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Adios España - Jamie Maxwell

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IN July 2011, two months after the SNP secured majority control of the Holyrood Parliament, I interviewed Neal Ascherson, the Edinburgh-born political writer, in central London.¹⁴ For Ascherson's convenience, we met at the Euston Hilton, a short walk from where he worked, somewhat incongruously, as an Honorary Fellow at UCL's Institute of Archaeology. Our conversation centred on the brewing row between the Scottish and UK governments over independence. 'The Salmond strategy is to bear down on the whole devolution structure in such a way that it can be shown not to work and a situation arises in which Westminster continuously blocks Scottish demands,' Ascherson said. 'But now things have moved so fast that his plan may be to just spin things out until devolution breaks down of its own inadequacy.'

'Either way,' he added, 'I can't see a million people gathering in Princes Street shouting "freedom". I don't think that's how Scotland operates.'

This remark stuck with me. Only in the final weeks of the referendum campaign did the independence debate produce anything resembling a mass social or protest movement, and even then – barring the odd internet flare-up – things remained remarkably subdued. Much of the activity occurred inside, at town hall meetings or packed-out conference centres. Canvassing teams recited tightly worded scripts. Doors were gently chapped rather than rattled. By historical standards – and despite the press hyperbole – breakaway nationalism has rarely been so well behaved.

But in other parts of Europe, separatism tends to be much more demonstrative. The standout example in this respect is Catalonia. Over the last few years, Catalan nationalists have staged a series of seismic protests in favour of independence. In 2012, one million Catalans poured into Barcelona city centre to call for a referendum on secession. In 2013, 1.6 million formed a human chain stretching from the region's northern border with France to its southern periphery along Spain's eastern Mediterranean coast. And this year, on September 11 – Catalan national day (*La Diada*), the anniversary of Catalonia's historic loss of independence to Spain – more than two million protesters again flooded downtown Barcelona with a riot of red, orange and blue *esteladas*, the flag of Catalan sovereignty.

As Glasgow University academic Kathryn Crameri explains in her new book *Goodbye, Spain? The Question of Independence for Catalonia* – a concise, intelligent account of the Catalan rupture in Spanish politics – Catalan nationalism is fuelled by Madrid's refusal to allow Catalonia an opportunity to chart its own constitutional course. In 2003, the devolved Catalan parliament, under the direction of a tripartite left-wing coalition, decided to update and strengthen the Catalan Statute of Autonomy, a document protecting Catalonia's status as a distinct political community within Spain. At first, the Spanish Socialist Party and its leader Jose Zapatero, then in opposition, seemed open to the idea. But once elected – and as it became clear the Catalans were serious about enhanced powers – Zapatero's enthusiasm cooled. In 2005, after the new Statute had been approved by the Catalan parliament, Zapatero said he wouldn't endorse anything that undermined the Spanish constitution, which includes a clause enshrining the 'indissoluble unity' of the Spanish nation. Since then, the situation has deteriorated with unerring consistency. Four years ago, the Spanish constitutional court struck down key passages of the Statute and a year later Mariano Rajoy, whose right-wing Partido Popular (PP) is widely reviled in Catalonia (and, some believe, reviles Catalan culture), took office in Madrid.

Over the last few months, the drive towards independence has accelerated. In the face of growing pressure from the nationalist grassroots and a developing electoral threat from the Catalan Republican Left (ERC), Catalonia's centrist president, Artur Mas, scheduled a referendum for early November. But this, too, was suspended by the Spanish courts. In its place, Mas organised a 'non-binding consultation' – a kind of glorified opinion poll – which many predict will lay the groundwork for fresh regional elections and then, if those elections return a nationalist majority, a unilateral declaration of independence sometime next year.

This crisis could have been avoided. 'From a base of 13.6% in June 2005, support for independence had risen to a massive 47% by 2013,' Cramer writes. 'Meanwhile, support for federal options had fallen from 31% to 21%, and for the status quo from 41% to 23%.' In other words, the tremendous inflexibility of the Spanish state has convinced a large section of Catalan society that only outright separation from Spain will deliver the autonomy they want. Madrid could have offered the Catalans a fiscal settlement close the Basque Country's *Concierto Economico*, whereby the regional government collects all taxes and sends an agreed portion back to the central government. But it didn't, and now nationalist sentiment in Catalonia is reaching an apparently irresistible pitch.

