

February 18, 2014

## Europe cannot afford to give in to the separatists

By Cayetana Alvarez de Toledo

*The writer is an MP for the ruling Popular party in Spain*

Secessionists hail the EU as a model of integration but work to disintegrate one of its states, writes Cayetana Alvarez de Toledo

The centenary of the first world war serves as a reminder of an ugly truth. As François Mitterrand put it in his last speech to the European parliament in 1995: “*Le nationalisme, c’est la guerre.*” More subtly, it is the refutation of cultural diversity, the rejection of political pluralism and the restriction of individual rights. That is to say, everything Europeans agreed to put behind them in 1945.

The EU stands for integration, solidarity, individual freedom and the rule of law. Ours is not a Europe of tribes but of citizens, and we must defend it as such. But this is now being undermined by populism and nationalism. Two of the continent’s biggest and most ancient states – Britain and Spain – currently face grave challenges from regional separatists in Scotland and Catalonia. These not only pose a threat to the very integrity of the countries concerned; they also undermine the bigger European project.

European leaders must confront separatism openly, and they must do so on political and moral grounds. Of course, they should play the legal card, invoking the EU treaties to remind the advocates of secession how hard it is to be accepted into the union and how easy to be expelled. This is what José Manuel Barroso, Commission president, skilfully did this week when questioned on September’s Scottish independence referendum, to the indignation of Alex Salmond, Scotland’s first minister. But it is not enough.

European leaders must unmask the hypocrisy of nationalism.

Brussels, however, has coined a catchphrase behind which its spokespeople take refuge: Catalonia is a Spanish “internal matter” on which European institutions have no comment. Mr Barroso himself has used this formula several times, including in his reply to a letter from Artur Mas, president of the Catalan government, urging European leaders to support a referendum in November on secession. From Paris to Berlin, reactions have been equally non-committal.

A shrewd political strategy? A clever way of snubbing the separatists to reassert the sovereignty of central government? Many, including in Madrid, argue that this is the case. The government of Mariano Rajoy, prime minister, does indeed have the political legitimacy and legal instruments to counter successfully one of the most serious challenges yet to Spain’s laws and liberties. But any attempt to shrug off intended secession as an “internal matter” is a mistake.

In Britain, the strident euroscepticism of the UK Independence party obscures the fact that Scottish nationalism also contradicts basic European principles, values that should be defended in Spain, too. Catalan separatism runs contrary to the values that define Spain as a democracy and the EU as a feat of civilisation. It puts identity before citizenship and defies the basic idea upon which our peace is founded, that Europe should not be the segregationist sum of ethnic or cultural nations but a union of democratic states. In this, if not in their historical or constitutional underpinnings, the plans for Scottish independence and Catalan secession look and sound worryingly alike. They should be confronted on the same grounds. The separatists hail the EU as a model

of integration but work tirelessly to disintegrate one of its member states. Mr Mas and his supporters urge Europe to support Catalanian independence in the name of democracy (“Let us vote!”) but simultaneously undermine democracy in Spain in the name of identity.

How? They distort historical facts to justify imaginary grievances: they have transformed commemorations of the end of the War of the Spanish Succession in 1714 into a denunciation of 300 years of “Spain against Catalonia”. They challenge the rule of law and, with it, the foundations of peaceful coexistence among Spaniards. The Catalan government has refused to abide by court rulings requiring children to be taught a minimum number of lessons in Spanish.

Secessionists often talk as though they speak for everyone in Catalan society. They do not. Catalonia is home to a diversity of views. When last week a Barcelona-based group of German businessmen warned of the economic impact of secession, prominent figures in the separatist camp were quick to dismiss them in shockingly pejorative terms – for which they later had to apologise.

Voters across the continent are demanding clarity. They want to know what Europe stands for and why it is worth their solidarity and sacrifices. In the memory of 1914 they may find the answer: there is nothing nobler, more decent or more necessary than the defence of individual rights and liberties against the smothering dreams of nationalism. Today, there is no room for ambiguity or silence. The issue of separatism is a profoundly European matter, putting to the test what the union is and what it stands for – and it demands a clear response.

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## **Catalonia’s very real grievances**

By Mr Geoff Cowling.

*Geoff Cowling, Bromley, Kent, UK, HM Consul General Barcelona 2002-05.*

The article by Cayetana Alvarez de Toledo, “Europe cannot afford to give into the separatists” (February 19), deserves comment.

It is wrong to describe the Scottish independence referendum as “a grave challenge from regional separatists”. Scotland is not a region. It is a nation in its own right within the United Kingdom. The Scottish and English parliaments were joined in an “Act of Union” in 1707. It is the democratic right of the people of the Scottish nation to vote for the repeal of that act if they so wish. Catalonia too is a “nation” as defined by the *estatut*, an act passed by the Spanish parliament in 2006. To describe both nations as “tribes” betrays a colonialist mind.

The UN is quite clear on the rights of nations. “All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.” For the European Union to “confront separatism”, to “unmask the hypocrisy of nationalism” and “play the legal card of the EU treaties” against Scotland and Catalonia, would be to tread on very controversial ground.

The article accuses the Catalan government of distorting historical facts in this 300th anniversary year of the fall of Catalonia at the end of the war of the Spanish succession. It is worth recalling that Catalonia was effectively an independent nation until 1714. During that war, Catalonia was allied with England under the treaty of Genoa of 1705

and fought for the Habsburg cause against the Bourbon Spain. When the British government withdrew its support for the Habsburgs and signed the treaty of Utrecht in 1713, Catalonia fought on alone. It took a one-year siege by a combined French and Spanish Bourbon army to break Barcelona's defences which fell on September 11 1714. Thousands of defending Catalans were killed in the siege and in the retribution which followed. Catalonia's ancient parliament, its identity, language and culture were crushed. Large parts of Barcelona were razed to the ground. Catalonia did not voluntarily join Spain, it was brutally conquered.

Catalonia was treated little differently during the Spanish civil war when Barcelona was bombed by Franco's rebel air force, killing 1,300. Catalonia's elected President Lluís Companys was forced to flee into France. He was extradited by Franco and shot in 1940 at Montjuic Castle overlooking Barcelona. Lluís Companys remains the only incumbent president in Europe ever to have been executed. No apology or posthumous pardon has been given.

Catalonia remembers these historical facts – they are not “imaginary historical grievances”. On its National Day (*La Diada*) on September 11 2012, one and a half million Catalans filled Barcelona's streets waving the Catalan *Senyera* flag and calling for independence. On *La Diada* last year they formed a 250-mile independence human chain from the French border to Valencia. The independence movement is deeply rooted in Catalan society, fuelled by every rebuff from Madrid.

Like Scotland's, Catalonia's parliament has a majority in favour of an independence referendum. The Westminster parliament has given Scotland the right to decide its future. In contrast, the Spanish parliament in Madrid refuses to debate Catalonia's request. Democracy is not feared in the UK – it is embraced. Democracy should not be feared in Spain either.

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