

UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 8TH MAY 2012

by Kevin Bruton



Among those of us celebrating François Hollande's victory on 6th May are the leaders of PSOE in Spain. For many weeks now Spanish socialist leaders have been praying for an Hollande win so that growth in Europe might move to the top of the political agenda instead of austerity.

The central government budget for 2012 which PP outlined a month ago announced 27 billion euros in spending cuts and tax rises. Government ministries were cut by an average 17%, infrastructure was cut and civil servants whose salaries were cut by 5% in 2010/2011 have had their wages frozen. Income tax rises were announced in December 2011 while electricity and gas bills are set to rise imminently. With unemployment at 24% many economists in Spain and beyond have warned that the measures being taken will take two percentage points off GDP growth, pushing the country into the second part of a double-dip recession. Spain is officially in recession after the first quarter of 2012.

Massive protests against cuts and austerity measures are continuing. Prior to May Day marches there have been four major days of protest in Spain since PP came to power in November 2011: 19th February, 11th March, the General Strike of 29th March and 29th April. The May Day rallies and marches in 80 cities were also a massive rejection of the Government's Labour Reform Law, basically a recipe for sacking workers and stripping them of their rights. The city of Valencia on 1st May was third in size of protests after Madrid and Barcelona . with an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 on the streets. In total, since February, millions of people have shown their complete rejection of austerity measures. Wherever one goes in towns large or small, one finds banners and placards rejecting cuts. This is especially evident in huge banners outside schools. And the PP Government's response? The PM Rajoy said on 29th April "Every Friday (when the Cabinet meets) there will be more cuts".

The PSOE response has been emphatic. The PSOE leader Rubalcaba called Rajoy "the Last Mohican of austerity in Europe" while, on 7th May, Rubalcaba referred to the success of the Labour Party in local elections on 3rd May, to Hollande's victory in France and to Greece's rejection of a cuts agenda as the beginning of the revival of social democratic principles in Europe. Rubalcaba's number two, the deputy leader of PSOE nationally, Elena Valenciano, was speaking at the XI Congress of the Valencian Young Socialists on 7th May. She said "The Spanish Right, through cruel austerity measures, have virtually liquidated the youth of Spain". She also claimed "The Right in Spain wants women to leave the workplace and return to their homes to look after children and elderly dependants". Speaking just hours before Hollande's triumph in France she stressed the importance of the "Hollande effect" in Europe – an opportunity for a growth agenda.

Her words are very apposite following a Government 'Plan de Estabilidad' or Stability Plan, announced on 27th April, which is stronger on stated objectives than on the means to achieve them. The main two planks are: firstly, an instruction to the Regions in Spain to cut a further 10 billion euros off education and health spending; and, secondly, a promise to increase VAT in 2013, a tax increase which, as with the income tax increases, PP pledged NOT to do in their 2011 manifesto. Among the instructions to the Regions to cut health/education spending are proposed charges for prescriptions, increases in class sizes in schools, a drastic reduction in teaching assistants and supply teachers as well as a 66% increase in university tuition fees.

The Government says that if the Regions do not comply (and remember that most of the Regions are run by PP) they will take over their budgets and enforce the cuts themselves.

This is now producing direct confrontation with two regions run by the centre left who say they will NOT cut education and health. In the Basque Country PSOE are taking the Government to the Constitutional Courts arguing that Central Government CANNOT, according to Spain's written Constitution, force them to make cuts. Also, Andalusia's newly elected coalition of socialist and communists refuses to undermine the health and education system.

At the end of the first quarter, unemployment was 5,639,500 ie. 24.4%, with 1.7 million families with no-one in work. Hence the 1st May slogan of the trades unions – "Por el trabajo, por la dignidad, por los derechos" or " For work, for dignity, for rights". The most recent measure of PP which will incense Spaniards is a projected 10 billion euro bail-out of Bankia, Spain's fourth biggest bank.

In the Valencia Region, PP has just proclaimed its intention to push through further education and health cuts and also to begin the process of privatising health services. Valencia has before it the horrendous example of the Madrid Region where, in 9 years, the PP Government under Esperanza Aguirre, a self-styled Spanish Margaret Thatcher, has decimated universal health care in attempting to hand over state hospitals to PP's friends in the private sector.

In education, in the Valencia Region, the five trades unions affected by cuts were calling on schools to protest at 12 noon on 10th May and were holding ballots which could mean 6 days of school closures from the second half of May onwards.

PP central Government is currently 'up in arms' over Argentina's decisión to nationalise YPF, the Spanish subsidiary of Repsol, which has huge oilfields in and off Argentina. The context, briefly, is that Repsol discovered in October 2011 in Argentina the largest new oilfield it has ever found and that YPF was in Argentinian hands until the early 1990s. The headline in El País is amusingly apt – "No llores por YPF, España" (Don't cry for YPF, Spain). A further blow came to Rajoy in early May when the Bolivian leader Evo Morales also said that Bolivia would nationalise Red Electrica Española, the Spanish electricity company that is the major supplier in his country.

The present writer has finally found one central government proposal in Spain with which he has some sympathy. This is a government plan to merge the administration of small towns or pueblos with populations below 5,000. This amounts to 84% of the 8,116 'ayuntamientos' or town councils across Spain. The details of the plan are still being worked out and a final report expected later this year.

Moving from an arid topic to an emotive one, the cemetery of Santo Torribio de Teba, a small pueblo in Málaga province is a physical symbol of the two Spains that fought the Civil War. In the centre of the cemetery is a collection of 12 monumental tombs, all in white marble, dating from August/September 1936 where you can read the name of the deceased and the following inscription " ----, assassinated by the enemies of God". Other inscriptions refer to "the Godless" or the "Marxist hordes". Twenty metres to the south, a group of archaeologists have just uncovered the second-largest "fosa común" or "common grave" so far found, of hundreds, or possibly thousands of Republican sympathisers murdered between February 1937, when Franco's troops entered the town, and 1949. The bodies were thrown haphazardly into a pit measuring 25 metres long and 2 metres wide. 35 bodies have been identified so far.

Teba, in early 1937, was right on the front line and when the troops of Queipo de Llano took the pueblo on 23rd February 1937 mass murder by shooting took place, in groups of 10, of anyone identified as being pro-republican. Three women were shot that first night. One of them, a 22-year old woman, was 7 months pregnant. Her 'crime', according to one of the local people involved in the dig, was that on May Day 1936 she displayed the Republican flag in Teba!