

UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 11TH NOVEMBER 2014
By Kevin Bruton



On Sunday 9th November, over two million people voted in Cataluña for or against Independence from Spain. This was NOT a referendum, since a referendum was judged illegal by the Constitution. This was NOT a consultation – “una consulta” – since a consultation was judged illegal by the Constitution. It was, however, a vote that defies categorising. By that Sunday night, 2,237,000 people had voted in response to the double question posed – “Do you want Cataluña to be a state?” (“un Estado”), and, if the answer is yes, “Do you want it to be an independent state?”. 80.72% voted for the double ‘yes’, ie for independence. Roughly 20% did not.

The Catalan Nationalist President, Artur Mas, called this “a complete success”, while the PP Central Government termed it “a farce” and “a useless and sterile simulacrum”. On 10th November, Fiscalía, the Spanish equivalent of the Crown Prosecution Service, began to investigate any illegal acts connected with the staging of the ‘vote’. This is because the day prior to the ‘vote’, Mas, representing the Catalan Regional Government, decided to delegate responsibility for organising the voting process to a number of pro-independence groups collected under the umbrella name “Pacto por el Derecho a Decidir” or “Pact for the Right to Decide”.

Over previous months, this organisation had amassed 40,000 volunteers to assist in the mechanics of the vote. Obviously, all these volunteers were pro-independence. Mas’s last ditch attempt to distance the Regional Government from illegality according to the Constitution may carry little weight in a situation where public buildings, mostly schools, were made available on 9th November as polling stations, even though local government staff were not compelled to work as they usually do in elections. In addition, of course, over the months, significant resources, paid for from the public purse, were employed to supply the wherewithal of the vote – polling boxes, tables, ballot papers etc.

The 2.2 million people who voted represent 32% of the potential electorate, since 4.1 million did NOT vote. This 32% turnout compares with a 70% turnout in the last Regional Elections in Cataluña (25th November 2012) and with a 49% turnout in the Referendum of 18th June 2006 which voted in a new Statute of Autonomy. Obviously, no-one knows why over 4 million people did not vote, although it is reasonable to surmise that many who did not do so are antipathetic to independence.

There were curious elements to the vote. For example, although the result was declared on the same night as the vote, at the moment of writing, people can STILL vote and can do so at regional government offices and even at the main Tourist Office in Barcelona, until 25th November. 16-year olds were allowed to vote for the first time, as in the Scotland Referendum. Barcelona and other towns laid on a free municipal bus service. Five towns, however, refused to allow their buildings to be used and potential voters had to travel elsewhere. A delegation of 8 Euro MPs observed the voting. These Euro MPs, from France, Belgium, Sweden, Slovenia, Spain and the UK, were chaired by the Tory Ian Duncan. The day following the vote they made four observations: firstly, there were too few polling stations (the actual number was 1317); secondly, there was no electoral register; thirdly, there were no returning officers; and, finally, there was no guarantee of privacy when voting.

Whatever the shortcomings of the vote, the reality is that 1.8 million Catalans (so far!) voted in favour of independence. The political ramifications are enormous, with the irony that Artur Mas is asking Central Government for a referendum after the vote just as he had done before the vote. More extreme nationalist parties in Cataluña are calling for early Regional Parliamentary Elections. The Spanish Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy, has shown no evidence at any stage that he can handle the Catalan situation. His customary passiveness, as always, is a barrier to negotiation. He and Artur Mas have not met personally, for example, since the end of July.

A small right-wing party, Vox, a party to the right of PP, is issuing a law-suit against Rajoy for abdication of responsibility in failing to prevent the vote. Clearly, however, the intervention of the national police or the Guardia Civil or the regional police force, the Mossos d’Esquadra, would have inflamed the situation and promoted the pro-independence cause.

The other big news of late has been the decision taken by the Court in Palma de Mallorca (the Audiencia Nacional) on 7th November to uphold two charges of tax evasion against Cristina, the sister of the (new) Spanish King Felipe VI. The court dismissed a charge of money-laundering against Cristina but the two charges remaining carry a maximum penalty of five years imprisonment apiece. Cristina has a possible a ‘get-out-of-jail-free card’ in that the charges against her are not being brought by the State in the form of the Fiscalía but by “acusación popular”, i.e. by a grouping of associations who do not believe that a member of the royal family should be beyond the law. “El País” newspaper and many others have called

for Cristina to renounce her claim to the throne. She is currently sixth in line. The present writer believes it extremely unlikely she will ever face a prison sentence.

