

# the future of Catalonia

John McInnes examines the political history of Catalonia and looks at the opportunities as a result of the recent elections

Like Scotland, Catalonia is a small (7 million) 'stateless nation' with its own executive and parliament established in 1980. About two thirds of the population live in Barcelona: a cultural powerhouse boasting astounding architecture but surrounded by a metropolitan 'red belt' of altogether bleaker high rise estates where the workers from the car factories, chemical industries and docks live. The rest of Catalonia is rural, given over to farming, tourism and small businesses. The country that Orwell wrote his homage to still harbours a radical tradition. The Partido Popular (PP) – the Spanish Tories – struggles to keep its share of the vote in double figures. When George Bush snr. complained in 2003 that he wasn't having US foreign policy decided on the streets of Barcelona (almost 1 in 5 of the country's entire population had turned out for the anti Iraq War demo) the collective civic pride was tangible.

Only about half of Catalonia's current population was actually born there. Most migrated from impoverished Castilian-speaking areas of Spain in the 1960s as Franco's moribund dictatorship embarked on industrialisation. Catalonia was also the cockpit of the Spanish Civil War and a key player in the 'negotiated' transition to democracy. Franco's declared enemy were the 'Rojoseparatistas' who wanted not only a democratic and secular Spain, but a federal one. This is a lesson the Catalan socialists took to heart. The Partit dels Socialistes Catalans (PSC) is federated to but independent of PSOE, the state wide socialist party led by Spanish President José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. It is socialist, but also nationalist. It easily wins elections to the Cortes, the Spanish equivalent of Westminster. It was also favourite in the first democratic elections to the Catalan Parliament, the Generalitat, in 1980. However they were won by a nationalist coalition *Convergència i Unió* (CiU) led by Jordi Pujol who proceeded to govern for 23 years, partly because many PSOE voters in the red belt abstained, presumably alienated by the solidly nationalist character of Generalitat politics.

Bogged down by corruption scandals, weakened by an unpopular alliance with the PP to hang on to power and facing the PSC's Pascual Maragall, the former Barcelona mayor who brought the Olympics there in 1992, CiU lost in 2003. Owing to an electoral system that systematically favours CiU by under-representing Barcelona, the PSC was forced to form a 'Tripartit' government with the republican nationalists Esquerra (ERC) and the Communist-Green alliance (ICV) to secure a parliamentary majority. Its flagship policy was to renegotiate the Catalan Statute of Autonomy, the equivalent of the Scotland Act.

Much was expected of the Tripartit. And its untold story was how much social reform it delivered, ploughing resources into public services that had been systematically ignored for a quarter century. 23 years of CiU government had left Catalonia,

one of the richest areas in Spain, with some of the lowest per capita budgets for health and education anywhere in Europe. The Catalan middle class treats itself in private hospitals, hires immigrants from Latin America to care for dependents and packs its children off to well-subsidised private schools. Many forecast a grim future for CiU once it no longer had the considerable spoils of office at its command (patronage is rife in Catalonia). Both its nationalist and conservative supporters could now vote for the real thing: Esquerra or the PP.

The Tripartit's social policies rarely made the headlines, eclipsed by the roller coaster trail of Statute re-negotiation, replete with brinkmanship both amongst the Catalan parties and between Barcelona and Madrid. Zapatero had to balance support for his Catalan comrades against the hostility to Catalan nationalist demands across the rest of Spain; hostility that gave

the struggling PP an invaluable lifeline. The Statute dominated Spanish politics for two years. Throughout, CiU played a predictable game of arsonist in Catalonia and fireman in Madrid. In a masterstroke characteristic of his acumen, President Zapatero did a deal with Artur Mas, new leader of CiU, to secure the final passage of a Statute acceptable to the Cortes. This simultaneously chastised the PSC (while giving them a Statute they and CiU could support without problems) and enraged the radical nationalists of fellow Tripartit members Esquerra enough to tip them into opposing the deal – along with their arch-enemies the PP. After months of being accused by the PP of being a Catalan ETA in sheep's clothing Esquerra spokespeople struggled to explain how they now found themselves on the same side of the debate.

Esquerra's reaction meant the end of the Tripartit and early Catalan elections. It had repeatedly been weakened anyway by the never less than bizarre behaviour of Esquerra who appeared incapable of exercising the merest shadow of collective responsibility in government, condemning the administration to lurch from one crisis to another. Its leader Carod Rovira set the tone early on, when without informing his fellow ministers he met secretly with ETA leaders to negotiate a cease-fire: for Catalonia only. The universal outrage forced Maragall to sack him.

José Montilla (secretary of the PSC and industry minister in Zapatero's government) replaced Maragall as PSC candidate for president. Maragall paid the price for the Tripartit's failure to get beyond the nationalist agenda of the previous quarter century. Montilla's most important credential was his birthplace: Andalusia. The party gambled that although Maragall's rating in the polls was higher, alienated socialist voters in the red belt would turn out for one of their own.

