

**UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 9th April 2013**  
**by Kevin Bruton**



During the Easter break, the corruption charges allied to Bárcenasgate, and affecting the national leadership of the governing party PP, have been in abeyance whilst the law courts consider the way forward. Fortunately, for convinced republicans, such as the present writer, the examining magistrate, or 'juez', José Castro, aroused us from our vacation slumbers on 3rd April by announcing that the younger daughter of the King and Queen, Cristina, WOULD after all, be brought before the courts to answer questions about her involvement with the Instituto Nóos. As is well known, this Institute, founded by her husband Iñaki Urdangarín, is accused of sequestering and laundering countless millions of euros of public money into the private pockets of Urdangarín and partners.

The judicial system had no choice but to call Cristina to appear in court. The former business partner of Urdangarín, Diego Torres, has furnished investigators with hundreds of emails demonstrating the compliance of Cristina with Urdangarín's nefarious and allegedly criminal business deals. Torres's emails (which it would be too fanciful to imagine are all invented) further reveal that other members of the Royal Household, including the secretary to Cristina and her sister Elena, Carlos García Revenga, were also involved. The King himself is believed to have given his explicit approval of Urdangarín's allegedly con-artist schemes.

The February Update referred to institutional crisis in Spain and 'El País' of 7th April had the same heading – "Crisis e instituciones" or "Crisis and Institutions". The Editorial was occasioned by a major opinion poll conducted in March, ie before the announcement of Cristina's summons to court. This poll shows that the subject of the Monarchy and the Royal Family has, in a short space of time, gone from being a taboo issue, which even republicans were wary of raising, to an openly questioned and criticised institution. The events of the past year have helped, of course – notably the King's elephant hunting, the dubious role in Spanish public life of his 'friend' Corinna zu Sayn-Wittgenstein and, naturally, the involvement of Cristina and the Royal Family in the Urdangarín court case.

The opinion poll, which 'El País' termed "A barometer of institutional confidence", asked Spaniards: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way in which the following institutions are carrying out their functions?". The King now has an approval rating of 42% but a disapproval rating of 53%, viz a net score of -11, his lowest figure since he succeeded Franco as Head of State in 1975. His net rating a year ago was +21. By age group, only among the 55+ age group is the King's net rating in black figures, at +12. In the 35-54 age group, the King ranks at -10 but, in the 18-34 age group, his net rating is an astonishing -41.

In the institutional poll generally the answers were as would be expected – little faith in politicians or parliament, or in large and small companies, or the Church or, perhaps surprisingly, the Trades Unions. The justice system only merits a marginal approval rating by Spaniards. The big losers, however, given their historic status, are the Royal Family and they could feel the consequences very soon. This is because the PP government, acknowledging to some extent plummeting public trust in the institutions of state, are about to re-launch a Law on Transparency, a new Act of Parliament which had its first reading in parliament nine months ago but which has been gathering dust ever since. The Law on Transparency Mark II will force the Royal Family to make public all kinds of expenditure hitherto secret, such as travel expenses, signing of contracts, maintenance of royal palaces, use of official vehicles etc. etc. Such information, normal in other constitutional monarchies, but undeclared hitherto in Spain, has allowed the Spanish Royal Family to boast, falsely, that they are the cheapest in Europe.

On transparency itself, Spain must have one of the worst records around, although it is not easy to find figures to support this general assertion. One organisation, however, the Open Budget Index, an international body that assesses the transparency of budgetary and economic information supplied by governments, has recently published a report which shows that in 2012 Spain occupied 19th position, below countries such as Uganda, Bulgaria or Slovakia.

An important footnote to the ongoing saga of Cristina and Urdangarín is that they will soon be separated physically. This is because Urdangarín announced on 8th April that he will take up a post in Qatar as assistant to Qatar's new national handball coach, Valero Rivera. (It is worth remembering that Urdangarín first came to fame winning two Olympic bronze medals for hand-ball.) Cristina and their four children will remain in Barcelona until the end of the school year but, subsequently, may also move to Qatar. Many Spaniards are calling for the removal of Urdangarín's passport in the same way that the authorities confiscated the passport of Luis Bárcenas.

And how is the PP government managing the economic crisis? Badly, if one is to believe Eurostat, the EU agency charged with assessing national accounts. On 27th March, Eurostat rubbished Spanish government claims that the economy is improving by saying that there will be no recovery in 2013 and that the destruction of jobs will continue through 2014. The European Commission piled in by declaring that the government's statement that public deficit was 6.74% of GDP in 2012 was wrong and that the real figure was almost 7%.

More damaging is the European Commission's condemnation of Spain's failure to pass through legislative reforms which the government signed up to one year ago. Of the 72 reforms pledged to be enacted by March 2013, 41 have not seen the light of day. And this dereliction of responsibility has come about during a year when the EU bailed out Spanish Banks to the tune of 100 billion euros, all of which demonstrates that Rajoy's government is not only immoral, from a Socialist perspective, it is also objectively incompetent.

It may be a little early to talk about Rajoy's successor as leader of PP, although many are already doing so. The favourite is the head of the regional government in Galicia, Alberto Núñez Feijóo. Feijóo has been 'Mr Clean' until now. However, it has recently come out that Feijóo has shared holidays and stayed in the mansions and on the yachts of a close friend Marcial Dorado. This man has just been arrested on charges of major drug-trafficking, apparently the source of his considerable wealth. An increasing number of Galicians are already calling for Feijóo to stand down.

If PP has problems, the Spanish Socialist Party, PSOE, and their leader Rubalcaba have more. The latest opinion poll, Metroscopia, conducted on 3rd-4th April, again asked the question "Do you approve or disapprove of . . . ?" On Rajoy as Prime Minister the response was 19% approval, 76% disapproval, a net -57. On Rubalcaba, as leader of the opposition, the approval rating was 10% and the disapproval rating 85%, ie a net -75. In a general election, PP would gain 24.5% of votes (compared to 44.6% in the General Election of November 2011), while PSOE would gain 23.0% (compared with 28.7% in the last General Election). Izquierda Unida, the communist party, has gone up to 15.6% (from 6.9%) and a centrist party, UPD, 13.7% (from 4.7%).

It is with huge regret that the present writer joins the millions of people who have been mourning the death, on 8th April, of a famous woman, an iconic figure who was the first woman to succeed in the way that she did and who had a dramatic impact on people's lives. The present writer is referring, of course, to the great Spanish singer and actress, Sara Montiel who died at the age of 85! She was the first Spanish actress,(or indeed actor) to succeed in Hollywood. She appeared in films with many major stars – Gary Cooper, Burt Lancaster, etc. and she was married to the film director Anthony Mann. Hers is a death we can all mourn!