

Conference by the President of the Catalan Government at Harvard University: ‘Catalonia, Today and Tomorrow’

Cambridge, MA, 27 March 2017

On behalf of the Government of Catalonia, I would like to thank the Center for European Studies at Harvard University for inviting me here today, and I would also like to thank you all for your attention. It is a great honour to be able to share with you the core principles that guide the political dynamics of my country.

As introduction, I would like to quote the words of Pau Casals, one of the greatest cellists of all time, a guest of the White House in 1961 and later awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Kennedy, and in 1971 awarded the United Nations Peace Medal in recognition of his stance for peace, justice and freedom.

It's with humility that I say:

I am a Catalan. [...] Catalonia has been the greatest nation in the world. I will tell you why. Catalonia has had the first parliament, much before England. Catalonia had the beginning of the United Nations. All the authorities of Catalonia in the 11th century met in a city of France, at that time Catalonia, to speak about peace. 11th century! Peace in the world and against, [...] war, the inhumanity of war. This was Catalonia. I am so so happy, so moved to be here, with you.

Pau Casals talked about our country, Catalonia, which has a history traced through the centuries. We have conducted ourselves proudly in “the Catalan way” of peace and democracy, and we continue to do so today.

This year, with huge democratic expectation, we are living through the most challenging event in our recent history: the organization of a binding referendum to decide whether Catalonia should become a new State.

This is the commitment of my Government and supported by the political majority in the Catalan Parliament. It is our democratic response to the demands of Catalan society: around 80% of Catalans are in favour of holding a self-determination referendum.

Many of you may be wondering why there is an issue with resolving the current situation in the ballot box.

Let me go back to 1975, when the death of Franco put an end to a harsh dictatorial regime. The following 40 years were characterized by close collaboration between Catalonia and the Spanish institutions, contributing decisively to the democratic, economic and social progress of Spain.

In 1978 the majority of Catalans voted in favour of the Spanish Constitution, believing it would be the best instrument to face a democratic transition in peace and with respect for minorities. It is worth remembering that the Constitution was adopted just three years after the dictator's death, and only two-and-a-half years before a failed military coup in Spain.

The consensus achieved opened an exemplary period of transition, applauded worldwide. Catalonia, and many others, accepted sacrifices for the common good, and Catalan politicians played a key role in all the crucial decisions that were to come: entry of Spain into NATO, full recovery of previous institutions, joining the European Union, restoration of civil rights, and integration into the single European currency, among others.

In recent years, during the difficult times of the economic crisis, we have asked Catalan citizens to make titanic efforts in order to avoid an EU bailout for Spain... at a social and political cost that cannot be ignored.

It is without question that Catalans have demonstrated, over and over during recent decades, an exemplary, loyal and democratic attitude towards Spain, and a deep sense of state.

These advancements were based on a bilateral relation between Catalonia and Spain, on the recovery of Catalan self-government and on the process of political decentralization. In 2010 understanding and mutual respect were dealt an abrupt blow, followed by a regression in civil rights and political power, and a return to former times.

In July that year, the Spanish Constitutional Court, strongly politicized and partial, destroyed the main precepts of the recently modified law that had established the functions of the Catalan Government and was to update the political relations between Catalonia and Spain. The Law had been approved by both the Catalan and the Spanish parliaments, and had received an overwhelming endorsement from the Catalan people, with 74% in favour in a referendum.

In short, the Court de facto demolished the bilateral relationship that Catalonia and Spain had maintained up to that point that had been the means of understanding and progress. This is the same High Court that upholds a Constitution which authorizes the Army to act against its own citizens, something that appears in only one other constitution in Europe: that of Turkey.

A political court overturned a democratically-adopted decision. The Constitution was approved in a referendum, the Government of Catalonia Law was approved in a referendum, and the current conflict has to be solved by voting in a referendum.

In a democracy the absolute priority should be to serve and protect the citizens who make it possible. Without the democratic will of the citizens, the “We the People”, there is no possible legality. And when a matter of politics is handed over to the courts, democracy and freedom vanish in the blink of an eye.

Our fellow citizens are demanding to be part of a new State in order to live in a country with the following ten characteristics:

1. A country that actively strengthens the European Union and its founding principles

Last weekend in Rome we celebrated the 60th anniversary of the signature of the constitutional treaties of the European Union. Catalonia is firmly committed to greater European integration to continue the path of six decades of peace and stability.

Further integration is necessary to tackle an unprecedented political crisis and waning trust in the European Project; something we witness with concern. The combination of populism and some legitimate concerns like a lack of accountability and distance of the institutions from the people, has led to the growth of Euroscepticism across the continent, and to the situation in which a Member State has voted in favour of leaving the Union.

A stronger and more resilient Europe is needed to balance solidarity and responsibility of Member States, a coordinated fiscal system, the development of welfare, the strengthening of the single market (especially the digital one), the protection of the environment, and the consolidation of security and cyber-security. Otherwise, the economic and monetary union, and the euro itself, will not be viable in the face of growing challenges from protectionism, inequality and insecurity.

