

UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 9TH SEPTEMBER 2014

By Kevin Bruton



11th September is, of course, the thirteenth anniversary of 9-11 in the US as well as the anniversary of the Pinochet coup against Allende in Chile in 1973. In Spain, 11th September is the Diada, the Catalan National Day which has special significance this year, as a brief history will demonstrate. 1701 to 1714 was the War of the Spanish Succession. Cataluña took sides with Charles, Archduke of Austria against the Bourbon King of Spain, Felipe V. After the victory of the Bourbons on 11th September 1714, Barcelona lost its municipal government and its historical independence.

Last year, Catalan nationalists formed a human chain from the French border down to Vinarós, the northern coastal boundary with the Valencia Region. This year, the three-hundredth anniversary, nationalists are organising a Human V which will extend along two of the main thoroughfares of Barcelona – the Diagonal and the Gran Vía. The vertex of the V will be the Plaza de las Glorias and here nationalists will locate 16-year old youngsters, 16 being the minimum age at which one could vote in a putative referendum. This is because the Catalan Nationalist Government and their supporters are still clamouring for a referendum on independence on 9th November, a referendum which neither the Constitution nor central government will allow. At 17.14 on 11th September, the Human V will form, comprising almost half a million people. Meanwhile, in Tarragona, a huge demonstration will take place by those who favour a continued federation with Spain.

Last month's Update discussed the corruption charges that may face Jordi Pujol, former Nationalist President of Cataluña for 23 years. Among the allegations are that his party Convergència in government creamed off between 3% and 5% in commissions to party funds from public contracts awarded. Pujol himself will appear in the Catalan Regional Parliament on 26th September to make a statement, but it is not clear that he will answer questions. While the wheels of justice, as usual, grind slowly against Pujol and other corruption cases in Spain, the street protest movement Podemos, who have exploded on to the political scene out of the 2011 "indignados" and 15.M movements, have issued a lawsuit against Pujol and his family.

How the Pujol case will affect Catalan nationalism remains to be seen. Naturally, Catalans are watching closely what happens in the Scottish referendum vote on 18th September although, truthfully, the historical antecedents are totally different. The right-wing PP Prime Minister, Rajoy, said at the Wales NATO Summit on 5th September that "Escocia y Cataluña no tienen nada que ver" or "Scotland and Cataluña have nothing to do with each other". He went on to say that they would only have two things in common were they to become independent: firstly, they would leave the European Union and all international accords; and, secondly, they would suffer a loss of wealth and income of enormous proportions. He also denied that a yes vote in Scotland would promote the independence cause in Cataluña, though many Catalans would take the opposite view.

The PP government, aware of the voters growing mistrust of the principal political parties and aware that in the Euroelections of 25th May this year the two main parties fell below 50% of the vote combined, have come up with an Electoral Reform Law which they say will "regenerate democracy" in Spain. This proposal is nothing short of cynical party-interest politicking. It is, essentially, that in the local elections which take place across Spain in May 2015, PP propose that the party which wins the most votes or, if you like, the most voted party, will appoint the mayor and will govern. The cynical self-interest is evident. PP are afraid of losing thousands of councils to a coalition of forces which might include the Socialist Party, Izquierda Unida (the communists), Podemos and/or environmental parties. PSOE, the Socialist Party, have condemned this move and called on other parties to stop it, saying it is "partidista" (pro one party) and anti-consensual if not anti-constitutional. Those on the right of PP want to extend the proposal to regional elections. This is because the Party is terrified of losing its Madrid and Valencia Regions to a red/green alliance.

The Socialist Party has only had a new leader, Pedro Sánchez, for two months (since 13th July). He has not, however, wasted the summer. On 23rd August, Sánchez appeared in Santiago in Galicia to coincide with a "friendly" visit from Angela Merkel to the PM Mariano Rajoy. Sánchez (and remember he has a PhD in economics) produced a 10-point plan for European Union measures to improve the economy in Spain. He argued for a detailed EU plan to help those Euro countries with an unemployment rate of more than 15% (Spain, of course, has 25%). He demanded a social pact across Europe to help recovery and stability and, controversially, if bravely, he wanted a depreciation of the euro.

