

UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 8TH MARCH 2016

By Kevin Bruton



The current situation in Spain is one of complete impasse. It is almost three months since the General Election on 20th December 2015. It is worth remembering the arithmetic: of the 350 seats in total in Parliament, PP (the right-wing party in office since 2011) have 123 seats; PSOE (the centre-left Socialist Party) have 90 seats; Podemos (anti-establishment 'left') have 69 seats; while Ciudadanos (the new centre-right/right-wing party) have 40 seats. To invest someone as Prime Minister requires 176 votes for an overall majority or, failing this, a simple majority, which clearly means abstentions.

Since 20th December, Mariano Rajoy, acting PP Prime Minister, has twice been asked by the King to present himself for investiture as Prime Minister and has twice refused to do so believing he does not have the numbers to succeed. He has passively rather than actively talked up a Grand Coalition with PSOE à la German CDU/SPD coalition. The term 'talked up' is apposite because PSOE will NOT accept it and there have been no negotiations.

PSOE, until 24th February, had been pursuing parallel negotiations. On the one hand, PSOE had been attempting to formulate a 'pact of four on the left' with Podemos, Izquierda Unida (Communists) and Compromís (self-styled left-wing nationalists). At the same time PSOE was negotiating a pact with the centre-right Ciudadanos and their leader Albert Rivera. Once Rajoy had turned down the opportunity to seek investiture, the King asked Pedro Sánchez, PSOE leader, to try to form a government. On 24th February, PSOE and Ciudadanos announced that they had signed an agreement which includes express reform of the Constitution and a package of 200 measures. The two party leaders gave a press conference that day and what they said is important due to subsequent events and the current aftermath.

Rivera spoke first and said that the agreement signed with PSOE was open to other parties, that it was anti-corruption and that he wanted other parties to participate in it in the same way that parties from the centre, left and right negotiated Spain's Transition to Democracy following the death of Franco. He also said that 80% of Ciudadanos' programme is in the agreement.

Rivera left the detail and the big speech, however, to Pedro Sánchez of PSOE who gave a lengthy press conference. He began by saying "We have ceded ground so that ALL Spaniards win". He then went on to detail 200 points of agreement with Ciudadanos that are "reformist and progressive". Selectively he announced a plan to repeal the regressive Labour Reform Act pushed through by PP. He promised a new Statute for Workers with an increase in the minimum wage. He pledged a Wealth Tax on large fortunes and a Law against Corruption and Fraud. The agreement includes legislation to reduce VAT in the Arts and, in the social sphere, a 'Plan for Social Emergencies' with Sánchez saying that "Spain is the most unequal country in the EU apart from Latvia". He promised new laws against energy poverty and against evictions. He said the agreement would repeal the LOMCE (a regressive education law approved by PP) and would restore educational grants as a right. He would rescind the 'co-pago' or part-payment for pensioners in pharmacies and would increase maternity or paternity leave.

Sánchez also promised a new law on equality and against gender violence. Party finances would be regulated with no revolving doors. Any councillor or MP (national or regional) charged with corruption would have to resign. He also promised a new 'Law on Historical Memory' to allow the victims of oppression under Franco to seek restitution. In summary, Sánchez called the agreement with Ciudadanos "an agreement which is reforming, progressive and historic" and "an agreement which reaches out to left and right". He invited all parties to think "of all Spaniards not just their own party and of the common good".

Immediately after Sánchez's press conference, Podemos announced it was breaking off parallel negotiations with PSOE. Sánchez then announced he was putting the agreement to a vote of PSOE members on 27/28th February. 196,000 party members had the chance to vote and, in the end, 52% did so, with 80% voting in favor of the accord with Ciudadanos. Interestingly, 10,000 more PSOE members voted in favour than voted for Pedro Sánchez as leader of the party in July 2014. Sánchez then met his federal committee on 29th February. The committee supported the membership's stance and also passed two resolutions: firstly, that PSOE should say "NO" to PP under any circumstances; and, secondly, that PSOE should say "NO" to any party that wants an independence referendum in Cataluña or elsewhere.

Sánchez then took his agreement to an investiture debate in Parliament on 1st/2nd March which he knew, numerically, he could not win. It is worth briefly summarising Sánchez's speech in Parliament with the help of some verbatim quotes. Sánchez said "There is a big majority in this Chamber that wants change". Referring to PP he said "For four years there has been no dialogue. On 20th December, 18 million Spaniards voted for change. Seven million voted for PP." Sánchez also asked "Do we want a government based on dialogue or not? Giving in on some points is not defeat but a bridge towards accord". He added "There is no party majority with the same ideological convictions. We MUST have an ideological mix to form a government".

