

## Why Britain should pay homage to Catalonia

### **Barcelona's vote for devolution from Spain reveals a mature attitude to democracy that we would do well to emulate**

Hail the future. The future is Catalan. For most Britons, last weekend's vote for greater autonomy for Spanish Catalonia was a quirk of a people still emerging from the political dark ages. The new Catalan "statute" must be some constitutional sangria, redolent of Gaudí, castanets and bullfighting. At very least it must be deference to local populism by a still insecure central government.

It was nothing of the sort. The statute is the new era in European politics. It enshrines Catalonia's "national identity" in a regional context. It offers the Catalans a measure of legislative, judicial and linguistic separatism in both a federal Spanish state and a wider European confederation. Education, health, housing and roads are firmly localised, and the booming city of Barcelona can regulate its commerce and even regional migration. The Catalan language, already the medium of instruction in public schools, will be official. The province will continue to levy its income, business and property taxes, ceding just half to central government for national redistribution to poor provinces such as Andalusia and Extremadura.

The vote was a political success for the charismatic Catalan leader, Pasqual Maragall, and for Spain's new socialist prime minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. It was furiously contested, and rejected by local extremists of both left and right. The original document was diluted by a deluge of 500 amendments and finally approved by a narrow majority of the national Cortes and two-thirds of the Catalan vote. Zapatero now intends to negotiate similar autonomy - beyond that already enjoyed - with the Basques and Galicians. In the former case it could herald the end of one of Europe's nastiest separatist conflicts.

These arguments have been a reprise at ground level of last year's lofty debate over the new European constitution, a debate that Britain funk'd. They have shown a country seeking a new framework for its sub-national politics after much had been surrendered to Brussels and the Euro authorities by its central government. A city-state, Barcelona, bartered power with a nation-state, Spain, and reached a compromise balancing the aspirations of both with the disciplines of a global economy. Maragall and Zapatero cut many devious deals to achieve it, but it remains the outcome of a mature Spanish democracy.

Even Eurosceptics accept the need for some sort of new European treaty for the coming century. After last year's debacle, the ethos of such a treaty must be entrenched subsidiarity, a formal respect for the tiers of national and sub-national identity that make up a modern state. The failure of the current generation of Europe's leaders to understand this was what led to last year's referendum debacles in France and the Netherlands. To this extent the Catalan debates should guide a new European commonwealth, as the Putney debates did a new British one in the 17th century.

Most of Europe has been decentralising for over a decade. One talisman has been the eruption of bespoke regional constitutions, from Sicily to Corsica, Brittany,

Scotland and Lapland. They have often been accompanied by a politicised culture; witness the linguistic protectionism of Welsh, Flemish, Basque, Monégasque and Letzebuergesch (Luxembourg) among others. Even Cornish is returning from the dead. Europe's "variable geometry" is an ever more complex matrix of local identities and parallel sovereignties. In 1993 Andorra, across the Catalan border, upped sticks from France and Spain and voted itself into the United Nations. It is half the size of the Isle of Wight.

Britain remains loftily aloof from all this. For decades both Tories and Labour regarded devolution as something imposed on Germany to kill off the Third Reich, while separatism was a soothing balm to help post-communist east Europe over the shock of dictatorship. Such fractures were beneath the dignity of a mature united kingdom. Devolution was strictly an emergency measure for the Celtic fringe when parliamentary arithmetic required.

Even today London politics derides the experience of Scottish and Welsh devolution, assuming that the natives regret its extravagant budgets and costly architecture and would rather return to metropolitan direct rule. The fiasco of Northern Ireland, with its peace walls, political gangs, religious primitivism and colonial rule, is put down to the impossibility of the Irish. As with all European devolutions, the initial result can be expensive and bureaucratic. Yet they are popular. In both Edinburgh and Cardiff each constitutional review has seen a demand for more not less autonomy. Rarely do democrats want less democracy. Nor have the Scots been profligate with their local income tax, despite the Treasury's attempt to stop them from having one.

Neither Scotland nor Wales enjoys remotely the degree of autonomy exercised by provincial governments elsewhere in Europe. The Scottish parliament has roughly the powers possessed by a pre-Thatcher county council, and the Welsh assembly even less. When John Prescott tried to bring regional democracy to England he suffered a bloody nose. The people of the north-east voted overwhelmingly against his elected assemblies because he wanted to replace their counties with a new tier of government that did not relate to their local identity.

Yet Prescott misread the outcome. He claimed that English Britons wanted no more democracy and would be happy to accept an unelected tier of regional government appointed direct from Whitehall. He proceeded with regions everywhere. Had he offered a referendum for democratic devolution to Durham or Northumberland or Cornwall or Kent, or a dozen other counties which the English regard as their "provinces" and which would be competent (as they once were) to run local services, he would have scored a triumph. But that would have been real devolution, which Prescott could not stomach.

The British constitution, at least in regard to England, is now creaking at the seams. This past week has seen it close to collapse. A media-obsessed egotism has Tony Blair splurging new laws every day, Gordon Brown faking English nationalism and John Reid espousing sharia law at the bidding of the tabloid mullahs. It is centralist beyond reason, beyond fanaticism. Thank goodness for some sanity from Spain. Come back Armada, all is forgiven.

simon.jenkins@guardian.co.uk