

UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 11th Mar 2014

by Kevin Bruton



11th March is the tenth anniversary of the train bombings in Madrid which caused the death of 191 people. It is worth recalling that the then PP government's attempt to mislead the populace into believing that ETA (and not Al Qaeda) caused the bombing was a significant factor in the Socialist Party winning the General Election three days later on 14th March 2004.

8th March was, of course, International Women's Day and it was marked in Spain by huge demonstrations across the country condemning the PP government's regressive Abortion Act, still going through parliament, and protesting against the government's public sector cuts and tax rises which have affected all in society but especially women. Again, it is worth recording that the date of 8th March commemorates the same date in 1857, when 100 women textile-workers in New York died in a fire resulting from protests for better working conditions.

The biggest political story in Spain in the last month was the State of the Nation debate in Parliament. Whereas in the US the President makes an annual State of the Union address to members of the Senate and the House of Representatives, in Spain there is an annual State of the Nation Debate in Parliament. This year was the 23rd such debate and it lasted four days, from 25th to 28th February. In the debate, the Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy, spoke in mostly macro-economic terms, about the green shoots of recovery. Speaking for one and a half hours, with 30 interruptions for applause by PP members, he proclaimed "We've rounded Cape Horn". The PSOE leader, Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, also spoke at length and also pleased his back-benchers. He addressed the "real" Spain and the millions affected adversely by government measures. He challenged the PM several times with the question "In which country are YOU living, Señor Rajoy?".

The front page of "El Mundo" newspaper on 26th February summed up the debate very well when it said that "Mariano Rajoy spoke with the precision to satisfy the economists, the investors and the Euro Group. Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba spoke with feeling for the protesters, the evicted, the pensioners and the unemployed". In the days following the debate, several opinion polls were published asking the question "Who won the debate?". A CIS poll consulted 1600 people immediately following the debate and 29% proclaimed Rajoy the winner with only 14% selecting Rubalcaba. A year ago, however, 35% opted for the PM and only 8% for Rubalcaba. A more significant figure this year is that 36% thought that neither leader won. A different Metroscopia poll, published by the left-of-centre "El País" newspaper, revealed a technical draw between the two leaders.

A letter in "El País" on 28th February perhaps best sums up the view of many, if not most, Spaniards. The tenor of the letter was as follows: "Who won the debate? What a strange question. I don't know who won, but what I do know is who lost. We, the Spanish people, we have all lost. We have lost jobs, housing, social provision, education, savings, pensions, human rights, healthcare and, for women, the right to decide. And, in the best case scenario, we have only lost a part of our wages which we will probably never recover".

The other major political story of the past month is the situation in Spain's two enclaves in North Africa which border Morocco, the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. (Woe betide any Briton who mentions these places to a Spaniard in the same breath as Gibraltar!) As has been much publicised, hundreds of Sub-Saharan, mostly from Cameroon and Guinea, try to cross the barriers between Morocco and "Spain" every day. A few succeed in surmounting the fences topped with razor-wire. The controversy now is that, on 6th February, 15 immigrants died in Ceuta, mostly through drowning. While in the sea attempting to reach land in Ceuta, they were fired on by Spanish police using rubber bullets.

Apart from the human tragedies and human rights involved, the political dimension is two-fold. Firstly, the Spanish authorities and the police lied in the first instance, denying that they fired on those swimming. The Socialist Party is seeking a Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry into the incident. The Spanish

Ombudswoman, Soledad Becerril, has condemned the use of rubber bullets, as has Cecilia Malmström, the European Commissioner for the Interior. The PP government's response so far is to send the Minister responsible to visit Ceuta and Melilla and to order the construction of even bigger and more vicious barriers costing 1.5 million euros. The second, and wider, political issue, is that Spain needs to determine with Morocco and with the European Union, a humane and sensible approach to the whole larger question of immigration into Spanish and therefore EU territory.

