

## **UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 8TH JANUARY 2013**

**by Kevin Bruton**



For Spaniards and those living in Spain the New Year has started like most years – with price rises across the board. However, this year, the increases appear worse for a beleaguered nation. Electricity prices rise from between 3% to 8% depending on consumption. Petrol prices rise by an average 4 ‘céntimos’ per litre. Train fares rise as usual by 3%. Toll charges on motorways go up by an average 2.4%. Postage rates rise, as do phone charges for those linked to the biggest provider, Telefónica. Housing costs rise as VAT on purchasing new homes increases from 4% to 10%. Finally, for those lucky few who win a lottery prize, a new tax has been introduced of 20% on lottery winnings.

It is just as well that to assuage Spaniards’ minds and pockets they were fortunate once again to listen to “The King’s Speech” on Christmas Day. This refers, of course, to King Juan Carlos’s annual Christmas Day Message to his subjects. The King sounded very worried in his yearly address. He said that “politics is not having its best period of time in the perception of most Spaniards.” Clearly worried about threats of independence from Cataluña, he called for efforts “to unite rather than divide” people and sought an end to confrontation. He said that “austerity and growth must be compatible” and was concerned that “nothing of what we have achieved together in the area of economic well-being” should be threatened.

If this was a veiled threat to PP government policies it was ignored by PP leaders who praised the speech. The Socialist Party also applauded the King with a leading ex-Minister Trinidad Jiménez saying “the speech is very relevant to the political, social and economic situation of Spain”. It was left to Cayo Lara, leader of the Spanish communists, to condemn the King’s speech, proclaiming that “it shows a distinct lack of credibility and a worrying isolation from the tragic reality which millions of Spaniards suffer”.

The King also gave a rare TV interview on 4th January, the day before his 75th birthday, in which he reiterated his previous message but also said that he was concerned about “the lack of work which means millions of families cannot live with dignity”. He further expressed his alarm by claiming that “the reality of young people leaving Spain to find work is painful to me”. It is worth remembering that the King was born on 5th January 1938 in the Anglo-American Hospital in Rome.

The King was right, of course, to highlight unemployment. Spain finished the year with 4,848,723 people unemployed officially. This figure of nearly 26% is almost certainly a gross understatement. The number of people employed, however, at 16,332,488 is lower than ten years ago in 2002. The difference is that now the working population is over 4 million higher and there are 5.5 million more inhabitants. Symptomatic of the country is the Valencia Region which lost 35,000 jobs in 2012, ie four people were made unemployed every hour during the year! In terms of emigration for the purposes of employment, the King was also correct to be concerned. Apart from the many thousands of young people leaving Spain for South America in 2012, 50,000 alone went to seek employment in Germany.

In Cataluña, following the 25th November Regional Elections, analysed at length in the last Update, the Catalan Nationalist leader, Artur Mas, was finally invested as President on 21st December with the support of the second party in the region, Esquerra Republicana de Cataluña. The two parties have not signed a formal coalition but have agreed a two-year co-operation deal, the main plank of which is to move towards a referendum in 2014 on independence from Spain. They say that they will negotiate this deal with central government in the first half of 2013.

That this whole farrago is a gross deceit and insult to the people of Cataluña is an understatement in the view of the present writer. An independence referendum has no prospect of coming to fruition – and there is a recent precedent for saying this. In 2009, the then Basque nationalist leader, Juan José Ibarrexe, brought forward a similar project, widely known as the “Plan Ibarrexe”, which was overwhelmingly defeated in the Spanish Parliament (with Zapatero and PSOE in government) not least because an independence plan for any one region of Spain is anti-Constitutional, ie it cannot happen within the terms of Spain’s current democratic Constitution. The same is true now in Cataluña and Artur Mas knows it. The Spanish socialists support the PP government in upholding the Constitution, which says there can be NO referendum on independence. One can only assume Mas is playing a dangerous game to secure more autonomy for Cataluña. And it IS dangerous when central government is threatening to withhold funding from the region.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in Spain, protests have continued against PP policies – and right through the festive season in the case of the Madrid Region. In Madrid, on 27th December, the PP Regional Government approved measures to privatise hospitals and health centres in the Region. The protest movement of health workers, known as the Marea Blanca, or “The White Tide” has organised demonstrations almost daily over the last couple of weeks. Indeed, on 8th January, a massive march took place in Madrid under the slogan “La lucha sigue - sí se puede” or “The struggle continues – yes we can!”. The aim of this march was to bring the health workers’ protest to national attention and, with this in mind, it had the full support of the socialist leader, Rubalcaba. As a tiny post-script here, the protests of Parador workers against the proposed closure of seven paradores and the threat of 644 job losses has resulted in a compromise agreement with management, the terms of which are 350 job losses and the closure of one parador only, Puerto Lumbreras.

Returning to the socialist party leader Rubalcaba, the last Update recounted his appallingly low ratings in the opinion polls. Now, his main adversary, Carme Chacón, beaten by a handful of votes to leadership of the Socialist Party one year ago, has gone on the offensive again. Before Christmas, Chacón challenged the PSOE leadership to bring forward the date of ‘primary elections’ to choose a candidate to fight the next general election, due in 2015. Rubalcaba wants a date approximately six months before and Chacón wants a date very much earlier. In this, she has the support of the President of Andalucía, José Antonio Griñán and the leader of the Madrid socialists, Tomás Gómez. She also has the support of Juan Alberto Belloch, Mayor of Zaragoza, the only socialist mayor in Spain of a city above 500,000 population.

In the Valencia Region, education protests continue against PP cuts. The ceiling is literally falling in on schools where repair budgets have been frozen. In the Luis Vives Primary School in Valencia, a huge placard outside warns pupils – “Before entering wear a helmet, a mask, gloves and carry a torch”. This invocation is not only ironic since the ceiling of one of the classrooms did collapse on 23rd November. On 15th December, another ceiling collapsed. Pupils, teachers and parents are warning the Regional Government with another placard proclaiming “Danger! - Primary School!”.

As the PSPV (Valencia Socialist Party) call on the Regional Government to introduce a regional bank tax which could net 100 million euros a year, an extraordinary case of what looks like institutionalised PP corruption is now coming to light in the world of the arts. This relates to one of Valencia’s flagship art galleries – the IVAM or the Valencia Institute of Modern Art. In March 2013, the IVAM is mounting an exhibition by Mónica Ridruejo. Mónica Ridruejo ten years ago was head of the Spanish television network under a previous PP government. Later, she became a Euro MP for PP and, since then, has had various directorships in telecommunications companies. Does she have an arts curriculum vitae to support an exhibition in the IVAM? The answer is apparently not or, at least according to Valencian socialists, who say that her only qualification is that of being an activist in the Partido Popular.

To coincide with the season of film awards, a cinematic metaphor suggests itself to the present writer. Over the Christmas period, the first prequel film to the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy came out - "The Hobbit. An Unexpected Journey". The film would seem to be an accurate portrait of contemporary Spain. In the film, an all-powerful and unscrupulous dragon expels the dwarves from their home and appropriates both their home and their wealth. The dwarves have to fight without anyone's help to recover both home and fortune. Substitute the banks for the dragon, ordinary Spanish citizens for the dwarves and you see how "The Hobbit" speaks to us of the housing crisis and the scandal of home evictions!