



Catalonia at the Crossroads

A talk with the president of the Government of Catalonia

Columbia University, April, 8, 2015

INTRODUCTION

Good evening. Thank you for coming. It is a great honor for me to be at one of America's finest universities. I would like to thank Mr. François Carrel-Billiard and the staff of Columbia's European Institute for making that possible. I would also like to thank Columbia's own Professor Xavier Sala i Martín, who you should know is also one of Catalonia's own, for such a kind introduction. I am grateful to Professor José Moya for moderating the discussions later and, of course, I must thank the staff of Catalonia's Delegation in the United States who have worked so hard in the background to make today happen.

After my talk here tonight, I will make a stop at St. Paul's Chapel, which features beautiful vaulting in intricate patterns designed by another of Catalonia's own, Rafael Guastavino, whose work can also be seen at Grand Central Station, Carnegie Hall, and the Great Hall on Ellis Island. Mr. Guastavino trained as an architect in Barcelona and when he emigrated to the US in 1881 he brought Catalonia's ancient techniques here and left his stamp on your lovely campus and the City of New York!

As the title of my speech here tonight says, we have reached a crossroads in our long history. In a few months the Catalan people will vote in plebiscitary elections to decide if we stay in Spain or whether we move towards independence. Before talking specifically about that, however, I thought perhaps I should tell you a little about Catalonia. Many people in the U.S. have heard of Barcelona, the capital of Catalonia, and any soccer fans here tonight may know about our Barcelona Football Club, one of the best teams in the world. But not many Americans really know much, if anything about my homeland.

HISTORICAL CATALONIA

We are an ancient people, going back to the very origins of Europe, with ancient Greeks and Carthaginians giving way to the Roman Empire, followed by the Visigoths, and then the Franks, when Catalonia was joined with the core of Europe as part of the Carolingian Empire. Eventually in the 9th century we became a self-governing principality under the ruling of the Count of Barcelona, and a clearly identifiable Catalan culture developed by the 10th century, with our own language, laws, and government. The parliamentary and constitutional system of Catalonia, dating from the 11th century, is one of the oldest in Europe (as old, if not older, than the English). Catalonia's government is called the Generalitat of Catalonia and was created to limit the power of the monarchy. The first president was named in 1359. I have the honor of being the 129th President of the Generalitat of Catalonia. There would

have been even more presidents of Catalonia over the last 700 years had the Generalitat not been forcibly suspended for several centuries of our history.

I cite all this because it helps to make it clear that Catalonia has a long political past as a territorially differentiated nation with its own representatives and autonomous institutions. Strategically located in the Northwest Mediterranean, Catalans also took advantage of their long coastline to go to sea and trade Catalonia's almonds, olive oil, wine and fine textiles, coming to dominate a maritime empire that extended across the western Mediterranean. This empire was not created not only by soldiers, but also by sailors, merchants and philosophers, and a mentality to produce rather than destroy. Later Catalans went to the New World and beyond, and there is probably no country on earth today where you will not find a Catalan or two carrying out scientific research, running a company, teaching at a university, or saving lives as a doctor. We also have some very good basketball players, Pau and Marc Gasol, who are helping out in your NBA!

Catalonia evolved from the rights we had in the Middle Ages through the industrial revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries, and in the 20th century we truly became a land of immigrants, just like the United States. It began with a huge influx of people from other regions of Spain who came to Catalonia where there were plentiful jobs in our different industries. It has continued until today to the point where 16.7% of our population comes from immigration from inside the European Union, with large numbers from the UK, Italy, Germany, France, and Romania, as well as from further away, with the largest numbers coming from Pakistan, China, Morocco, Bolivia and Ecuador. They have all been welcomed and integrated into our multi-cultural society, making a huge contribution to our varied economy that with an output of some \$260 billion in goods and services makes our economy larger than a dozen of the European Union's 27 Member States. Catalonia's capital, Barcelona, rivals many of Europe's capitals in size and surpasses many in terms of economy as well. As an example we have 117 diplomatic consulates in Barcelona, behind only Hong Kong, Hamburg and New York. In short, Catalonia and our capital, Barcelona, have the economy, size, and importance of many European countries.

We have never been a financial power, or a military power, nor can we dominate demographically, or with the power of great multinationals. Our power and survival have come through our creativity, and our capacity to work hard.

As you may know, we have also faced some hard times. One of the most difficult periods in our long history came after a year-long siege of Barcelona ended with the surrender of our troops on 11 September 1714, when Catalonia was finally conquered by the Crown of Castille. Catalan attachment to its traditional institutions was so intense that resulted in a fierce defense that prompted the admiration of all Europe, with the European press of that time praising the Catalans for their "Love of Liberty". In response, Spanish King Phillip the Fifth banned all of Catalonia's institutions, civil rights, and the ancient privileges of the Principality of Catalonia.

