as being true, also came on 3rd December when the Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy, gave his first press interview since winning the General Election two years previously. The interview, conducted under the aegis of the Europa group of newspapers, was published in “El País” on 9th December. Rajoy answered questions from journalists writing for “El País”, “Le Monde”, “The Guardian”, “Süddeutsche Zeitung”, “La Stampa” and “Gazeta Wyborcza”. The interview, mostly about Europe, also included direct questions about corruption in PP, with Rajoy following the PP party line and saying that if there was a slush-fund it was Luís Bárcenas and not PP who was managing it.

It is interesting that the “El País” journalist who interviewed Rajoy, Javier Moreno, wrote on 9th December that when it came to discussing “corruption in PP and the Bárcenas case the Prime Minister’s answers were less fluent and displayed a certain vexation”. In any case, Spaniards do not believe Rajoy, as evidenced by a CIS poll conducted between 1st and 13th November, which showed that corruption was in second place, behind unemployment, as their main preoccupation. The Annual International Transparency Report, just published, also revealed that Spain has slipped in the Perception of Corruption Table from 13th to 14th, just below Syria and Poland and just ahead of Brunei and Cape Verde.

Meanwhile, demonstrations continue throughout Spain, almost on a daily basis. 23rd November witnessed huge mobilisation across 55 cities against government cuts, against pension reduction plans and against the banks. The extreme right-wing PP administration in the Madrid Region continues with the privatisation of hospitals and health services. The latest measure is to privatise hospital laundry services, with workers who survive the process receiving, in the best-case scenario, a 40% pay cut. On 13th November, a street cleaners’ strike ended in Madrid after 13 days. Workers and trades unions fought a PP decision to privatise the service, with 1000 of the 1500-workforce scheduled to lose their jobs. An indication of the weakness of trades unions in the present environment is that a deal was struck in the end which keeps the 1000 jobs but which means that the existing workforce will work for 45 days per year without pay and will endure a pay-freeze until 2017. The “Marea Blanca” or “White Tide” of protests by health workers in Madrid continues

weekly, as does the “Marea Verde” or “Green Tide” of protests against education cuts and the new regressive Education Act known as the LOMCE.

What is the classic response of capitalism to worker mobilisation and public demonstrations? The answer, of course, found first in Marx and Engels, is to criminalise protest. And this is precisely what the PP government is now doing with new legislation: the “Law of Citizens’ Safety” or “Ley de Seguridad Ciudadana” was agreed by the cabinet on 29th November and is set to go through Parliament. The government minister promoting the bill, Jorge Fernández Díaz, said that under this law it would be a grave offence (“infracción grave”) punishable by fines of up to 30,000€ to display in a demonstration any banners or slogans which “criticise Spain or one of Spain’s regions or its symbols, its institutions or the flag of Spain”.

A disturbing innovation in this new law is that the local council or region can apply the fines; the word of a police officer is enough for a sanction to be applied! Hitherto, protesters arrested at demonstrations have appeared before local courts and, interestingly, in the past few months, the courts have exonerated most demonstrators brought before them for such “offences”. A second innovation is that the government will create an index or record of protesters, in true Kafka-esque fashion. It is unclear who will control this index or how it will be used or whether the police or the Guardia Civil will have access to it. PSOE described the new law as clearly authoritarian and contrary to freedom of expression, saying also that the 15-M Movement and the Stop Desahucios (Evictions) Movement would not have been possible with this law.

This authoritarian, not to say totalitarian, approach of the government is further evidenced in the past few days by a purge of senior officials in Spain’s “Agencia Tributaria” or Tax Office. Cristóbal Montoro, Spain’s equivalent of Chancellor of the Exchequer, has just dismissed 29 officials in the Tax Office accusing them of being “socialists”! It is no wonder that a PSOE spokesperson, condemning this extraordinary decision, referred to the minister as “Cristóbal McCarthy”. In case anyone believes that the PP sacking of officials is arbitrary, it is worth recalling that in many parts of Spain, and not just in Bárcenasgate, PP politicians are being investigated for tax evasion and fraud. Just recently, of course, Carlos Fabra, the PP “godfather” in Castellón for many years, was sentenced to four years in prison for tax offences.

With regard to the economy, official unemployment dropped by 2475 in November but the destruction of employment continues with 66,892 people fewer on the employment register. The reasons are obvious – emigration, desolation, desperation, apathy and abulia. According to Price Waterhouse Cooper, it will take Spain two decades at least to recover the jobs lost since 2008. But, of course, the bankers prosper. The European Banking Authority published its 2012 Report on 29th November showing that 100 bankers in Spain were paid more than one million euros in 2012. This puts Spain fifth behind the UK, Germany, France and Italy. The highest paid banker in Spain, head of the BBVA, was paid 9.67 million euros! Spain also comes out poorly in another league table arising from the OECD Report on Education for 2012. 65 countries were rated according to Maths, Reading and Science. In the Maths table Spain came 33rd (the UK came 26th); in Reading, Spain came 32nd (the UK came 23rd); and in Science Spain was 29th (the UK came 21st).

In the last month, the Government of the Valencia Region decided to close down RTVV, the regional Valencian language television and radio network. Despite efforts by the workforce to keep the channels open, eventually the plug was pulled. The present writer is not going to shed crocodile tears for Canal 9, the television channel, which was infamous across Spain and Europe for PP manipulation and control of broadcasting. Naturally, however, there is sympathy for “Valencianistas”, proud of their language and culture who do not want to see them removed from the airwaves.

Alberto Fabra, PP head in the region, is currently planning further cuts of 389 million euros at central government's behest. This is the Fabra who said in September this year that there will be "no more cuts". Fabra went personally on 4th December to Xàtiva to reopen the wing of a school. 8 police vans and scores of national police, local police and Guardia Civil cut off the street to prevent 100 protesters approaching within 200 metres of Fabra. There were cries for his resignation ("Fabra dimisió") and for the return of Canal 9 ("Que torne Canal Nou") and these calls were taken up by 50 pupils (aged between 6 and 12) from inside the school. Now education inspectors and the police have returned to the school to see if criminal action can be taken against teachers, pupils or parents!

And now, a double Christmas post-script to finish. Firstly, on 21st December last year, Alberto Fabra and his committee chairs, together with partners or spouses, had Christmas lunch at the Palau de la Generalitat. This cost a total of 1870€, or 103€ each. Just previously Fabra had instructed his officers to limit their lunch expenses to 20€ per head!

Secondly, as all those who live here know, Christmas would not be Christmas in Spain without a haunch of ham (or "jamón"). Also, for many people, Christmas would not be Christmas without purchasing the new Guinness Book of Records. Currently a citizen of Valencia, Noé Bonillo, aged 26, is attempting to beat the Guinness record for slicing ham which presently stands at 24h 54m. One should not doubt that Bonillo will set a record of which Valencia can be proud! He has 9 year's experience of ham slicing and has been training since the summer, with up to 30 hours at a stretch. Bonillo will slice between 20 and 30 hams (80 to 100 kg) and all the ham will go to people in need!