



The parliamentary session of dissent

Number 6

Albert Aixalà

Director of the Fundació Rafael Campalans

The parliamentary session that is now finishing has been one of dissent over foreign policy. In the previous session, the consensus was broken as the government engaged in a war that was supported neither by the main opposition party nor Spanish public opinion as a whole. And in the current session, a new political stage has been set, which this article aims to describe in brief.

Today's dissent has its origins in the end of consensus that took place during the previous parliamentary session. In order to understand the extent of the process, we must start first by analysing the electoral campaign itself, prior to the elections of 14 March 2004. The 2004 campaign was defined by the foreign policy of Aznar's government. Almost for the first time in history, foreign policy became one of the main sources of confrontation between the government and the opposition - to the point where PSOE's foreign policy alternatives in the electoral programme featured notably as a primary priority for its alternative to government.

Following the Socialists' electoral victory on 14 March and taking power on 17 April, the programme priorities became political decisions. On Sunday 18th April, less than 24 hours after his government took power, President José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, flanked by the vice-president and minister of defence and with the Spanish and European standards in the background, announced from the Palacio de la Moncloa that he had given "the order" to the minister of defence that he should use all "means necessary" to bring home Spanish troops stationed in Iraq "as quickly and as safely as possible".¹ It was a firm decision with important consequences both at home and abroad.

In terms of foreign policy, that was the fundamental moment in the parliamentary session and was to mark definitively the irresolvable confrontation between PP and PSOE with regard to the government's foreign policy.

In this article, we start with this event and analyse the relationship between PSOE and PP throughout the whole legislative period, in relation to the debate on the need, or not, to establish a new consensus around Spanish foreign policy.

The fragile bases of consensus

The foreign policy of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's government has been marked by the fundamental moment when the troops were withdrawn from Iraq, which was completed on 24 May 2004, when the 1200 soldiers sent by the previous government came home - just before combat in the Arab country began to worsen from that summer onwards.

Throughout this parliamentary session, the Socialist government has accused the Popular Party of having unilaterally broken the consensus on foreign policy while

arguing that the government itself has once again positioned Spain on a path towards international legality, multilateralism and European unity while simultaneously giving a decided impulse to the fight against poverty and support of human rights.

However, the affirmation by the Socialist government that it was the Popular Party who had broken the consensus on foreign policy does not fit precisely with the reality of Spanish democratic foreign policy, given that in Spain for many years a fragile consensus existed, based on not discussing the government's foreign policy; during the initial democratic period there was real, deep dissension. We should not forget that in the early 1980s, the PSOE - at that time in opposition - openly disagreed with the foreign and security policy of Leopoldo Calvo Sotelo's government, and ended up proposing a popular referendum in order to prevent Spain from joining NATO - something that, once in government, it used to legitimise staying in the Atlantic Alliance.

In spite of this, it is true that since the middle of the 1980s, Spain's foreign policy has been built around plans that were accepted by the two major parties. However, these foreign policy plans became redundant during José Maria Aznar's second parliamentary session because Spain had been changing even more than the world around it. Twenty years, or even ten, years earlier, Spain had no alternatives as regards its decisions on the international stage: it had to be in the European Community; it had to be in NATO; it had to be in the Economic and Monetary Union. But from the moment Spain was firmly "in its place", without historic emergencies, the political forces realised that there was a wide range of possibilities for the nation's foreign policy - and even more so for its European policy.

Spain could commit to advance further within European integration, or stand up for a more intergovernmental Europe. It could promote a Europe that was constructed around the strategic alliance with the United States, or a more autonomous Europe. It could prioritise its relationships with Latin America above those of the Mediterranean, or vice versa. It could, in short, choose how best to defend its political, economic and cultural interests.