The parties' apparently anodyne election slogans each spoke volumes. CiU, favourite in the polls, plastered Barcelona with

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portraits of its photogenic leader proclaiming **'Love Catalonia, Govern well'**. Four short words said 'the Tripartit could not organise a school trip without a crisis summit first. Moreover, when the chips are down, they'll obey their Spanish masters, just look where Montilla was born'. Catalan PP leader Josep Piqué, an intelligent man with an impossible job, appealed for **'Time for common sense'**. This message was really for his own party leadership which had spent two years denouncing the Statute as part of a terrorist plot to dismember Spain. Only the Communists and Greens campaigned openly for the re-election of the Tripartit, a **'Government of the Left'**. Its youth wing's novel campaign of distributing free condoms bearing the message 'Fuck the right' caused some controversy. Esquerra's campaign, typically, was odd. Posters of Carod Rovira shaving proclaimed he was **'Human, Like You'**. Its No. 2, Joan Puigercos was pictured with a power drill in his hand. Maybe this was a subliminal riposte to the PP: we **are** psychopathic driller killers! The PSC's strategy was low key, their posters of the uncharismatic Montilla announced that **'No-one does more for the Catalans'**. Finally the newly formed socialist anti-nationalist party Ciutadans-Partido de la Ciudadanía (Citizens Party) called for an end to 'the obsession with identity and the past'. Its leader (a lawyer of 27) dressed only in his birthday suit announced 'Your party has born'.

As the tables shows, the elections were won by CiU, the party written off by many after its 2003 defeat. The socialists lost a sixth of their vote and five seats. The Communists and Greens did very well, almost increasing their vote enough to push the PP into fifth place. Esquerra, rather than being punished for their poor record in government and U-turn on the statute, lost the same share as the socialists and two seats. The PP lost only one seat: a good performance from a candidate so embarrassed by his party leadership he had asked them to stay away. However the biggest winners on the night was the Citizens Party. It took up to 5% of the vote in Barcelona securing 3 seats.

#### 16 November 2003 (turnout 62.5 percent)

Party	Votes	Percent	Seats
CiU	1.024.425	30,94	46
PSC	1.031.454	31,16	42
ERC	544.324	16,44	23
PP	393.499	11,89	15
ICV	241.163	7,28	9
CPC	-	-	-
Absention	20.184	20.91	
Total	3.097.122		

#### 1 November 2006 (turnout 56.8 percent)

Party	Votes	Percent	Seats
CiU	928.511	31,52	48
PSC	789.767	26,81	37
ERC	413.067	14,06	21
PP	313.479	10,64	14
ICV	218.474	9,56	12
CPC	89.567	3,04	3
Absention	60.025	2,03	
Total	2.885.678		

As the results became clear, everyone was, of course, a winner. The PP had avoided meltdown. CiU won both the popular vote and the most seats. ERC, thanks to CiU's advance, held the balance of power: a much stronger card to play in the post-election poker game of alliance negotiations than they had achieved in 2003. Mas immediately offered a coalition pact to the Tripartit's black sheep, offering the deputy leader's position to Carod, in the full knowledge that PSOE leaders elsewhere would balk at Montilla making such an offer, although Zapatero's public position was that the PSC had freedom to do what it thought best. Montilla might have lost votes and seats, but the Tripartit's partners had enough for a working majority if they could agree on a programme. The nationalist wing of the PSC could now argue that ditching Maragall was foolhardy: it gifted votes to Convergència.

The socialists could argue that the obsession with the Statute had already done the deeper damage. One price paid to keep CiU on board was dropping electoral law reform, worth about 5 seats to CiU. By Sunday night, three days after the polls closed, Tripartit mark 2 was formed, with Montilla as President and Carod as his deputy. This result meant that once again, the Catalan socialists had done Zapatero few favours. CiU will no longer give him their votes in the Cortes, and the PP will make the most of Carod Rovira's role.

However a Tripartit with a less nationalist project would be no bad thing. Hell will freeze over long before either Scotland or Catalonia gain independence, and deep down, even the most ardent nationalists know it. Beneath the elevated discussion of historic rights and identities lies a much more prosaic fight for resources from the central state. In Scotland, characterised by **some** areas that need extra state aid (Edinburgh, for example is hardly the UK's most impoverished city) this has a certain legitimacy. In Catalonia, one of Spain's richest areas, it has none at all. Nor is it only a question of economics. Barcelona is, and to some extent has always been, a vibrant innovative city. There used to be some truth in the rather clichéd contrast between the bureaucratic, sluggish but dignified ex-imperial majesty of Madrid and the commercial bustle of its northern rival. Now it is Barcelona that is stuck in the past, its political and commercial elites incapable of outgrowing an increasingly inward-looking politics of victimhood in which Madrid plays the role of eternal villain.

It is ironic that in one sense Franco is the father of contemporary Catalan politics. It was the Cuadillo, after all, who equated socialism and peripheral nationalism. One of the more surreal aspects of the Statute negotiations was listening to PP leaders hijack the language of the left: solidarity; a central state strong enough to re-distribute resources, equal rights for all. Yet this election may prove something of a turning point. For the first time in many years the Generalitat has a few non-Catalanist but radical deputies. It has its first ever President born outside Catalonia. A quarter century late, Catalonia may realise its radical potential once again.



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