For the Catalan nation, committed to the founding European treaties, its principles and its future, it is difficult to be part of a Spanish State that frequently ignores European laws; a State that some European reports accuse of being among the most noncompliant within the Union. This is not only unfair to our European partners but it also demonstrates that Spain is incapable of meeting the challenges it faces today.

The Spanish diplomatic services have even attempted to abort official missions of the European Commission to Spain to analyse this compliance with the law; an unprecedented and unjustifiable behaviour of a Member State.

2. A reliable European and Mediterranean partner

We strongly believe in a common Euro-Mediterranean project, and we are convinced that we have a future together. Our shared history and culture make us stronger and more prosperous.

After the wave of changes in 2011 – the Arab Spring – we have witnessed the growing threat of Jihadist groups resulting from the destabilization of much of the region, and the consequent migration crisis.

Europe and the Western world are facing a grave challenge to their security and to the regional stability of the Mediterranean. We need a more assertive foreign and security policy, coordinated with our partners, with more resources devoted to strengthening Europe's role in the promotion of peace, development, and the fight against threats in a variety of new forms.

At the same time, we cannot simply turn our back on the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Mediterranean countries across from our homes.

Catalonia wants to play its role. We have always been a welcoming land, a confluence of historical cultures. Our citizens are calling on us to tackle without delay the current human drama. Only with the power of a State can our response capacity be used in an effective way. We have directly offered the European Commission thousands of places to admit refugees, as the Spanish government is not fulfilling its commitment to the 17,000 refugees that were supposed to arrive months ago.

3. A country with freedom of speech

The Catalan struggle in favour of democracy is being followed and debated in Finland, Ireland, Estonia, Switzerland, Belgium, Denmark and the United Kingdom by means of all-party parliamentary groups, in parliamentary debates or in ad hoc parliamentary sessions.

Something that is normal around Europe is forbidden in Catalonia. In one of the oldest Parliaments in Europe, the Spanish State has resorted to criminal litigation and taken Catalonia's Parliamentary speaker to court for having opened the door to this debate.

Perhaps this is why the influential Konrad Adenauer Foundation has appealed that the conflict between Catalonia and Spain cannot be resolved neither by means of police nor courts.

4. A country with an independent justice system

According to the World Economic Forum, Spain is in 84th place in the world in independence of the justice system (out of 148 countries ranked), and has dropped 24 positions in the last three years. On a purely European level, Spain occupies one of the lowest positions.

This perception is worsening as the Catalan situation deepens and more disputes are subjected to criminal litigation and taken to the very top of the judiciary – which is precisely where the political affairs of State are being settled.

A few weeks ago, experts in constitutional law at the Council of Europe, the Venice Commission, concluded that in order to promote the perception of the court as a neutral arbiter, and to strengthen its independence, the Spanish Government should reconsider the recent amendments made to the Constitutional Court Act, which granted executive powers to the Court. That court now has the legal power to suspend my government without trial.

The experts warned the Spanish Government that it is following the models of countries such as Albania, Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine, and that it does not comply with the European Charter of Human Rights.

5. A country of social justice

In the past years, a growing number of legislative initiatives adopted to protect the welfare of our fellow citizens have ended up being taken to court as well. This social legislation has nothing to do with politics. It affects the daily lives of the people and is especially important during the slow recovery from the economic crisis.

We cannot build the country we want and deserve. Our hands are tied by outdated Spanish laws which don't serve common welfare.

Just two of the many examples: the newest regulations aimed to protect access to electricity for vulnerable families, and the rules put in place to facilitate housing for evicted families with no resources, have both ended up in court.

And all this has happened at the same time that the Spanish Mortgage Act has been overturned on several occasions by the Court of Justice of the European Union for allowing abusive clauses to be included in mortgage contracts.

6. A country of equal treatment for everyone

Two years ago, the Catalan Parliament unanimously passed a comprehensive Equality Law, which was regarded as one of the most advanced in Europe. This law, once again, has not made it past the scythe of the Constitutional Court. It represents a lost opportunity to drive through innovative measures in terms of labor market opportunities that would level the field.

7. A country that protects animals

Our Parliament has legislated to forbid animal abuse within Catalan territory. The response of the Spanish State has been to move heaven and earth in the legal system to allow bullfighting, a spectacle that publicly tortures bulls until their death. How? By taking the Catalan law to court; by arguing that the defence of animal rights is not within the power of the Catalan Government, and by claiming that the protection of such lives violates Spanish Culture.

8. A country with a competitive economy

We need the instruments of State to strengthen the strategic sectors in our economy, to stimulate investment, and to consolidate a vibrant business sector which generates value and employment.

To this end, we need public investment to be directed towards the productive economy and to have a social and economic return. I will give you only a couple of examples here: while some European countries move 40% of their commodities by train, in Spain it is below 5%, entailing a huge impact on economic costs, the environment and transport safety.

At the same time, it is puzzling that Spain is a leading country worldwide in terms of passenger high-speed railway when its profitability is among the worst. To put this nonsense in perspective: Spain is slightly larger than California, yet it has eight times the high-speed rail infrastructure of the whole of the United States.

