

UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 10th Sep 2013

by Kevin Bruton



For eight months in a row this Update has been recounting the shameful saga of Bárcenasgate, ie. the story of how Luís Bárcenas, a former Treasurer of PP, and his predecessors, over a 20-year period, appropriated astonishing amounts of money from companies and entrepreneurs and used the money to finance PP illegally, through illegal funding of election campaigns, illegal payments in cash to PP leaders and illegal awarding of public contracts to companies.

El Mundo newspaper, on 17th July, published a supplement detailing 20 years of black accounting in PP. On 1st August, the Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy, while denying illegal funding and refusing to answer numerous specific allegations, informed Parliament only that he had made a mistake in appointing Bárcenas as treasurer. “Me equivoqué. Me equivoqué.” (I made a mistake. I made a mistake.) Three days later the Spanish Socialist Party published a video comparing Rajoy’s statement and attitude with that of Nixon in Watergate. Inter-cutting images of Nixon and Rajoy, the video starts with Nixon saying in uncannily similar terms “I am going to tell everyone this. I have made mistakes”.

Since early August, opposition spokespersons have continued to call Rajoy a liar and have demanded he answer specific charges in Parliament and in public. For example, Rajoy said on 1st August that Bárcenas was not in PP when Rajoy became Prime Minister at the end of 2011. Yet El Mundo newspaper has published salary slips showing PP paid Bárcenas right through 2011 and 2012, and, moreover, paid him 18,000€ per month, plus an office in PP HQ, a secretary, a car, and chauffeur! This made Bárcenas the best-paid PP official and most objective observers believe that the money was “hush money” paid to a man who knows too much about the illegal funding of PP.

Additionally, on 13th August, Bárcenas’ successor as Treasurer, Cristóbal Páez, admitted to the examining magistrate, Juan Ruz, that he had received illegal payments which correspond exactly to the papers published by El Mundo. This was a “smoking gun” which proves Bárcenas’ papers to be true despite denials by PP. The “smoking gun” became a “Gatling gun” on 16th August when Ruz announced that he has now verified 55 separate entries in the papers – papers which PP still deny are true. The judge has since acquired the two laptops which PP seized from Bárcenas’ office earlier this year and, predictably, PP have wiped the hard-drive. Most political commentators agree on three things: firstly, that Rajoy and PP leaders are still lying; secondly, they concur with Rubalcaba’s comments in Parliament on 1st August that if this were Britain, France or Germany, there would have been resignations and elections by now; and, thirdly, they agree that the Spanish justice system is painfully slow.

Leaving Bárcenasgate, 11th September is, of course, the anniversary of 9/11 and of Pinochet’s coup against Allende in Chile in 1973. More parochially, for millions of Catalans it is their national day of celebration of identity, known as the Diada. For the past year, the Catalan Nationalist Leader and Regional Government President, Artur Mas, has been whipping up nationalist fever to promote a referendum on independence in the autumn of 2014. As this Update has reported previously, no such referendum can or will take place, since the Spanish Constitution does not allow it and Rajoy’s government will never permit it.

However, on 11th September this year, a pro-independence Human Chain, consisting of hundreds of thousands of people, will unfold, from El Pertús on the French border in the north to Vinarós in the south, on the border with the Region of Valencia. The human chain will be 400 km long and will cross 86 different ‘municipios’ or local council areas. It will officially be started at 17.14pm (it may be remembered that 1714 was the year that

Cataluña lost its 'fueros' or self-governing rights to Spain. The human chain will be countered by a mini protest of those supporting unity with Spain. All that they can manage, however, is to encircle the Sagrada Familia church in Barcelona.

In truth, Mas is in trouble in Cataluña. The human chain is another weapon in on-going negotiations with central government as is a putative referendum. Already, however, Mas is backtracking by saying that the next regional elections in Catalonia, due in 2016, will be an independence plebiscite.

The PP government nationally has failed to take the summer heat out of Bárcenasgate although the Gibraltar smoke-screen has given the right-wing press and the daily television chat shows plenty of diversion. Anti-PP ammunition in the past month has included the spectacle of young PP members from the Valencia region sporting Nazi symbols and Nazi flags and making fascist salutes. The PP leadership response has been disgraceful – barely a mild reprimand and an appalling comment from a PP spokesperson, Rafael Hernando, who said he could see no difference between sporting Nazi flags and carrying Spanish Republican banners at demonstrations.

If Gibraltar was a counter-coup by PP then the elimination of Madrid in the first round of voting for the 2020 Olympics on 6th September was a real body-blow to the government. The reaction from the international and national media shows that Spain has been found wanting – wholesale corruption, an economy in recession, unemployment terrifyingly high and two million children below the poverty line.

The Spanish Socialist Party has had a mixed summer. After a good speech on 1st August in Parliament replying to Rajoy, the PSOE leader Rubalcaba, in the interests of transparency, published his income-tax returns for the last ten years at the end of August. This showed, for instance, that Rajoy earned three times as much as Rubalcaba when Rajoy was opposition leader in 2009 and Rubalcaba was Minister of the Interior (240,262€ for Rajoy and 88,096€ for Rubalcaba). In another inflammatory comment which smacks of Spanish Civil War rhetoric, PP said that this was because "Rubalcaba is only a chemistry teacher, while Rajoy is a property owner".

PSOE's staggering news of the past month came on 29th August when Carme Chacón, the charismatic MP who lost very narrowly to Rubalcaba in February 2012 for leadership of the Socialist Party, announced that she was giving up her seat in Parliament immediately to spend a year teaching Political Science at the University of Florida in Miami. In her press conference, Chacón condemned the party leadership for failure to renew its policies and its personnel but said that she would definitely be back in Spain to participate in primaries to elect a socialist candidate to contest the next general election. Whether Chacón will be a candidate or whether Rubalcaba will be a candidate remains to be seen. PSOE, finally, can take some encouragement from one opinion poll published on 8th September by El País newspaper. This is the first poll since the General Election of November 2011 to put PSOE ahead of PP – but only just, with PSOE on 30.5% and PP on 30.1%. The same day, however, the Valencia regional newspaper Levante put PSOE on 25% and PP on 38%.

With reference to the economy, the government is talking up green shoots. However, the government's own National Institute of Statistics revealed on 27th August that GDP fell 1.6% in 2012 (not the predicted 1.4%) and that GDP will not return to pre-crisis levels until at least 2016/17. The government has also been trumpeting another fall in unemployment in August which, as in previous summer months, saw a rise in foreign tourists coming to Spain. Last month, 31 people, i.e. one a day, came off the unemployment register. Amazingly, El Mundo tracked all 31 down and produced photos and CVs on 8th September. Virtually all of the 31 people have new jobs that are part-time or temporary with only 20% of the total earning more than 1000€ per month. A list of some of the monthly 'salaries' in euros makes chilling reading – 652, 630, 532, 500, 480, 400, 350 and one young woman earning 225€ part-time has a degree in Maths and two Masters degrees.

Finally, a corruption case with a difference! Everyone knows the story of Castellón airport, a grandiose project brought to fruition by PP against all common sense and yet an airport without aeroplanes. Despite the absence of planes, it has also been the airport for the past few years where, to paraphrase Keats, "no birds land" – that is until 11th July. This is because the falconer, Fernando Olmos, who was paid 82,000€ a year to keep the empty airport free of birds with his "Birds of Prey" business, has now been found to be corrupt. He was using birds of prey that were too old, birds of prey that were too young, unauthorised birds of prey etc.etc. many of which escaped into nearby dwellings and one of which escaped INTO a zoo in Castellón! At least now Castellón airport has birds even if it has no planes.