In the first part of the 20th century we fought hard to defend the Second Republic, which had restored our autonomy after more than 200 years, and the use of our language. Sadly the Republic was defeated by the forces of General Franco during the Spanish Civil War, and a dark period of Catalan history began again. While all Spaniards were victims of Franco's ruthless and institutionalized violation of human rights, Catalonia suffered an additional cruel

and systematic attempt at cultural annihilation. Once again all regional powers were removed, and the Catalan language was made illegal. The Catalan Government went to exile, but the Catalan President at that time, -Lluís Companys- was captured by the Gestapo, sent back to the fascist-controlled Spain and executed.

When the 40-year long dictatorship finally ended in 1975, Spain surprised the world, with a peaceful transition to democracy that shattered conventional wisdom, which was that dictatorships could only be overthrown by violence. But Spain is still a young democracy, and there are still some vestigial ticks from our pre-democratic past.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL SPAIN

Once the 40-year dictatorship ended, through the remainder of the 20th century Catalonia had a tacit agreement with the Spanish government, with two overarching goals: first, the desire to democratize, Europeanize, and modernize Spain, and second, to develop more self-government, with the necessary tools for managing Catalonia's own development.

When the 1978 democratic constitution was drawn up one of the priorities was to accommodate the historical nationalities which had already existed in Spain (Galicia, the Basque Country and Catalonia) through the recognition of "autonomous communities". In the end, however, rather than a federal model based on a concept of dual federalism or shared sovereignty as is the tradition here in the United States, Spain imposed a regional model with a radial centralist system of infrastructures and an obsessive government monopoly on all spheres of power including tax collection, airports, trains, ports and judicial system. And any confidence that a negotiated settlement on adequate measures of recognition and decentralization could be reached under the current system was broken completely when the Spanish government had the Constitutional Court eviscerate Catalonia's State of Autonomy, which strengthened the growing and unceasing campaign towards less and less self-government.

In the end it is this lack of genuine autonomy, the inability to govern our own affairs, which has worn down support for the current settlement and set the stage for the growth of the current self-determination movement.

To Catalans, self-government means, in the first place, having the competencies to protect and nurture our cultural patrimony, and our centuries old language. Catalan is the largest language group in Europe without its own state, and yet one cannot address Spanish government institutions even today in any other language other than Spanish. And because Spain does not request it, Catalan is also not an official language in the EU. Instead, the current Spanish Minister of Education declares publicly that Catalan children need "Hispanization" (in other words they need to be more uniformly Spanish) and the school system incurs regular interventions by the central government claiming bias against Spanish, even when standardized tests show that Catalan students are bilingual, and they even score better in Spanish than some autonomous communities who only use Spanish. This may seem like a distant or esoteric issue to someone here in New York, but we would ask you to remember, this is our own culture and language, in our own land we are talking about. A language which I dare-say exists only because Catalans have tenaciously fought to keep it alive, over the centuries, and in spite of, rather than thanks to, Spanish institutions.

On the economic front, our dream is to create the infrastructure necessary to make the Barcelona port one of the top container ports in Europe (as it already is for the cruise industry) and for it to serve as the top cargo hub from the Americas and Asia to the rest of Europe. We have a vision of Barcelona Airport, one of the most popular tourist and business destinations in the world, of becoming a truly trans-continental hub on par with London or Paris (or Frankfurt or Milan, non-capital hubs). We have a dream of implementing an industrial policy more properly suited to Catalonia's infrastructure and economy, and we dream of university reform to give our students what they deserve, the best higher education in the world.

And I can go on but the important point is that to all these questions the answer is the same - we cannot. We do not have control nor competencies over the Barcelona airport, the state still keeps a monopoly of control over the Port as well, ditto on industrial policy as well as the university system. When we wish to raise more revenue via a bank account tax or medical prescription tax, we are told that we cannot violate Spaniards equality. And even though the Catalan parliament outlawed bullfighting in 2010, the Spanish congress is making moves to approve a law which would force bullfighting on us as it would be considered immutable patrimony of Spain. I have given you several examples of the frustrations that our government and our people feel in terms of the dissonance between how they wish to organize their lives, the economic, institutional and social model of our country, and our reality, which is a highly restricted regional governance structure which leaves minimal room for anything that Americans would recognize as real autonomy.

But let me clear, I have not come here to complain, rather, I have come to tell you about how and why we dream of a different future. We are acutely aware that many on this earth are not as fortunate as we are, and that we have the problems of any developed world economy rather than the crushing poverty or war that many of our brothers and sisters suffer in other parts of the world. I know that and believe me, we get that.

