

UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS - 8TH DECEMBER 2015



By Kevin Bruton

For obvious reasons Spain's General Election on Sunday, 20th December, will occupy the bulk of this Update. The last General Election was on 20th November 2011 when the right-wing government of PP and Mariano Rajoy was elected. The past four years have been marked by austerity and cuts which have eaten into the very heart of Spain's welfare system. On 20th December, 350 parliamentary seats are to be filled in the lower house of Spain's Parliament, the Congreso – the equivalent of the UK's House of Commons. These 350 MPs, or 'diputados', are elected on a multi-member constituency basis, each constituency equivalent to one of Spain's provinces, and on a party-list system. 36 million are eligible to vote.

Four main parties are in contention: the current governing party, PP; the opposition Socialist Party, PSOE, which governed Spain from 1982 to 1996 and from 2004 to 2011; Ciudadanos, the new right-wing party which originated in Cataluña; and Podemos, the anti-establishment party which grew out of the street movements of the 15th May 2011. The biggest single party in contention, apart from the big four, is the Communist Party, or Izquierda Unida, which currently has a handful of MPs and is unlikely to improve its position. Although the competing parties have been campaigning for months, the official campaign period, which always lasts 15 days, only started on 4th December. This is when posters and hoardings began going up in the streets.

Pedro Sánchez, leader of PSOE, started his campaign with a walkabout in Barcelona's 'red belt' or 'cinturón rojo', specifically in Nou Barris, one of the working-class areas of Barcelona city most affected by cuts and home evictions. Traditionally a bastion of socialist voters, Nou Barris voted heavily in the May local elections this year for Ada Colau, the anti-evictions campaigner who is now mayor of Barcelona and in the September Regional Elections the area leant towards the new party of Ciudadanos. Sánchez visited the market in Nou Barris, bought oranges from stall-holders and took advantage of the usual photo-opportunities. He did, however, refuse one photo-opportunity when a stall-holder offered him a pair of red boxer shorts!

On a more serious note, the past week has seen two major debates between the parties. On 30th November, the media group which owns "El País" newspaper hosted a multi-media debate between three of the party leaders viz. Pedro Sánchez of PSOE, Albert Rivera of Ciudadanos and Pablo Iglesias of Podemos. The Prime Minister, Rajoy, refused to participate and "El País" refused the offer made by PP of the deputy PM – Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría. The debate went out on the internet, radio and televisión and on social media. 1.5 million followed it on TV and 700,000 did so on the radio but Spain's first ever General Election debate on the social media attracted 11 million followers during the broadcast.

On 7th December, the national TV channels, Antena 3 and La Sexta, broadcast simultaneously a debate between Sánchez (PSOE), Rivera (Ciudadanos), Iglesias (Podemos) and from PP, since Rajoy again refused to appear, Sáenz de Santamaría. It is too early to say who won the debate

but Rivera, from Ciudadanos, claimed that, if elected, he would open his government up to PP or PSOE but would not go into opposition with either party. Sáenz de Santamaría said that only the most voted party list should govern (obviously she means PP) and not a “tri-partite assembly of losers” (ie the other three parties). Pablo Iglesias insulted the Socialist Pedro Sánchez by saying to him “In your party you don’t decide what happens, others do”. Sánchez stated that unhelpful opinion polls only encourage him to victory. Two further TV debates are scheduled: a nine-party debate on 8th December; and a face-to-face debate on 14th December between Sánchez and Rajoy, the only time the PM has put his head above the parapet.

6th December in Spain was Constitution Day, a national celebration of the day in 1978 when Spaniards approved overwhelmingly in referendum the present democratic Constitution, widely hailed at the time as one of the most progressive Charters of Rights in the western world. Constitutional reform is a large part of the manifesto of all major parties except PP. Pedro Sánchez has been clamouring for months for a new updated Constitution which would enshrine social welfare rights and reform the regional government system, permitting a fresh look at the situation of Cataluña. He again wrote an article to this effect in “El País” on 6th December. Pablo Iglesias also wrote in “El País” that “We must fight for a new constitutional spirit to remember our parents and grandparents who forged the 1978 Constitution”. Since then, he said “The crisis and the 15th May Movement are the result of the betrayal by the oligarchies of the Transition to Democracy”. The most interesting comment, in the view of the present writer, came from the 30-year-old new leader of the Communist Party, Alberto Garzón, who reminded everyone that 60% of the present electorate, for obvious reasons, did not vote for the 1978 Constitution. He also quoted Thomas Jefferson who noted that each generation needs a Constitution because “A Constitution expires naturally after 19 years”.