Contrast Madrid's handling of the Catalan question with London's handling of the Scottish one. Even the Conservative Party has acknowledged Scotland's right to leave the United Kingdom provided a majority of Scots vote for it in a referendum. Indeed, from a staunchly unionist perspective, the story of Scottish devolution has been one of relentless concession and retreat. Every time nationalists (of both the large and small-n variety) advance, Westminster relinquishes more power, from the creation of the Parliament itself to the Calman Commission to Gordon Brown's panicked vow-making in the penultimate week of the independence campaign. Ironically, each new set of proposals confirm Britain is capable of exactly the thing nationalists insist it isn't: reform.

But in Spain the process is working in reverse. Rajoy has used the Spanish economic crisis as an excuse to rein in what he views as profligate regional government spending, thus clipping the fiscal wings of Spain's various devolved parliaments. Under the PP, power has been recentralised, partly to facilitate a programme of brutal austerity cuts. And there is a specific Catalan dimension to Rajoy's agenda. Not only does the PP refuse to recognise Catalonia as a nation in its own right, it has also threatened to reassert Spanish as the dominant language in Catalonia – a move which carried some unsettling Francoist overtones for a generation of Catalan speakers.

As the prospect of independence has grown, the nature of Catalan nationalism itself has changed. According to Cramerí, Catalan nationalists now place less emphasis on culture as the galvanising dynamic of Catalan politics and more on the practical benefits of self-rule. The key driver of this shift has been the ERC and, in particular, Josep-Lluís Carod-Rovira, its leader between 1996 and 2008. 'Being and feeling Spanish in Catalonia, more or much more Spanish than Catalan in Catalonia – even perhaps *just* Spanish – is perfectly compatible with arguing for Catalan independence,' Carod-Rovira wrote in 2008. '[To support] independence, it is only necessary to want a better life for yourself and your loved ones.'

This is, of course, precisely the attitude that has come to dominate SNP thinking over the last two or three decades, as the party has worked to shed its White Heather Club image and marginalise the Ewingite traditionalists in its ranks. The fact that support for Scottish independence is higher in 2014 than it was 1994 suggests the revolution in nationalist messaging has worked. It would be to imagine Nicola Sturgeon arguing, as a sizable chunk of the SNP did in the 1980s, that identity forms a sufficient basis on which to break-up one state and start another – and if she had, the Yes campaign wouldn't have lost by ten points in September it would have lost by 25 or 30.

That said, there remains a strong cultural component to Catalan nationalism. Cramer outlines how nationalist intellectuals have mined Catalan history for symbols of heroic national defeat to match those of Bannockburn and Robert the Bruce. One such symbol is Josep Moragues, a brilliant Catalan general from ordinary stock executed by Bourbon forces as he fought to preserve Catalonia's autonomy in the early eighteenth century. 'Heroes [like Moragues] speak of a modern Catalan state that has never existed but that is known with certainty to be radically different from a Castilian state: democratic, egalitarian, based on clear rights and responsibilities that are vested in the people rather than the rulers,' Cramer writes. 'They symbolise the Catalans' lost statehood, and their chances of regaining it.'

The narratives of Catalan nationalism have also been fed and reinforced by a number of pro-independence – or, more broadly, “Catalanist” – news organisations, including the newspaper ARA. Founded in late 2010, ARA has, as Cramerí explains, ‘[integrated] traditional and new media into an innovative multiplatform environment, [encompassing] print, interactive web content, video and social media ... On its third anniversary it reported average daily sales of 27,520 print copies but more than 1.7 million online views, with 22,000 subscribers, 100,000 Facebook ‘likes’, and nearly 150,000 followers on Twitter.’ ARA – like the television channel TV3, which was created in the 1980s to promote the Catalan language – performs a vital function for the independence movement by countering the often aggressive anti-nationalist bias of the mainstream Spanish media. In this way, Catalan nationalists have used alternative channels of communication to mobilise vast numbers of people at relatively short notice.

But the Catalan ‘Yes’ movement’s greatest strategic advantage may yet turn out to be Castilian intransigence. Unlike David Cameron, who negotiated the Edinburgh Agreement with the SNP, Rajoy isn’t going to budge an inch. He is playing a zero sum game, and betting the Catalans won’t hold their nerve. But many Catalans who would once have settled for a ‘third way’ between separation and the status quo now view Spain as unsalvageable – a democratic wreck. It’s starting to look like the whole structure, as Neal Ascherson might put it, is breaking down of its own inadequacy.

GOODBYE, SPAIN? THE QUESTION OF INDEPENDENCE FOR CATALONIA

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