Sánchez's speech (1h36min in length) was both general and very detailed, indicting PP's record in government over four years in every sphere of policy and relating it to many of the points in the 200 point accord with Ciudadanos. The words he most used were "change" and "dialogue" and he finished by saying "We can start on our 200 points programme next week". The speech was immediately condemned by PP on the right who said it was a farce and by Podemos on the 'left' who called it "more of the same". Pablo Iglesias made a vituperative speech in which he castigated PSOE for past corruption dating back to the mid-1980s and singled out Felipe González, PSOE leader and PM (1982-1986) at the time. The smaller nationalist parties all damned the speech and there was no surprise when the vote on 2nd March showed 130 votes in favour of Sánchez's investiture (PSOE and Ciudadanos), 219 against and 1 abstention (an MP from the Canaries).

A second much shorter debate followed on 4th March in which Sánchez said there was "an institutional blockage and a lack of government" in Spain. Rivera, leader of Ciudadanos, said "I am not going to ask you in PP to sign up to an agreement you haven't read" and, addressing Podemos in the Chamber, Rivera reminded them that the Communist Party signed up to the Transitional arrangements post-Franco, NOT for government jobs but for freedom. Rivera said to Podemos and others "Why can't you do the same?".

The second investiture vote went the same as the first – 219 against with 131 in favor, the Canaries MP now voting with Sánchez. Currently, in mid-March, the King has put off contacts with party representatives for the moment but can nominate any candidate for investiture who thinks he or she can command a majority in parliament. If no-one can do so by 2nd May there will be a second General Election on 26th June.

The arithmetic still does not work until someone relents. PP want a grand coalition with PSOE which the PSOE federal committee will not accept. Ciudadanos rejects Rajoy as a candidate for PM. Podemos will not pact with Ciudadanos and viceversa. A so-called pact of the left does not add up to a majority in parliament unless pro-independence nationalist parties abstain. They say they will only abstain if an Independence referendum is granted. PSOE will not accept this and neither will a dozen regulations of Spain's Constitutional Court.

Recriminations and accusations between parties and leaders have been rife and it is worth noting some of the best of them. "El País" editorials have been interesting. The 3rd March editorial said "Sánchez and Rivera will lose the vote but their arguments have won" while another editorial criticised Pablo Iglesias for irresponsibility. Iglesias, in what to the present writer seems to be either naïveté or hubris, demanded several weeks ago that he be deputy PM in any future government and started to parcel out government departments to Podemos ministers – and all this when there was no PM in prospect. This outburst has occasioned several ripostes about the anti-establishment party seeking posts in government. The best of these came from Sánchez himself when he said (and the alliteration and assonance only work in Spanish) "Nosotros hemos hablado de soluciones no de sillones" or "We have discussed solutions not seats in government".

The present writer is not alone in believing that PP and Podemos both want a second General Election in the hope of squeezing PSOE from left and right. Indeed, PSOE spokespeople in parliament have said to Podemos "Why don't you just say you want a second General Election?". Another good PSOE jibe was "We have consulted our membership. Why don't you consult yours?". Many on the left have also reminded left-wing parties in Spain that seven different parties joined the Second Republican Government in 1931 to carry out sweeping reform. Rajoy will not go, conforming to the Steinbeck adage that "It is not power that corrupts but the fear of losing it." Manuela Carmena, Mayor of Madrid (from a community group Madrid en Común), called for support for Sánchez. It is worth recording that at town-hall level Podemos is in alliance and in government with PSOE and other parties. This is true in Madrid, Barcelona, Zaragoza, La Coruña, Santiago and Cádiz. In all these cases and in the case of the regional government in Valencia, parties on the left have coalesced to stop PP governing and to support change.

Two recent Metroscopia opinion polls make interesting reading. For the first time in decades, top of Spaniards' concerns is "politics", with 90% viewing the situation as 'bad' or 'very bad'. Unemployment and corruption have been relegated to second and third place. On 6th March, "El País" carried out the first post-investiture debate opinion poll. To the question put to all voters "Was voting 'no' to Sánchez good or bad?" 48% said 'bad' and 36% 'good'. Asking Podemos voters (many of whom used to vote PSOE) the same question ie "Was voting 'no' to Sánchez good or bad?" 50% said 'bad' while 33% said 'good'. Another question gave a

conclusive response. The question was “Has Rajoy’s time in office gone and should he go?”. 80% responded ‘yes’ with only 17% saying ‘no’.

This has been a one-topic Update which will end with a suggestion from the present writer. On 7th March in Seville, a Belgian theatre company put on in the Teatro Central a dramatic work called “Mount Olympus”. This comprises a series of Greek tragedies which last continuously 24 hours from beginning to end. Greek tragedies usually resolved problems via argument and conflict. The present writer recommends that political party leaders in Spain be locked in a theatre for 24 hours in front of an audience of Spanish electors and be compelled to come up with a dénouement which is good for Spain and the Spanish people.