The theme of corruption has been aired monthly in this Update over the past few years. On 27th October, the Guardia Civil arrested 51 people in Madrid, Murcia, León and Valencia in an operation called "Operación Púnica". The police have uncovered a vast network of corruption in town halls and regional governments amounting to 250 million euros of public money in contracts awarded. The most disturbing aspect of this is that it has taken place over the past two years, in other words, while other major corruption cases dating from earlier years have been going through the courts and receiving daily media attention. The biggest name arrested in "Operación Púnica" is Francisco Granados, ex-head of PP in the Madrid Region, mayor of Valdemoro and, for years, number two in the regional government of Madrid. He, apparently, is the brains behind the operation.

Despite calls by opposition groups in the National Parliament since August this year, the PM Rajoy has refused to appear to address the issue of corruption. He now says he will do so in the "Congreso", Spain's equivalent to the House of Commons, on 27th November. As is well known, however, the Augean Stables of corruption in Spain may need cleansing but Rajoy is NOT the Hercules who can divert the purifying river through them.

Pedro Sánchez, the leader of PSOE, the Spanish Socialist Party, has recently completed 100 days in office. He continues to impress in his public appearances. On 8th November in Seville, he made a major speech – serious but with humour and hugely communicative – in which he denounced unemployment, exploitation of the labour force, childhood poverty, corruption and the unfair tax burden where people pay on average 50 times more than companies. The following day, in Toledo, Sánchez said that in the next few months he will put forward "audacious proposals to put to an end the concentration of economic power in few hands" and "to introduce democracy into the economy".

He will need to do something to counter the meteoric rise of Podemos in the opinion polls. There have been two major polls recently. The bigger one, the official CIS poll, taken before "Operación Púnica", put PP on 27.5%, PSOE on 23.9% and Podemos on 22.5%. Podemos, however, came top in terms of people's definite intentions to vote. A second poll, Metroscopia, in "El País", taken after "Operación Púnica", astonishingly puts Podemos in first place with 27.7%, PSOE second with 26.2% and PP on 20.7%. Podemos continues to have a major presence in the news media and especially on TV. Their leader, Pablo Iglesias, (who, incidentally, has abandoned his earring!) appears always to be on television. On 7th November, for example, a whole programme on La Sexta was devoted to one day with him as a Euro MP. The programme had the title "Podemos – Asalto a la Moncloa" or "Podemos – assault on the Moncloa Palace (ie the home of the Spanish PM).

With reference to the economy, in the past week, "El País" has published evidence of the massive tax evasion and avoidance by Spanish subsidiaries of huge American high-tech companies. The newspaper looked at Yahoo!, Microsoft, Apple, Google, Facebook, Twitter, Ebay and Amazon. All paid absurdly low amounts of tax in Spain in 2013. A few examples will suffice. Facebook paid 59,000€ tax on a turnover of 2.7 billion euros. Ebay paid 18,000€ tax on a turnover of 1.2 billion euros while Yahoo! paid no tax at all on a turnover of 14.5 billion euros!

Finally, as a postscript, Rome kept the populace quiet with bread and circuses while Franco did so in Spain with "pan y fútbol" (or bread and football). Spain has four major theme parks, only one of which, Port Aventura, has been an economic success. The others have been an economic disaster, often mired in corruption. Nonetheless, a new theme park is scheduled to begin construction in January 2015 with the provisional name 'Paramount'. The entrepreneur leading the project, which will cost 300 million euros, is Jesús Samper. Samper is the president of Murcia Football Club, the owner of Santa Mónica, the lead company in the project and is currently facing charges of illegal property speculation. He claims that the European Commission has authorised a subsidy of 16.28 million euros from the European Regional Fund to start the project. Is it any wonder that Spaniards are turning to Podemos?!