On 1st September, Sánchez held a televised press conference following the first post-summer PSOE National Executive Committee Meeting. He was devastating in his indictment of the cuts and sufferings inflicted by the Rajoy government and he highlighted the areas which must be included in PSOE's Manifesto for November 2015, the date of the next general election. He emphasised the desperate need to create jobs and the urgency of producing a progressive taxation policy to help the worse off and to finance education, health and the social services. He talked inter al about the need to promote gender equality and a new Law to combat corruption and prevent revolving-door politicians. He stressed the need for Constitutional Reform to address the Catalan and Regional problem in Spain. Overall, it was an impressive performance, as also was a lengthy interview published on 8th September in the Valencian regional daily newspaper "Levante". In this interview, he said "I became PSOE leader because I want to change Spanish politics" and "I understand Podemos and want to open up my Party to the people. We will hold citizen conventions to construct from below our manifesto for 2015". He finished by saying "PSOE must become again the great party of change in Spain".

As was to be expected, open primaries to elect a candidate to fight the next general election will be put back until next year. The date has just been confirmed as being 26th July 2015. At this juncture it seems highly unlikely that Sánchez will find a serious rival candidate. Lastly, on Sánchez, he is not ignoring his international public image. On 7th September, he appeared on a platform in Bologna, Italy, alongside what Sánchez called a "new generation of EU socialist leaders". With him were Matteo Renzi, Italian PM, Manuel Valls, The half-Catalan French PM, as well as the leader of the SPD in Germany, Achim Post and the Dutch Labour Leader, Diederik Samson. Sánchez, after a few improvised words in English, read out a speech in Italian while Renzi introduced him as the next Spanish Prime Minister.

At the NATO Summit in Wales, on 4-5th September, the PM, Rajoy, effectively placed Spain in the rearguard of countries prepared to take military action against ISIL in Iraq. Everyone in Spain remembers the public revulsion against the previous PP Spanish government (that of Aznar) joining Bush and Blair in Iraq in 2003. Incidentally, Spain has about 60 nationals fighting for ISIL while roughly 1200 Moroccans with Spanish residency status are also in Iraq and Kurdistan.

On the economy, unemployment was up 8,070 in August. GDP improved by 0.6% in the second quarter of the year but the Spanish trade balance is worse as imports grow and exports fall. On 8th September, the OECD issued a report on Spain which called for more increases in taxation, both direct and indirect, but also, Janus-like, called for action to counter cuts in education, health and the social services.

This Update started with history and will finish with history by referring briefly to a local hero. All year the centenary of the start of WW1 has been remembered. But, of course, this past week has also seen the 75th anniversary of the start of WW1. As has been well documented, at 02.00 on 1st September 1939, the Wehrmacht's first mounted regiment moved into Poland. At 04.40, the big guns of the old German battleship, the Schleswig-Holstein, anchored in Gdansk harbour for a "goodwill" visit, opened fire on the Polish fort at Westerplatte. On Sunday 3rd September, Britain and France declared war on Germany in fulfillment of their guarantees to Poland. In Spain, in 1939, Franco's brutal 'victory' in the Spanish Civil War was turning into equally savage reprisals against the losing side. A customs officer named Miguel Giner Giner, from Altea in the Region of Valencia, was investigated by Franco but allowed in 1940 to go to Les in the Spanish Pyrenees, a small pueblo close to German-occupied France and to Andorra. The Wehrmacht took up posts along the border with Spain to prevent 'illegal' entry into the country. In July 1943, 15 to 20 men, women and children (all Polish Jews) fled Nazi atrocities to escape to Spain. They were arrested and returned to the Nazis. Giner could do nothing to help.

From then on, Giner decided to disobey Franco orders. In subsequent years, he helped hundreds of escapees (mainly Jews) by hiding them or lodging them in Les and the surrounding area before facilitating their onward movement to safety. The Raoul Wallenberg International Foundation in Israel is currently preparing a posthumous homage to Giner (he died in 1969) whom they call the "Angel of the Pyrenees". "Levante" newspaper on 1st September termed him the "Oskar Schindler" of Altea. A local hero indeed!