

‘May Dialogue Win, Let the Ballot Boxes’ – Translation of the Op-Ed by President Puigdemont and Vice President Junqueras in *El País*

The UK government and Scotland reached an agreement on a referendum. The question, as approved by the U.K. Electoral Commission, was: “Should Scotland be an independent country? Yes or no”. Nothing more. They reached agreement because the political will existed to call and hold the referendum. There was no need for the courts to become involved with what could be resolved politically. Now it seems that Scotland and the UK will once again reach an agreement on another independence referendum. The second one in three years. That’s not bad for something that Spain cannot even sit down at a table for a dialogue between the Spanish and Catalan governments.

Agreement on how to resolve political differences always unifies. Differences only separate and divide if there is no will to resolve things. Differences are part of coexistence in a democracy; they aren’t negative, you just need to treat them delicately when dealing with differences that are more difficult to defend and involve more commitment. This is how democracy is strengthened, and reasserts itself in the face a populist push, and it is simple to resolve differences through prohibition, putting up walls, discrimination. To point at the one who is different with a threat, with an element of division in a society that had been living peacefully with its sacred and unwavering truths is, apart from being terribly unfair, a grave obstacle when it comes to finding solutions.

As a consequence of the agreement between Scotland and the UK a broad debate occurred, a debate of ideas. In the end, a majority of the people of Scotland opted for “no” as the government in London had predicted. That was what happened, nothing more. Life goes on in Scotland and the UK, just as it would have with a victory of the “yes” voters. The independence referendum had a voter participation level of 84.59%, 12 points higher than the Brexit referendum, which was 72.2%, a number that was considered a milestone, because it was the highest level of voter participation in the last 25 years. This data offers something that is very relevant, which should be noted by those who accuse the people seeking change of being some kind of agents seeking to divide society: the separate camps in a democratic discussion nevertheless are brought together at the ballot boxes. We insist: don’t separate the differences, because what separates is just the absence of agreement on how to resolve the differences.

As a consequence, the scenario of an agreed referendum is what we would like in Catalonia. We would like to remind everyone that we have requested such a referendum many times. Today, despite the bad omens and the frontal rejection from the Spanish government, we insist on it once again. Perhaps it is unjust to attribute this attitude exclusively to President Rajoy, his government, and his political party. We note with pity and sadness that this same position, without any kind of shading, is shared among the Popular Party (PP), the Socialist Party (PSOE) and the Citizens Party (C’s).

Therefore, it seems fairly indisputable that the position of the Catalan government and the Parliament of Catalonia is in line with the Scottish position (dialogue and an agreed

referendum), while the position of the Spanish government and the Spanish parliament bears no resemblance at all to the position of the UK government or parliament. There is not only a worrying absence of any will to create a dialogue, but also the fact that Spain keeps going in totally the opposite direction: indictments, and politicizing the courts while judicializing what is a political problem in a dirty war, with threats of exceptional measures against Catalonia, etc. We have already seen the first results: the first convictions and barring Catalonia's former president, Artur Mas, and his ministers Ortega and Rigau, while we are currently awaiting the ruling of Francesc Homs. Their crime was to have given Catalonia's citizens a voice.

In accordance with the will of the Catalan government, the Parliament and society, in Catalonia we have launched the National Pact for the Referendum, which has been joined by an overwhelming majority of Catalan society, from the business sector, civil society and right across the board. Polls of all types and origins show that 80% of Catalans want to vote on the political future of Catalonia as regards Spain. The Pact's goal is to reiterate the will of the people for an agreed referendum as a priority. Some might consider us dreamers. It is better to be dreamers than irresponsible and better to try to find solutions than opting to not even attempt anything, making a virtue out of doing nothing.

If the frontal refusal is maintained, then nobody should be surprised if we reiterate that we will not renounce this right. We will do everything in our power to see that the people of Catalonia can vote in 2017, in a self-determination referendum. We have reached this point through conviction and commitment, while being accountable for the mandate given to us by the voters. And don't even dare think that the future of Catalonia, of Catalonia's citizens won't be decided by its citizens, but by the Spanish government instead. The very same Spanish government that, with their usual way of approaching things, has managed to make the majority of Catalans fed up with them, to the point where these feelings are shared by sectors of Catalonia's population who, quite legitimately, don't want to see Catalonia become an independent state.

The Spanish state has abandoned all the Catalans, even those who don't want independence but who love Catalonia just as much as those who do, and who therefore suffer when Catalonia suffers. The fact that some Catalans are not in favour of independence doesn't mean that they don't deeply feel how Catalonia has been neglected, and that they also suffer the consequences. The Spanish state has also abandoned those Catalans who wanted to see a Spanish state that doesn't turn its back on them. And for these Catalans and all the others the Government of Catalonia will put out the ballot boxes. Let all Catalans decide. It is their right, and they will exercise it.

The time for politics is long overdue. We are doing this in Catalonia, and we know we might not always do it right but we are ready to listen. Nevertheless others have decided to delegate their political responsibilities to the courts. They hide themselves behind the Constitutional Court, behind the Supreme Court and the regional courts, with no concern about compromising the separation of powers and the role of the courts as neutral arbiters. Europe has fully realized and showed their concern without any ambiguity for the drift in Spain's democracy that seriously compromises the fundamental health of the rule of law, as was recently pointed out in the Opinion put out by the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe. We can hear voices from abroad loud and clear who are calling for political dialogue, and a political solution. This is just what the recent report from the Konrad Adenauer Foundation said as well. And the very British Parliament that allows Scotland to vote has

formed an All-Party Parliamentary Group to monitor the situation in Catalonia. One thing is certain, that what is possible in Westminster isn't possible in the Spanish Cortes.

A few days ago in Madrid a veteran Spanish democrat, Antonio Garrigues Walker, reminded us all of something that all democrats in general agree with, whether they are for or against independence, and that is that in a democracy there is no right to refuse dialogue. We are already seated at the negotiation table. How long before the others arrive? Or will they even come? When it is too late please don't look in our direction. Please be as demanding, critical, and as relentless with your own politicians as you have been with us all these years, going back to when your sentence against our Statute of Autonomy began to create the broad majority that now exists for allowing all Catalans to decide their political future in a referendum.