A brief update on the main corruption cases in Spain shows that the examining magistrate, José Castro, investigating the Noós case in which Urdangarín, son-in-law of the King and Queen faces charges of embezzling 6 million euros, is almost finished after two years. The Gürtel case, involving many millions of euros embezzled by PP, has unearthed even more cases of public contracts awarded illegally by the PP Regional Government in the Madrid Region. Pablo Ruz, the examining magistrate, is pursuing this case alongside the Bárcenasgate scandal which has been running for 14 months. Pablo Ruz is also still investigating Jordi Pujol Ferrusola. He is the son of the former president of Cataluña, Jordi Pujol, of the Nationalist Convergència i Unió coalition. The son is accused of financing a luxurious life-style (11 top-of-the-range sports cars, for example) through creaming off millions of euros awarded to firms in public contracts by the Catalan Regional Government.

Most Spaniards, in the present writer's view, are disgusted by these events and conclude, like C P Snow in his 1958 novel "The Conscience of the Rich", that the rich indeed have NO conscience. Protests against corruption and government measures continue on a daily basis. On 22nd February in Castellón in the Valencia Region and in the Balearic Islands, many thousands demonstrated again against offshore oil prospecting and fracking. The following day, many thousands again protested against government cutbacks in Madrid, Valencia, Alicante, Málaga, Almería, Segovia and Gijón. 41 organisations were represented in these demonstrations. 14,000 students went on strike and on to the streets in Valencia on 28th February, while on 9th March, a series of marches called "Marchas por la Dignidad" or "Marches for Dignity" started in many parts of Spain and will converge in Madrid on 22nd March. The banner theme under which they march is "Por un sistema sometido al control del pueblo" or "For a system subject to the control of the people".

With regard to the economy, the European Commission published new economic forecasts for European Union countries on 25th February. Brussels envisages a marginal improvement in the macro-economy for Spain in the next two years with GDP forecast to rise by 1% in 2014 and by 1.7% in 2015. Unemployment, however, stays at a predicted 25.7% in 2014 and 24.6% in 2015, a figure which will see Spain move ahead of Greece again as the EU's worst offender. The EU has also said that Spaniards have been paying an illegal so-called "health tax" of 1% on their income-tax since 2002. The tax take from this between 2002 and 2011 is known to be 13 billion euros. It has yet to be decided how or, even if, individual tax-payers can have this money returned.

Future Updates will discuss the Euro Elections on 25th May insofar as they affect Spain. It is interesting, however, that PSOE have already chosen their number one candidate on the national party list – Elena Valenciano, the high-profile deputy to Rubalcaba. PP, on the other hand, despite a national executive meeting on 10th March convened especially to select a candidate, have not done so at the time of writing, which may be a sign of internal ructions or even internecine warfare within PP ranks.

Before the next Update, one of the great cities of the world, Paris, will almost certainly elect a socialist woman as mayor, with France holding municipal elections on 23rd and 30th March. The socialist woman, moreover, has Spanish parentage and was born in Cádiz in 1959. Her name is Anne Hidalgo, daughter of emigrants and grand-daughter of Spanish republicans. Furthermore, her political powerbase is possibly an object lesson for parties of the left in Spain and elsewhere. This is because her Parisian "Parti Socialiste", unlike Hollande's national party, has been in coalition with the Communist Party in Paris since 1988 and has widened this coalition to include Mélenchon's "Front de la Gauche" which made such an impact in France's last Presidential Elections.

This Update started with anniversaries and will finish with one. 22nd February was the 75th anniversary of the death of Spain's greatest 20th century poet, Antonio Machado, a staunch republican, who was driven into exile and death by the Francoist advance and died in Collioure on the south-east coast of France on 22nd February 1939. Public tributes were paid to Machado in Seville, where he was born, and in Madrid, Segovia, and in Soria, where he was a school-teacher. He also lived in Rocafort in Valencia for a year and a half during the Civil War. His last line of verse was found in his jacket by his brother José and it read "Estos días azules y este sol de infancia" – "these blue days and this sun of childhood".