

UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 11th Feb 2014

by Kevin Bruton



The outstanding political story of the last month is the questioning, on 8th February, of the Infanta Cristina de Borbón, daughter of the King and Queen of Spain, 48 years of age and seventh in line to the throne. Cristina faces potential charges of tax fraud and money-laundering and, on 8th February, she answered questions at the courts in Palma de Mallorca under the aegis of the “juez”, or examining magistrate, José Castro.

A brief background will be helpful. Investigation into the Noós case started three years ago and has shown that Cristina's husband, Iñaki Urdangarín, and his partner Diego Torres set up, in 2003, an umbrella company to divert public funds to their private firms and so defraud the Tax Authorities. Between 2004 and 2007, this umbrella company, the Instituto Noós, set up as “non-profit making”, concluded a series of public contracts in the Balearics and in the Valencia Region, both governed by PP, to the tune of six million euros. A large proportion of this money ended up in the private companies of both partners. In the case of Urdangarín, one of these companies, Aizoon, was also half-owned by Cristina de Borbón. Enquiries have revealed that through this company Aizoon paid personal expenditure of Cristina and her husband as well as refurbishment costs of their home in Barcelona and payment for domestic services.

On 8th February, for more than six hours, Cristina answered 400 questions put by the examining magistrate, José Castro, and by two left-wing groups which, under Spanish law, were able to bring “popular accusations” against the Infanta. Cristina said that, apart from putting her name down as co-owner of Aizoon, she knew nothing about the company's dealings and had “complete confidence” in her husband. She did NOT know that their house in Barcelona was the HQ of Aizoon; she did NOT know where the money came from on her Visa card to make hundreds of purchases for the house, for the family and for paying servants; and she did NOT know that the Visa card came from Aizoon. Her answers were mostly “no sé” (I don't know), “no me consta” (I don't know) or “no recuerdo” (I don't remember).

One of the lawyers of the two “popular accusations” said afterwards that 95% of Cristina's answers were evasive. She also used the Spanish version of the Fifth Amendment. More devastating was the following-day editorial in “El Mundo” newspaper, a right-wing newspaper over its 25-year history: “Cristina's statements are implausible and untenable – She should renounce her rights as an Infanta sooner rather than later” and “Her stubborn resistance to losing her privileges is causing objective damage to the institution of the monarchy”.

For ordinary Spaniards perhaps the reaction is different. For many years, Cristina has presented the image of a modern woman, almost progressive, almost “normal” within her social class, with an almost “normal” job for a charitable foundation. In short, for a member of the royal family, Cristina was closest to normal people. Now, that image is incompatible with the statements made by Cristina and her lawyers, viz. that, through confidence in her husband, she signed everything he put in front of her without looking at it or understanding it! This submissive, dependent attitude is totally out of sync with that of a competent, educated and informed woman of the 21st century. The examining magistrate, Castro, said that it will now take some time to decide whether to bring formal charges against Cristina.

With reference to party politics, at the National Convention of PP on 2nd February, the Prime Minister, Rajoy, launched a personal attack on the Socialist Party leader, Rubalcaba, by saying “Tú, o te callas o reconoces

el mérito de la gente” (“You, either shut up or recognise what people have achieved”). Rajoy’s use of the familiar “tú” form in railing against Rubalcaba, was clearly meant as, and universally interpreted as, being personally insulting and disrespectful. Rubalcaba replied by saying that he would never shut up about the government’s appalling policies.

But the PP leader’s speech perhaps reveals more about internal tensions within PP. There have been disagreements over the attitude towards ETA, the former PM Aznar was notable by his absence from the Convention and the leader of PP in the European Parliament, Jaime Mayor Oreja, is not standing again in May. Furthermore, there has been some dissent within PP ranks over the regressive abortion law currently going through parliament. In addition, PP have had no rivals on the centre-right/right of Spanish politics for over two decades. With Euro elections coming up on 25th May and local/regional elections in May 2015, a new right-wing party has just been launched in Spain. Called Vox and made up of previous PP activists, a number of self-styled right-wing intellectuals and some former victims of ETA, Vox could, in the medium to long term, threaten PP hegemony.

As for PSOE, it has announced Primaries in November, following the example of sister parties in France and Italy, to elect a candidate to fight the 2015 General Election, expected in the autumn of that year. Rubalcaba has not stated yet whether he will be a candidate and nor has Carme Chacón (for many the “leader over the water”, currently residing in the US), who was beaten by only 22 votes to leadership of the Socialist Party two years ago. As for the standings of the political parties, there have been several opinion polls in the last month but the biggest and most prestigious one, the CIS poll, published on 6th February, shows that PP, astonishingly, would win a general election held now with 32%, a 5.4% point lead over PSOE on 26.6%.

