

## UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 13<sup>th</sup> May 2014

by Kevin Bruton



Currently, the main issue is, of course, the 25th May in Spain, the date of the elections to the European Parliament. The official campaign began on 8th May and Spain votes on a national party list system, with 54 seats in total available across the country, four more than at present. Head of the list for the governing party PP is Miguel Arias Cañete, born in Madrid in 1950. Cañete was elected as a regional MP in Andalucía in 1982 and then, from 1986 to 1999, was a Euro MP. Under a previous PP government, the government of Aznar, he was Minister of Agriculture and he occupied this same post until a few weeks ago in the present government.

It appears that he was reluctantly persuaded to return to Europe as number one on the PP list. The head of the PSOE list is Elena Valenciano, born in Madrid in 1960. A lawyer by training, Valenciano was a Euro MP between 1999 and 2008 and she played a crucial role in Rubalcaba's elevation to leader of PSOE; she has been deputy leader since.

It is worth highlighting the PP and PSOE leading candidates precisely because so much media attention focuses on them and their activities in a personality-based media trend which, of course, is not only national. The War of Words between them started on 8th May and continues on a daily basis. Cañete's first major campaign speech was a lengthy attack on the previous Socialist government of Zapatero and Rubalcaba's part in it as deputy PM and Interior Minister. Elena Valenciano said that "PSOE is the only party to stop the right in Spain and Europe". PSOE has been accused of talking down the so-called Spanish economic recovery while Valenciano said "The main thing Spain needs to recover from is inequality, catechism in the classrooms and clandestine abortions". The head-to-head between Cañete and Valenciano is scheduled to continue in a TV debate on Spain's TVE 1, the equivalent of BBC1, on 15th May. The candidate of Izquierda Unida, (ie the communists) Willy Meyer, has said that voting for either PSOE or PP is tantamount to voting for the Troika (the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the IMF) which, he says, is responsible for imposing an "austerity, anti-social Europe".

Both PSOE and PP are waving the European flag. On 9th May, Europe Day, Elena Valenciano published a joint article in "El País" newspaper with Martin Schulz, currently President of the European Parliament and the social democratic candidate to replace Barroso as European Commission head. On 21st May, Valenciano will address a rally in Barcelona alongside Martin Schulz and the new Prime Minister of France, Manuel Valls, himself born in Barcelona, son of exiles and grandson of an editor of a pro-republican newspaper in the Spanish Civil War. In the opinion of the present writer, Valenciano is not just a party aparatnik but a very impressive politician and, on 9th May, the Financial Times newspaper included her on a list of the 25 key figures in the future of the European Parliament. As for PP, the Prime Minister Rajoy has already appeared on a campaign platform with Jean Claude Juncker, the right-wing candidate for the head of the European Commission, to be chosen, of course, by the new batch of Euro MPs.

What will happen in Spain on 25th May? The biggest and most prestigious of the opinion polls to date, the CIS poll, gives PP 33.7% of the votes with PSOE on 31%. In terms of seats, this would mean PP winning 20/21 seats instead of 24 now and PSOE 18/19 seats instead of the current 23. The beneficiaries would be the minor parties with the communists going up from 2 to 5 seats and UpD, a centrist party, up from 1 to 3 seats. Two things jump out from the CIS poll. Firstly, the 2.7 percentage point advantage PP has over PSOE transfers into only 480,000 vote nationwide, while the 2.7 percentage point gap is arguably a technical draw since it is within the poll's margin of error. Secondly, the turnout is predicted to be low, perhaps as low as

40%, a figure that can be compared with the first Euro elections in Spain in 1987 when the turnout was nearly 70%.

As the campaign develops, no doubt more people will take note of the 25th May elections but, when the CIS poll was taken, only 17% knew the date of the election. "El Mundo" newspaper on 11th May joked that 99% of Spaniards know that on 24th May, Real Madrid and Atlético Madrid play in the Champions League Final in Lisbon! The CIS poll also showed that the principal preoccupation of Spaniards is, once again, unemployment, with 94% naming this their biggest worry. PP trumpet the April figures, which show an official improvement of 111,565 jobs over March. In a debate which is familiar from the UK and elsewhere, the Spanish trades unions point out that almost all new jobs are part-time, temporary or zero-hours contracts and, of course, low-paid. Meanwhile six million Spaniards are unemployed, 42% of whom do not receive any unemployment benefit, and hundreds of thousands are leaving the country.

Many in the Labour movement, including many in Labour International, have been championing the Tobin tax on financial transactions. The UK Government has been to the European Courts in Luxembourg to try to stop the introduction of this tax anywhere in the EU and has failed. As a result, next year, eleven euro-zone countries plan to implement this tax – Germany, France, Italy, Portugal, Greece, Belgium, Austria, Estonia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain. In Spain, current estimates suggest the Tobin tax in Year 1 will bring 640 million euros to the Spanish exchequer. (It is to be hoped that Ed Miliband and the Labour Party take note!)

The crisis in Spain continues to engender daily protests against government policies and is evident every day. On 11th May, the Formula 1 Spanish Grand Prix took place in Barcelona. The attendance, by the standards of other grand prix was poor, with huge sections of the stands empty. This prompted one commentator to ask "What's the difference between the Spanish grand prix and other major grand prix? – In other countries, the spectators know the drivers – in Spain, the drivers know the spectators"!

More seriously, amid the many continuing protests, hundreds of thousands turned out on May Day in 70 cities across Spain protesting against government measures. One on-going protest, however, is worth highlighting. This is the attempt by Greenpeace activists in Carboneras, Almería, to stop the construction of a 21-storey hotel in an area of natural beauty on the Almería coastline. Hundreds of protesters are turning this into the biggest ever Greenpeace protest in Spain.

Finally, the campaign for the Euro elections in Spain came to sudden halt just after 5pm on 12th May. In the city of León, the PP president of the Diputación (or provincial government), Isabel Carrasco, was shot three times outside her home and died. Carrasco was also president of PP in León province. Two women were arrested, a mother and daughter, in what appears at first sight to be a motive of personal revenge. A witness to the murder asserted that two shots were initially fired at Carrasco and a third finished her off on the ground. Both women arrested are also members of PP. One lost her job in the Diputación offices two years ago and the daughter, Monserrat Triana Martínez, was No 7 on the PP party list in León at the council elections in 2007.

The PM Rajoy immediately suspended a campaign meeting in Valladolid. He has spoken to the PSOE leader, Rubalcaba, and travelled to León on 13th May together with the King and leading members of PSOE. Apart from the human tragedies involved, how and if, this impacts on the Euro elections remains to be seen.