

Catalunya after the 9 November informal independence consultation

By Geoff Cowling, HM Consul General Barcelona 2002-2005

The relatively low turnout in the Catalan "Informal Consultation" on November 9 compared to the Scottish Referendum may be significant - or perhaps not. The Catalan consultation exercise was not "official" and therefore not for real. That must have had an impact on many Catalans' willingness to participate and is not necessarily a sign of indifference.

In Scotland, the SNP represented a solid united front for Scottish independence. But to the outside observer, Catalunya's independence case drowns in an alphabet soup of fractious Catalan pro-independence political parties: CiU (consisting of Convergencia, which does not converge, and Unió, which does not unite), Iniciativa, ERC, CUP etc. Even the pro-Unionist Catalan parties fail to sing to the same tune - PPC, PSC, Cuitadans. And hovering on the political fringe lies the rapidly emerging "Podemos" party, gathering the protest votes of those fed up with the corruption and inefficiency of Spain's main political parties - a kind of Spanish left wing UKIP. I've no idea what impact "Podemos" ("Podem" in Catalunya) will have on Spain's General Election next year, but you can be sure that UKIP and a rejuvenated SNP will profoundly upset the usual composition of the House of Commons in next May's UK General Election.

After last weekend's "Consultation", you might have thought it wise for the Madrid government to remain silent and let the impact of all this sink into the Catalan psyche. But no, they have jumped at the chance to unite pro-independence and wavering Catalans in a spectacular series of measures. The hectoring put-down of CiU in parliament by the Deputy Prime Minister Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría, followed by the dismissive "No no no!" intervention by Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy could not have been better designed to alienate both undecided and pro-independence Catalans - no hearts and minds attempt at wooing Catalans back into the Spanish fold there! And the proposal to prosecute Catalunya's President Artur Mas for placing ballot boxes on Catalunya's streets is likely to cause rumblings of concern among governments who, up to now, have been content to regard all this as an "internal matter for Spain."

As I said in my presentation to the *Fundació Catalunya Oberta* on 9 September, governments were unlikely to comment on the Catalan consultation beyond pointing to need for all in Spain to comply with the Spanish Constitution, as indeed David Cameron did last Monday. In his Times column, a riled Matthew Parris accused David Cameron of "sucking up to Madrid" and seeing "the paw marks of our Embassy in Madrid". Personally I share Matthew's sentiments, but as a long serving Foreign Office diplomat, my objective advice to UK Ministers would have been to look to the UK's relationship with a government which was both a fellow EU and NATO member, but was also acting in a hostile manner towards Gibraltar - no point in rocking the bi-lateral boat over Catalunya, the UK has bigger fish to fry.

I imagine the same rationale is followed in Paris, conscious of its own French Catalan and Basque minorities along the northern slopes of the Pyrenees. Brussels would be worried at the potential secessionist divide between the Flemish and Walloons. Even Mrs Merkel would be wary of those richer German Federal States, resentful of bailing out the poorer German Eastern States, taking a lead from Catalunya. I would expect nothing from the deeply discredited EU President Jean-Claude Juncker.

Where is all this going? Much more pressure by Madrid could see the Catalans calling *legitimate* Catalan internal elections, resulting in the independentist ERC party holding the balance of power in the Catalan government. Any "Unilateral Declaration of Independence" could see the Catalan government suspended and the imposition of direct rule from Madrid. That would certainly alarm the EU community and beyond.

It's somewhat difficult to see much beyond that scenario, except through a veil of tears. Hopefully cooler heads in Madrid and Barcelona will heed international press advice and enter into a meaningful dialogue long before that stage is reached, otherwise this crisis could sour internal Spanish politics for decades to come. Constitutions have their place, but there are times, like this, when present political reality trumps past legislation.....