On 3rd February, the European Commission published its report on the perception of corruption in EU countries. Citizens were asked “How widespread do you believe corruption is in your country?”. Spain came fourth highest, with 95% of Spaniards believing corruption was widespread. The UK came 22nd with 64% and, for the record, Greece was top with 99% and Denmark was bottom with 20%.

In Spain, Bárcenasgate continues. In early February, the head of the Mercadona supermarket chain denied giving two cash payments of 150,000€ each to PP, although the Bárcenas papers clearly evidence it. And, after 13 months, the examining magistrate, Pablo Ruz, is awaiting seven further reports in order to proceed, including three from the police and one from the tax authorities. The Gürtel case of corruption in PP, linked to Bárcenasgate, and with 140 so far accused of corruption, has now been more than five years in court and is taking on the dimensions of the famous “Jarndyce versus Jarndyce” litigation in Dickens’ “Bleak House”.

The “blind alley pursuit” of a referendum on independence in Cataluña, which will never take place, still continues. The only sensible way forward here, it seems to the present writer, is being proposed by PSOE. Rubalcaba led on this months ago and now the new leader of the regional government in Andalucía, the Socialist Susana Díaz, has met with Artur Mas, the Nationalist leader of Cataluña, in Barcelona. Her two-fold proposals appear eminently sensible. Firstly, she advocates reform and clarification of the responsibilities of regional governments vis-à-vis central government; currently the two are often in conflict and in court. Secondly, the proposal is that the Senado, or Senate, the upper chamber of the Spanish Houses of Parliament, basically toothless at present and without even the revising powers of the House of Lords, should become a second chamber representing Spain’s 17 regional governments and with powers to institute legislation affecting regional government. This, after all, is what happens with the Bundesrat in Germany which approves 40% of the laws passed in Germany which affect the Länder. Naturally, any of this would have to await the election of a PSOE central government in 2015.

Unemployment increased in January by 2.4% but what is evident month after month is that the number of people seeking employment is decreasing for the obvious reasons of migration, apathy, desperation etc. Strikes and protests continue, of course, and finally, the “Marea Blanca” or White tide of protests in Madrid have stopped the privatisation of six more hospitals in the region. Coca Cola workers in Spain are taking industrial action in response to the company’s announcement of 1200 redundancies. The Alicante plant, for example, has been on strike for a week at the time of writing.

On 20th January, Oxfam published a report on Spain stating that the combined wealth of the richest 20 people in Spain – 77 billion euros – was equivalent to the combined income of the poorest 20% of the population. Oxfam further declared that Spain was the second most unequal country in Europe. On 29th January, Save the Children reported that almost 3 million children in Spain live below the poverty line (ie. one in three of all children) and that poverty has risen by 27% in the last three years.

Inevitably, we go from one extreme to the other as we are in the midst of the Film Awards season. At the end of January in Valencia, the “City of Arts and Sciences” was brought to a halt with the filming of sequences for “Tomorrowland” a Disney film starring George Clooney and Hugh Laurie. They stayed in hotel suites at 800€ a night! Last year, in Alicante, Ridley Scott filmed “The counsellor” with Michael Fassbender, Penelope Cruz, Brad Pitt and Javier Bardem.

As it happens, Javier Bardem was one of the celebrity speakers at the Goya film awards in Spain on 9th February (this is Spain’s version of the Oscars or, more accurately, the British BAFTAs). The occasion turned into a political demonstration with one award recipient after another slamming the Culture Minister, José Ignacio Wert, variously for not attending (the first time in 28 years this has occurred), for cuts in the arts and for raising VAT on the arts. The Head of the Spanish Film Academy said “To make a film in this country is an act of real heroism” while Bardem called Wert the “Minister of anti-Culture”.

In contrast to the glamour, grandiloquence and garrulousness of the Oscars, the Goyas showed candour, conviction and commitment. The Spanish film which won virtually all of the awards is a film set in the Francoist 1960s about a Spanish teacher of English using the Beatles songs in his classes. An obvious diatribe against Francoism, the film’s title has a political message for all. It is “Vivir es fácil con los ojos cerrados” or “Living is easy with your eyes closed”.