Faced with this situation, it is reasonable that Spain's two major parties should have defended different projects regarding the country's role in the world, and even interpreting the country's international position differently. After more than twenty years of broad consensus regarding Spanish foreign policy, based on its normalisation and Europeanisation, society and the country's political parties have in recent years faced up to the need to "act", to assume the responsibilities of a country with important interests in three regions of the world and to "choose" between different, and sometimes opposing, options. Spain has had to choose between different options on the international stage and this has brought about a necessary politicisation of foreign policy.

This process, however, has met with structural difficulties. In the first place, the lack of a tradition of thinking about foreign policy. Until very recently, different doctrines did not exist in Spain. Foreign policy was defined by government and not by the academic world or by the parties. Alternatives or real doctrines were never developed by the opposition. And when different alternatives arose in the public debate and the parties offered their own solutions, there was fear of confrontation. However, during this parliamentary session, reality has been increasingly imposed, with the government abandoning the rhetoric of consensus and starting to present Spain's international options as political decisions, decisions that the different parties disagree on, in the same way that they disagree on other public policies.

Two views of Spain and its role in the world

The Popular Party and the PSOE have two different views on international relations and Spain's interests in Europe and in the world. These two views were seen clearly in the electoral programmes presented at the last general election - and so they still are four years later. If we analyse the respective electoral programmes for the elections of 9 March, we can observe that the differences, whilst displaying some overlap, are clear. And this is in spite of foreign policy and security no longer being the pre-eminent topic that it was in 2004, with economic and fiscal policy being the focus of the current electoral campaign.

These two opposing views were brought into sharper focus during the first half of the parliamentary session. Since April 2004, when the Socialist government took power, relationships between both parties were marked by an important clash. This was based not only on the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and cooling of relations with the US, but also on the European elections of that June (which entailed making explicit the two forms of viewing Spain's European and foreign policies) and the negotiation of the new European Constitution, which was used by the Popular Party to accuse President Rodríguez Zapatero of failing to defend Spain's interests.

In the early months of 2005, this confrontation was put to one side during the European Constitution referendum campaign. In spite of their differences and the aim of part of the Media sympathetic to PP to subtly promote abstention, both parties campaigned for a "Yes" vote. In this case, it became evident that PSOE and PP were in agreement over the framework of European policy despite not agreeing fully on the specifics of the legal arrangement, as is common in a political democracy. Apart from this episode, however, taken as a whole the parliamentary session has been characterised by the constant opposition of two models of understanding Spain's position in Europe and in the world, although this has moderated as international policy has evolved. As the military intervention in Iraq became a nightmare for the Bush administration (mainly from 2005) and the European Constitution project ran aground as a result of the French and Dutch saying "No" in their respective referenda, PP and PSOE were forced to temper their positions.

The Socialist government was not only forced to maintain its military presence in Afghanistan (and even to extend it), but it actively participated in setting up an international military mission in the Lebanon following the war in the summer of 2006. Zapatero's peace policy had to adopt specific nuances despite continuing with its commitment to an Alliance of Civilisations – something that was constantly ridiculed by the Popular Party. In Europe, political change in Germany and the weakening of French President Jacques Chirac in his last two years in office forced the PSOE government to be more flexible about its alliances and to change its position on the European Constitution. This led to an aligning with the new consensus led by Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy.

In this regard, the Socialist government was also obliged to re-start the discourse on the defence of Spanish interests at the heart of the European Union, especially in relation to the negotiation of the 2007-2013 financial framework - which will continue providing a positive balance of more than 16 billion euros - as well as European's policy on immigration, which has meant that the government has led a long-term strategy for Africa, by common agreement with countries in the neighbouring continent.

As far as the Popular Party goes, US President George Bush ceased being a role model and the party had to find other arguments with which to criticise the government. In

relation to the economic sphere, it is worth highlighting the sudden conversion of PP to economic Europeanism (symbolised by the creation of large European transnational companies) when, with Gas Natural making a bid to takeover Endesa, the party clearly supported German company E.On's takeover bid over the creation of a large Spanish gas and electricity company.