At the same time, what we wish to explain is that Catalonia is a centuries old nation whose citizens have every right to create, if the citizens of our country so democratically choose, a different social construct, with different institutions and different priorities than their current state.

But we explain some of the issues because we are also aware that when contemplating such an important step as creating a new state, we have a duty to explain, as America's founding fathers also made clear in their own Declaration of Independence of 1776, that "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation." Please allow me then a few minutes to give you some context on our self-determination movement, and our proposals for the coming months and years.

NATIONAL TRANSITION PROCESS

Political analysts say the tipping point for Catalonia came in 2010 when Spain's Constitutional Court ruled as unconstitutional crucial portions of Catalonia's Statute of Autonomy. This statute of autonomy had already been approved by both the Spanish and Catalan parliaments and by a huge majority of Catalonia's citizens in a referendum. Many Catalans felt deeply betrayed, they had played by the rules and in good faith. Therefore, for many Catalans the Court's decision put an end to any speculation regarding the possibility of

Catalonia progressing within Spain. The stripping of our autonomous powers led to a million-person strong demonstration in July 2010 with the slogan “We are a nation. We decide.”

This million person march has been followed by several others. On Catalonia’s National Day, September 11th 2012, some 1.5 million people – one-fifth of our population – marched through central Barcelona to demand that Catalonia become a new state in Europe.

Once again on September 11th 2013 1.7 million Catalans of all ages, from every social strata and every corner of our land joined hands peacefully in a remarkable human chain that went from one end of Catalonia to the other, across hills, beaches, fields, and rivers, to make it very clear that the Catalan people wanted to vote on Catalonia’s political future.

Then again on September 11th 2014 1.8 million Catalans filled two of Barcelona largest avenues from one end of the city to the other, wearing yellow and red shirts to form the stripes of the Catalan flag that stretched for miles and joined up at one end to form a gigantic “V” for “Vote”.

These massive peaceful demonstrations were all organized by Catalan civil society groups, the Catalan National Assembly (ANC) and Omnium Cultural. The members of these groups represent all different social classes, ages and ideologies. They come from every corner of Catalonia, and include Catalans who were born in Catalonia as well as others from around the world, some with Catalan as their first language, others with Spanish as their first language or English, French, Urdu, Mandarin, Polish or Arabic. They have all been welcomed, and integrated into our society and want Catalonia’s dream to be fulfilled too.

The independence movement started spontaneously at the grassroots level. Unlike what some have claimed, it was not the idea of a radical politician or an irresponsible political party. This process has come from the bottom up, and as the movement grew the political parties realized that they had an obligation to fulfill the people’s will to have a vote on their political future.

At that stage we felt we had three options:

1. To resign ourselves to the situation, which most people didn’t want
2. To try to change the Spanish Constitution. That needs the support of three-fifths of the votes in the Spanish Parliament and the current Spanish Government has said they would block any attempt in this regard, so that is out of the question
3. Independence

This debate has been a top issue in Catalonia for years now, but unfortunately, the Spanish government refuses to even discuss the matter. I have made repeated requests to Prime Minister Rajoy to meet to discuss the situation, and he simply refuses to talk about it with me or anybody else.

Also, it is important to point out that the plebiscitary elections are a last, rather than a first resort. Prior to calling these elections we have tried every legal and political road possible to an agreed referendum. In September 2012 the Catalan parliament approved a motion, with

65% in favor, to formally ask the Spanish government to authorize a self-determination vote in Catalonia, as the British government did with Scotland. Our request was quickly denied. In January 2013 the Catalan parliament passed a declaration of sovereignty stating “the people of Catalonia have by reason of democratic legitimacy the character of a sovereign political and legal entity.” This was overturned by the Spanish Constitutional Court in May 2013.

After the Catalan parliament passed a consultation law in September 2014, and set the date for a non-binding consultation on November 9th 2014 the Constitutional Court overturned the law based on the Spanish Constitution saying that the Spanish state is “indissoluble.” The law made clear that referendums would be non-binding consultations, but this was emphatically refused anyway. We decided that we had to carry out the will of the Catalan people, so a vote was held using volunteers instead of civil servants, and allowing on-the-spot registration for the electoral lists.

The Spanish government employed various measures to prevent the participatory process, having the Constitutional Court suspend it and pressuring school directors not to open the schools to be used as polling stations. Nevertheless, and under duress, out of a voting population of 5.4 million, 2.3 million Catalans still managed to cast their ballots, with an 81% majority voting in favor of independence. I, my Vice President and the Minister of Education, were all charged with disobedience for violating a court order, misusing public funds, breaching our public duties and usurpation of powers for holding this non-binding peaceful vote.