We only demand efficiency in the decisions taken to promote competitiveness, openness and economic integration. The centralized operation of all Spanish harbours and airports, an abnormality in European countries, has to end if we

are to promote competitiveness and encourage trade with Asia and, as a knock-on effect, boost both the Spanish and European economies.

9. A country that fights against climate change and supports renewable energies

We all have an inescapable commitment to the sustainability of our planet. This has become one of the greatest challenges facing humankind today.

Despite this, Spain has imposed harsh cuts on the promotion of renewable energies, it has established an energy mix based on fossil fuels, and has created legal uncertainty around renewable energies.

Even more incredible than all of this: Spain is known for its fair weather that provides the highest number of sunshine hours during the year in Europe. What has the Government response been to such a competitive advantage? It has created a solar tax that effectively wipes out self-consumption, which constitutes a cornerstone of the new industrial revolution. Not even the direct appeals of ideologues, such as Jeremy Rifkin, have managed to change the situation.

Wherever Catalonia has room to legislate, we act. This is why Catalonia has a law on climate change, one of the most ambitious in Europe, while Spain is still thinking in the twentieth century.

And now to my final point.

10. We want a country that scrupulously respects democracy

Democracy is a fundamental right which is not extended to Catalan citizens, neither at home nor abroad. Some of the Catalans citizens attending this talk have probably experienced this obstruction in person. Every electoral process is an attack on the civil rights of Catalans who live abroad. In the most recent elections for the Catalan Parliament, at a crucial time for Catalan interests, only one out of every 13 Catalans living abroad was able to vote.

Back at home, putting out a ballot box has been a cause of political debarment. In March this year, my predecessor, President Artur Mas, along with the former vice-president and the Minister for Education, and later the former Minister for Presidency, were disqualified from holding public office and fined in cases that should have never been brought before the courts.

They were condemned for having allowed the Catalan people to participate in a democratic consultation in November 2014. This participative process was a

commitment between the citizens and the Catalan political institutions; in other words, between the people and their democratically elected representatives to express the people's views on the relations between Catalonia and Spain.

That is what this is all about; the power to express our voice in a Spain that does not want to hear us, a Spain that does not want to listen to its own citizens.

Josep Puig i Cadafalch, the president of the Commonwealth of Catalonia, the entity that preceded the Government I currently preside over, said in a speech that, "all the efforts to overcome the old politics of Spain, renewing and regenerating them, have failed".

He said that back in 1923, and now, almost 100 years later, we feel that we are still in the same situation.

Catalonia wants to vote this year so it can gain its own voice which, like that of Pau Casals, speaks of prosperity, peace and freedom. A voice that proposes agreements and is committed to forming links with all the world's nations. A voice that recalls how Catalonia is a country that has always sought multilateralism and the principles this fosters: respect, dialogue, agreement.

These elements are part of our history, our DNA. And we believe now is the time to share them with everyone, with you. We are a country committed to building a new world order that is fairer and more peaceful, more interlinked and more open to dialogue.

The Government of Catalonia would like to hold this referendum in agreement with Spain. We are convinced that this is the best option. But up to now it has been impossible, due the Spanish Government's constant, absolute refusal to discuss it.

Our proposal for dialogue and consensus will remain open until the very last day.

However, if the Spanish Government continues to refuse, Catalonia will hold the referendum in any case. This was the decision adopted by the Catalan Parliament which, apart from being one of the oldest in the world, as Pau Casals claimed, also has full powers of decision regarding Catalan matters.

I would like to be clear that we are in the service of democracy and not the other way around. And we proceed because the referendum concerns democracy and the dignity of people who believe in freedom, whether or not they are in favour of a new political status for their country.

70% of the Catalan population has its roots outside Catalonia. This is not a question of nationalism, but of a profoundly democratic act through which we aspire to maintain and improve relations with Spain, Europe and the world. We all have economic, emotional, social, historic, cultural and family links with people throughout Spain which we do not want to lose.

The referendum on Catalan independence must therefore be the culmination of a peaceful, democratic grassroots process, arising from the will of the people. Every year since 2012, on our Catalan National Day, around one and a half million people, in a country of 7.5 million, have taken to the streets to demand independence for Catalonia. Never before has Europe seen such demonstrations, repeated year after year.

All this mass mobilization has been backed up by the ballot box. During the most recent elections, in September 2015, the electorate gave their representatives a clear and simple mandate: to hold a binding referendum to decide our political future.

Our struggle is a reflection of the fight for American civil rights. American institutions have respected democracy and the will of its people to adapt over time.

The US Constitution belongs to the American people, not the other way around. Up to 27 times it has been amended. Up to 27 times it has been adapted to the aims of the American people. Thanks to that, slavery was abolished. Thanks to that, women and men can vote. Thanks to that, segregation is a thing of the past.

The Spanish Government must listen to its people and respect civil rights.

We are convinced that a referendum is the clearest, strongest and most internationally acceptable mechanism for establishing the will of the people in a decision of this magnitude. We believe that the best way of asking the people is through the ballot box.

We, like you, also believe that democracy is based on the will of the people. We also believe in institutions, like your own, that start with the words, "We the People..."

Carles Puigdemont Casamajó
President of the Government of Catalonia