In spite of all of this, the impossibility of reaching a consensus on foreign policy has meant that, since 2006, both parties have progressively accepted that such an unreachable consensus must not be forced through on the basis of minimum imperatives. Rather it is a question of knowing how to manage dissent to make it possible for each party to apply its own foreign policy whenever they enjoy the trust of citizens through elections - in the same way that they apply their different economic, social and national policies. This "normalisation of dissent", as noted by Esther Barbé (2006), should enable a continuing in the next legislative session of the "normalising" of democratisation and a growing politicising of Spain's European and international policies. This will involve rejecting the establishment of new bases of consensus as well as defining new limits for dissent, which define the rules of the democratic game in foreign policy.

This debate on the limits of dissent is linked to the debate on limits of confrontation in a democratic system. Dissent over foreign policy has formed part of the tense and confrontational atmosphere that has characterised overall relationships between the two major parties during the parliamentary session. This need to define limits on dissent and confrontation has also become evident in other policies – such as that relating to the articulation of the Spain's territory. Foreign policy is no longer seen as a matter of political competence that is substantially different to other policies but instead is subject to the same rules of public debate and factional competence.

A new framework for Spain's foreign policy

In this new parliamentary session, the political parties will have two options: to maintain foreign policy as a domain reserved for decision-makers and academics, or accept the challenge of politicisation and democratisation that, far from being perceived as a danger, should be assumed as a reality to be managed. Faced with the impossibility of creating a new consensus, we must start to devise a policy for Spain that goes beyond consensus, and learn to manage dissent. However, for this to happen, we must also accept that the projects of both the Popular Party and the Socialist Party are legitimate and that only citizens have the right to reject or approve them. And this is something that the Socialist government has understood perfectly well.

The PSOE and the government of Rodríguez Zapatero have given significant media importance to foreign policy since its mandate began. The first measures taken on changing the direction of foreign policy - beginning with the withdrawal of troops from Iraq - consciously sought media impact. Both the form and time in which those measures were taken were decided according to internal political criteria, with the objective of conveying a clear idea: a response was being given to citizens' demands, expressed first on the streets and then at the ballot box, with an abandoning of alignment with the United States and a re-positioning of Spain in Europe side-by-side with France and Germany. The boldness of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's decision was to put democratic principle and popular legitimacy before the former criteria on consent with the main opposition forces and subordinating previous international commitments.

Thus, if foreign policy must be legitimised in the eyes of citizens then, more important than achieving a new consensus on foreign policy, is ensuring that the policies of the government enjoy the backing of the people. However for this to happen, citizens must be involved in an ongoing dialogue like that which takes place for other policies, since only with a greater level of public debate on Spain's strategic options can we effectively handle dissent between the political forces.

Undoubtedly, this will be one of the main foreign policy challenges that the new Spanish government emerging from the elections of 9 March will have to face.

Notes

¹ "Declaration by the President of the government relating to Spanish troops in Iraq", 18 April 2004, from <http://www.la-moncloa.es/Presidente/Intervenciones/ConferenciasdePrensa/p1804040.htm>

Bibliographical references

- AIXALÀ, Albert. "Spain's foreign policy in the face of the challenges of its politicisation: from consensus to legitimacy". *Cidob d'AFERS Internacionals* magazine, no. 69 (2005) pp. 89-105
- ALDECOA, Francisco AND SOTILLO, José Angel. "In search of multilateralism: Restoring the link between foreign and European policy". *CIDOB International Yearbook 2006* (published 2007) pp. 325-337
- BARBÉ, Esther. "dissent and adversity: Spain's foreign and security policy in 2005". *CIDOB International Yearbook 2005*" (published 2005) pp. 289-301
- HILL, Christopher. "What is to be done? Foreign policy as a site for political action". *International Affairs* 79, 2 (2003) pp. 233-255
- OPEX. *The bases and limits on consensus in foreign policy*. Observatorio de Política Exterior (Foreign Policy Observatory). Fundación Alternativas (2005)