As you can see, we are up against implacable opposition. Since the Spanish government still refuses to allow a referendum, and our people have been calling for one for years, I have no other option left but to call early regional elections and to use them as a plebiscite on independence. A majority of our political parties agreed to this, and a date is now set for plebiscitary elections on September 27th 2015. Those parties in favor of independence will share a common platform item making it clear that if you vote for them you are in favor of Catalonia entering a transitional period to independence immediately after the vote.

As I said, we are willing to talk and have always been open to negotiation with the Spanish government in Madrid. That remains the situation today. But, unfortunately, their approach seems to be to keep their heads buried in the sand while issuing statements that use dubious legal arguments about why they cannot discuss the subject, when the issue is not a legal one but a political one.

It is wrong to deny us our democratic right to self-determination. It is not just and it is not even sensible. On September 25th, 2012 President Barack Obama spoke about self-determination, saying “we believe freedom and self-determination are not unique to one culture...they are universal values.”

In preparation for the September 27th plebiscitary elections, we are also taking the first steps towards creating the state structures and tools we would need should there be a majority of votes in favor of independence. There will also be a new constitution, many new laws, and public organizations to set up which all require time and effort.

We will need a tax authority, a national bank, supervisory bodies for the stock exchange, port, airport and railway management authorities, a public health authority, a justice administration, a diplomatic corps, an intelligence service, and a means to defend our territorial waters, coastline and borders.

The terms of separation would have to be negotiated, and there will then be complex work to disentangle Catalan and Spanish institutions and interests, and set up all the institutions of a separate state. This won't happen immediately, as the complicated process of separating, setting up the institutions of an independent state, and establishing our place in the world will take some time. There will be extensive negotiations with the Spanish government, but also with international organizations of which Catalonia wishes to become a member.

INDEPENDENT CATALONIA?

Finally, what would an independent Catalonia look like beyond the basic state structures and tools? It would be the 16th most populous EU country, out of 29 member states. In the US we would be the 13th most populous state, between Virginia and Washington State.

We are a land of creative and innovative business and commercial entrepreneurs, Barcelona is a Smart City, and we have become a regional technology hub – a kind of Silicon Valley for Southern Europe. We are the second region in Europe with the most research grants, more than 5,500 foreign companies operate in Catalonia and we play a leading role in attracting foreign companies to Spain and Europe.

We would be good neighbors, reliable allies, and a net contributor to the EU budget. We also do not bear ill will of any other nations, least of all Spain. The historical, cultural and family ties are too deep. Geography has bound us together, and we will always remain Spain's friend. But what we have now doesn't work. We do not say that Spain has to be the way the Catalans want it to be. It doesn't make sense. Spain should be how it wants to be, with its centralized government, its monarchy, its own priorities, and Catalonia should be how Catalans want it. To each his own, without imposing on the other.

On the international relations front I have reiterated many times that Catalonia would be a reliable partner, assuming immediately and fully our international obligations. What Catalonia is seeking is nothing more than joining efforts with the free nations of the world to tackle today's challenges and to shape together our common future.

Our commitment with a just and peaceful world stems from our history, our principles and our aspirations. We are eager to contribute in Europe -united under the EU umbrella- as elsewhere –working with and through the United Nations system- to make such vision a reality. Catalonia believes in multilateralism and is willing to contribute to its proper functioning. From the design and implementation of the agreements around the post-2015 agenda, to the challenges of climate change, sustainable development and the promotion of human rights; our country is ready to prove our commitment and our capacity to provide a substantive contribution to the international community,

Catalonia is called to become an anchor of stability, not only of financial stability, creativity and economic growth in the Iberian Peninsula and the South of Europe; but also an anchor

of stability in terms of security as well as of social and intercultural coexistence in the West of the Mediterranean.

And we would also of course reaffirm our commitment to our partner across the Atlantic, the United States. Catalonia and the United States' relationship is nearly as long as the United States has existed. In fact it was President John Adams who created the first American consulate in Barcelona, in 1797 – this was one of America's first consulates. In doing so his priority was to promote relations between the young American democracy and Catalonia. Today, the United States and Catalonia do some \$4 billion of trade annually. And because America is a priority, Catalonia has had an institutional presence in the United States since 1989, starting with a commercial office in New York, and over time has expanded to two delegations in both New York and Washington (which handle institutional affairs, trade and investment, tourism and cultural and language promotion), and additional commercial offices in Miami and in Silicon Valley.

The current US President Obama said in his very moving speech in Selma, Alabama last month that the most powerful word in democracy is “we”. “WE the people” is the start of the U.S. Constitution. “WE shall overcome” was the anthem of America's civil rights movement. “Yes WE can” was how your president urged Americans to vote for him. We in Catalonia also believe in the power of “we” in a democracy. WE will vote on September 27th and WE will decide our own future.

Thank you very much.