On the subject of opinion polls it is worth recording that Spain is not like the UK in having numerous opinion poll organisations pumping out projections every few days. While remembering what happened in the UK on 7th May, there have been two major polls in recent days in Spain. On 3rd December, the CIS government-organised poll put PP eight percentage points ahead of PSOE and in first place. But, more interesting and perhaps more reliable, is the extensive Metroscopia poll published by “El País” on 29th November which is still being analysed by pollsters and pundits. While both polls show that a significant percentage of Spaniards are undecided, the Metroscopia poll places PP at 22.7%, Ciudadanos at 22.6% and PSOE at 22.5% (effectively a technical tie between these three parties) with Podemos at 17.1%.

Further analysis shows a divide between the larger provinces and the smaller ones. Essentially, in the five most populated provinces in Spain – Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Seville and Alicante – provinces which account for 106 parliamentary seats out of the total of 350, the four-way division between the main parties is shown very clearly in terms of voting intention. However, in the smaller provinces, the bi-partite modern tradition of voting largely for PSOE or PP holds sway. It is difficult not to conclude from opinion polls, TV and social media debates and party statements that 20th December is about PP versus the other three main parties – PSOE, Ciudadanos and Podemos. Despite the fact that the major party leaders say NOW that they will NOT go into coalition with other parties, it seems to the present writer that there is a distinct possibility of a three-party anti-PP coalition emerging in the aftermath of the General

Election. Alternatively, the two right-wing parties, PP and Ciudadanos, could form a government together.

A commonplace answer to the question of what wins elections is the response “It’s the economy, stupid!” This Update will briefly and selectively outline the parties’ manifesto positions on the economic issues affecting most people. On income tax, PP wants to reduce it from 19% to 17%, having increased it, of course, in government. PSOE will have a committee of experts to make recommendations within six months. Ciudadanos will reduce income tax and Podemos will increase income tax for those earning over 60,00€ a year and will raise the top rate of tax for earners of over 300,000€ from 45% to 55%. PP will reduce company taxes further while PSOE will increase them. Ciudadanos will apply a flat rate of 20% (the rate is currently 30%) while Podemos will retain the 30% rate. On indirect taxation, only PSOE and Podemos will reduce VAT. On the minimum wage, PSOE will increase this to 60% of average net wages over a ten-year period while Podemos, from January 2018, promise 14 monthly payments in a year of 800€ a month. PSOE will increase pensions gradually while Podemos will guarantee retirement at no older than 65 years of age.

Following this dry economic litany, it is interesting to read a recent a British newspaper report about Spain. The “I” newspaper carried a report on 20th November, the fortieth anniversary of the death of Franco, which stated that “The issue of the Civil War still divides Spaniards. Neither the war nor the dictatorship is taught in schools”. The “I” quoted a journalist, José Martínez Soler, kidnapped and tortured by the police in the months following Franco’s death. He commented that currently “When two Spaniards meet they will know within ten or twenty minutes which side their family were on in the Civil War”. He further said “The Civil War and the Dictatorship still have a very big footprint. It is still a burden – nobody wants to talk about it!” Soler now hopes that the General Election on 20th December will be an opportunity to end divisions in Spain.

This Update will finish by emulating the practice of so many newspapers at this time of year in recommending “Books to read in 2016” or “Christmas Reading”. 400 years ago this month, in December 1615, the second part of “Don Quixote” was published. Unfortunately, Miguel de Cervantes died in April 1616, only four months after it appeared. Next year, therefore, the 400th anniversary of Cervantes’ death will see huge commemorations and celebrations in Spain. The present writer therefore recommends for 2016 reading, or re-reading, the first and the best novel ever written – “Don Quijote de la Mancha” by Miguel de Cervantes.