

UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 15TH SEPTEMBER 2015

By Kevin Bruton



September 11th – an important date in modern history on a number of occasions. This Update, however, starts with September 11th 1714. During the War of the Spanish Succession (1701 – 1714) Cataluña took sides with Charles, Archduke of Austria, against the troops of Felipe V of Spain. On September 11th, Barcelona capitulated to the Bourbon King, and lost its municipal government and its historical independence. This is why September 11th is celebrated by Catalans who want independence from Spain. The day is known as the Diada and again this year a million Catalans celebrated their national day by filling the streets of Barcelona with flags and banners.

This year, however, September 11th was also the first official day of the Election Campaign which culminates on September 27th with Elections to the Regional Parliament in Cataluña. The present Head of the Regional Government, Artur Mas, is also head of Cataluña's biggest nationalist party, Convergència. Mas is fighting the 27th September elections as part of an umbrella pro-independence grouping called Junts pel Sí (Together for Yes) and claims that the election is a plebiscite for independence from Spain. He said at the Diada "I have a message for you in central government. Take note of the images today which speak for themselves. Cease your political myopia, your imperial pride, the threats you make as if we were criminals. We are normal, serene and peaceful people".

Mas was, of course, referring to the central right-wing government of PP and to Prime Minister Rajoy who constantly warns Catalans about the dangers of a schism with Spain. On 13th September, both Rajoy and the opposition Socialist Party leader Sánchez were in Cataluña. Both warned of the economic, political and social problems for Cataluña if it gains independence and both pointed out that Cataluña would be forced to leave the European Union. David Cameron, visiting Rajoy in Madrid on 4th September, also piled in, saying that if Cataluña wants to take another route it must conform to the law and that separation from Spain would mean leaving the EU.

The Socialist Party's response to all this is to urge a "third way" for Cataluña – neither a complete break nor a continuation of the present system, a way which would inevitably involve amending the Spanish Constitution and, presumably, giving Cataluña more autonomy. Sánchez, PSOE leader, has addressed numerous meetings across Cataluña stressing that Spain would not be Spain without Cataluña and that he himself feels Catalan.

Opinion polls on the 27th September election suggest a close race between the pro-independence grouping and parties against independence. The waters are muddied, however, when Mas calls for a plebiscite and then says he will accept a majority of seats rather than the popular vote as evidence of victory. Opponents of independence condemn the way in which the Diada was used politically and by pro-independence media as a major weapon in the campaign battlefield. More worrying for Convergència are more revelations that the nationalist party in councils large and small across the nation were paid 3% commission by private companies and entrepreneurs to secure public contracts. Mas denies illegality but, as the evidence mounts, Pedro Sánchez is able to say that "Artur Mas's only fatherland is Switzerland".

With regard to the Refugee Crisis in Europe, the Spanish government of PP has been forced by pressure from the public and local councils to change its stance in the past week. Until now Rajoy has refused to accept the quotas imposed on Spain by the European Commission. Now, however, the Government has said that Spain WILL accept the initial allocation of 19,000 refugees. In Spain, as elsewhere, there have been massive demonstrations in the streets supporting a more humane approach to the refugee crisis. Scores of local town councils have pledged their support and, symbolically, the football club Villareal from Spain's first división has said that all gate receipts from its 20th September league clash with Athletic Club will go to Syrian refugees.

The Spanish media have also pressurised the government. "El País" on 10th September published an editorial, in common with twelve other national newspapers across Europe, including "The Independent" in the UK, "Libération" in France, "Die Zeit" in Germany and "La Repubblica" in Italy. The editorial, entitled "An appeal to our leaders" called for a properly resourced humanitarian aid effort to assist refugees in their own countries and in their host countries in Europe, with all European countries playing their part.

The Spanish media have given a huge amount of coverage to the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour Leader on 12th September. To provide one example from many, "El Mundo" newspaper devoted two and a half pages to Corbyn the day after his election.

The same day, “El País” carried a headline which read “The election of Jeremy Corbyn announces an earthquake (terremoto) in the European left” while “El Mundo” said “Labour turns to the left”. “El Mundo”, as a right-wing paper, warned of the coincidence of Corbyn with many of the policies of Podemos and it is true that Corbyn in one public meeting thanked Pablo Iglesias for his support. “El Mundo” also commented that, while Labour’s 1983 Manifesto has been classified as the longest suicide note in history, Corbyn’s acceptance speech on 12th September may be the shortest.

Other newspapers have sought to investigate Corbyn’s Spanish connections, even surmising that his spoken Spanish must be reasonably good. His current wife is Mexican. His second wife, Claudia Bracchitta, had a grandfather who was Spanish Consul in Chile in 1936 when the Spanish Civil War began. He returned to Spain to fight for the Republic against Franco but went into exile again to Chile in 1939. In 1973 the entire family fled from Chile to London. And, Corbyn’s second wife’s uncle was with Salvador Allende in the Presidential Palace on another September 11th, September 11th 1973 when Pinochet’s troops attacked the Palace and instigated the coup.

In Spain, a General Election is due in November, although the PM Rajoy is seeking to delay it until December. The government’s budget for 2016 is currently going through Parliament and, with various giveaways planned, Pedro Sánchez has called it “A party manifesto rather than a budget”. Sánchez, prior to his recent duties in Cataluña, went on a South American visit to further cement his international credentials. At present, opinion polls suggest that no single party will win an overall majority in the forthcoming general election. There will be more on this in next month’s Update while everyone, of course, remembers what happened in the UK on 7th May.

On the economy, official unemployment figures rose in August by 21,679 as seasonal workers left their summer jobs. The Spanish Regions’ level of debt in the first half of 2015 rose to its highest ever level. Cataluña leads the country in indebtedness, followed in second place by the Valencia Region.

Oxfam has just published a report “Europe for the majority not for the élite”. The Report says that 123 million people in Europe, a quarter of the total population, are living in poverty or the risk of social exclusion. Between 2009 and 2013, the number of people within the EU suffering severe material privation increased by 7.5 million. 32% of young people below the age of 25 are suffering poverty. Spain is one of the countries where inequality has increased the most. According to Oxfam, the number of people in Spain suffering severe material privation doubled between 2007 and 2013 to 3 million people.

This Update makes no apology for finishing on another sombre note, which is set in deliberate juxtaposition to the Oxfam report. It is now, of course, 14 years since another historic 11th September, ie 9/11. At Ground Zero in New York, a huge metallic bird sculpture has been erected by the Valencian architect Santiago Calatrava. The 355ft-high sculpture rises above the Transportation Hub, a third transport interchange to go with Grand Central Station and Penn Station. The Hub and the bird sculpture have cost 4 billion euros to date. The US press has derided the Hub and the bird sculpture as a “Glorious waste of money” and “a self-indulgent monstrosity”. Even one of the Project directors said “All this just for another f*****g train to Jersey”. Closer to home, Castellón Airport, the airport without aeroplanes, finally had flights for the first time on 15th September to London and Bristol. 170 million euros have been spent to date on this airport, the airport, until now, without aeroplanes.