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You don't need to be a Catalan independentist to support the referendum on self-determination

Opinion Article by EFA MEP Jordi Solé, originally published in The Parliament Magazine

It was summer 2010 when many Catalans came to the conclusion that their country no longer belonged in the Spanish state. The Spanish Constitutional Court, after a four year long procedure, was expected to finally issue its ruling on Catalonia's statute of autonomy.

This new Catalan home-rule law had been adopted in 2010 after being approved three times - in the Catalan Parliament, in the Spanish Parliament (which delivered a watered-down version) and by Catalans in a referendum.

And yet, despite this strong legitimacy and support, the Partido Popular - at that time the main opposition party - chose to challenge the Catalan Statute before the politicised Spanish Constitutional Court. By opting for hard-line nationalism instead of reasonable politics, they changed - maybe forever - the relations between Catalonia and Spain.

A joint editorial by the 12 main Catalan newspapers in November 2009, which today could be considered quite visionary, clearly warned of the consequences of a ruling by the court that denied the will of the Catalan majority.

Under the title ‘Catalonia’s dignity’, the editorial stated, “There is concern in Catalonia and it is necessary that all of Spain knows about it. There is more than just worry.

“There is growing anxiety for having to endure the gaze of those who continue to perceive Catalan identity (its institutions, economic structure, language and cultural tradition) as the manufacturing defect that prevents Spain from achieving a dreamed and impossible uniformity...

“These days Catalans think, above all, in their dignity. This should be known”.

The ruling came out some months later, stripping out crucial - and symbolically sensitive - parts of the Catalan statue of autonomy. In consequence, Catalans decided to stand up for their dignity. In the Catalan way: peacefully, cheerfully, and democratically.

To protest against this appalling, ominous ruling, in July 2010 a one million-strong crowd demonstrated in Barcelona under the slogan “We are a nation, we decide”. This demonstration wasn't yet clearly an outcry for outright independence.

The message was rather, “it’s up to the Catalans to decide our future, not up to the authorities in Madrid”. In other words, the message echoed Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: the right to self-determination.

What happened afterwards is as much a story of a people rising up and organising themselves in defence of their democratic rights as it is a story of short-sightedness and arrogance by an incompetent central government.

Far from recognising the fundamental change Catalan politics and society were going through, the Spanish government preferred to say ‘No’ to a new fiscal arrangement in 2012, ‘No’ to a non-binding consultation on Catalonia’s future in 2014, ‘No’ 16 times in the Spanish Parliament to an agreed and binding referendum on self-determination.

Instead of trying to find a political solution to a political demand shared by three quarters of the Catalan population, the Spanish government opted to judicially besiege the Catalan institutions. So far, this strategy has led to former Catalan President Artur Mas and three of his ministers being banned from office and fined for allowing Catalans to vote, and the current speaker of the Catalan Parliament facing trial for allowing a debate on the roadmap towards independence in the chamber.

While the Spanish government chose to bury its head in the sand of its do-no-politics strategy and its nationalist rhetoric, the pro-independence political and social movement in Catalonia blossomed.

In 2015, in a snap regional election, pro-independence parties obtained an absolute majority for the first time in Catalonia’s history and the current government, fully committed to achieving independence, was elected.

The Catalan government, true to its commitment to the Catalan people, has called a referendum on self-determination that will take place on 1 October. Catalans will have the opportunity to decide whether they want Catalonia to be an independent state in the form of a republic or not. Have no doubt that many citizens will cast their vote despite the consistent threats from the Spanish authorities.

What sort of country denies people the right to vote on the grounds that voting is illegal? Is it not dictatorships, rather than democracies, which stop people from voting? Catalans have left no stone unturned in their effort to reach an agreement over the recent years, but every attempt has been met with a loud ‘No’.

What sort of country threatens elected politicians for simply implementing the mandate they received from a majority of citizens to organise a democratic vote? Such a country has a fundamental problem. And if the country that threatens democratically elected politicians and acts against the right to vote of its people is a member state of the European Union, then this becomes a problem for the entire Union.

You don't need to be a Catalan independentist to support the referendum on 1 October. You just need to be a democrat. And Europe is full of them.

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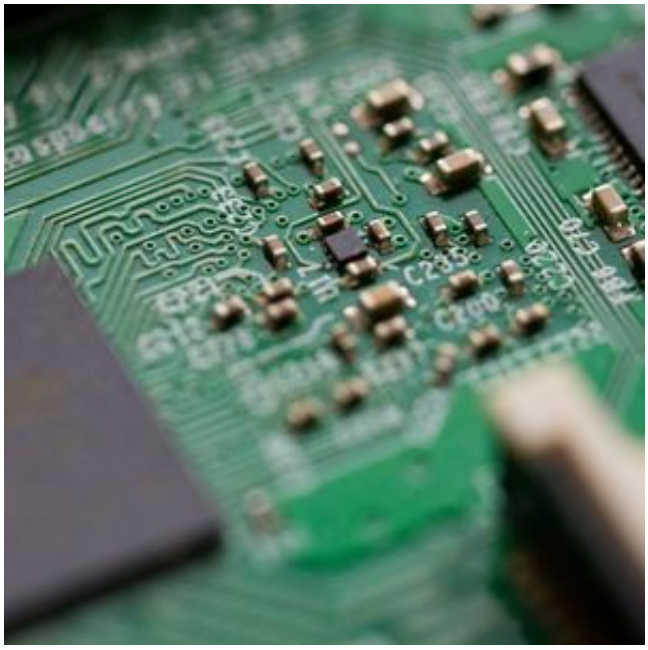


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