

# **Building a Catalan Republic - “we share the idea that independence is a necessary step to achieve socialism and feminism”**

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**Lluc Salellas of the Catalan leftist party CUP discusses the events that led up to Catalonia’s declaration of independence — and what happens next. *[This interview was done before the turn of events, October 27.]***

On Friday, after a prolonged standoff with the Spanish state, Catalonia’s parliament finally voted to declare independence. The vote, which followed October 1’s repressed referendum, was supported 70 of the 135 legislators with most of the opposition choosing to boycott.

In response, Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy announced he was moving to dissolve Catalonia’s institutions, sack its government, and impose direct rule until elections in December. It was the first time Article 155 of the Spanish constitution, which allows for the suspension of a region’s autonomy, has been used since its inception in 1978.

Today, Spain’s chief prosecutor has called for all fourteen members of the Catalan government to face charges of rebellion, sedition, and misuse of public funds. This follows the imprisonment of two leading civil society figures from the independence movement pending similar charges two weeks ago.

As the crisis has escalated, Catalan anticapitalist party Candidatura d’Unitat Popular (CUP) has found itself playing an increasingly important role. Lluc Salellas, a member of the party’s national executive, discusses the latest developments.

## **Pablo Castaño Tierno**

Very few people thought that the independence process would reach its current point, mostly because it did not seem that the conservative nationalists in the Catalan Democratic Party (PDCat) would pursue such a radical path. To what extent would you say that the role of the CUP in the pro-independence street mobilizations has been a factor in the development of the movement?

## **Lluc Salellas**

PDCat would have never arrived at its current position without the recent social mobilizations, which have interpellated their social basis and their voters. The CUP has always had a double strategy. On the one hand, we have taken part in the demonstrations that included all pro-independence people —whether they were left-wing or not — because we believed that independence would be a rupture that would alter the correlations of forces and disturb the equilibrium of the regime. This would allow the Left to introduce new concepts and dynamics.

On the other hand, we have always tried to conduct our own campaigns, with our own discourse, so we could introduce the idea that this is not only about independence. We have made an effort to provoke a shift in the pro-independence camp toward more disobedient and disruptive positions.

This has been a key factor in the current situation.

PCT

Pro-independence associations such as the Catalan National Assembly (ANC) and the cultural organization Òmnium had traditionally only held mass demonstrations once a year, but they have now adopted more radical tactics, such as civil disobedience.

LS

Yes, this became evident on October 1. ANC and Òmnium have realized that disobedience is the only possible way forward. We have assisted by bringing people who belong to a political culture of civil disobedience. When they had to defend the vote, they knew how it worked because they had experience in confronting the police. This was very important on October 1.

PCT

One of the most well-known slogans of the Catalan pro-independence left is “Independence, socialism, feminism.” Is independence an aim in itself or a means to advance towards a socialist and feminist society?

LS

Independence is a means to an end for the majority of the CUP, as well as most people who take part in our popular unity project. But for many of us, independence is also an aim. We think that Catalonia or the Catalan Countries [territories where Catalan is spoken] has the right to be a state, a sovereign political project. This is an aim in itself but it does not work on its own. In the pro-independence left, we share the idea that independence is a necessary step to achieve socialism and feminism. Because we don't believe that it is possible to reach these aims within the Spanish state, due to the existing correlations of forces and how this state has been historically constructed.

PCT

You have written a book called *El Franquisme que no marxà* [The Francoism that Does Not Leave], where you analyze what is left of Francoism in the Spanish state. To what extent do you think that the attitude that the Spanish state has toward this conflict is a necessary consequence on how it was constructed since the end of Francisco Franco's dictatorship?

LS

It is necessary to analyze how Francoism ended, to look at the basis of the 1978 regime, to understand where we are today. It was said: “Okay, there will be a formal liberal democracy, but there will be some totems that cannot be touched,” which are the unity of Spain and the impossibility of questioning the forty-year-long Francoist dictatorship. The proof of this are the ditches [thousands of victims of the Spanish civil war and the dictatorship remain unidentified and buried in ditches all around the country] and the policy around historical memory. The same happens regarding the unity of Spain. This leads us to a complacent political culture. Insofar as this is the basis of the state, these topics cannot be dealt with in ordinary political debate. It must be recognized that Podemos and Izquierda Unida challenge this when they defend the right of self-determination for the peoples of the Spanish state. However, the unity of Spain remains their project.

Reflecting on the dictatorship, we live in a place where the police, judiciary, and Popular Party (PP) elites have never had to apologize. There has never been a statement apologizing for the role they played during Francoism. They are now sixty, seventy, or eighty years old — what have they taught their daughters and sons? They have taught them that you can do all that and there will be impunity. Therefore, what is happening now is normal in the context of our history.

PCT

Within the Catalan independence movement there remains an idea that “Spain steals from us,” a right-wing discourse that says “we pay more taxes than other regions of Spain.” To what extent do you think the CUP’s idea of allying the struggle for independence and the struggle for social justice is now winning out?

LS

This is true. Denying it would be lying. These positions exist but it is also true that if you look at the laws that have been supported by Junts pel Sí [the pro-independence coalition composed of the center-right PDCat and center-left ERC] in the Catalan parliament during the last year and a half on topics such as housing, health, and social issues, it is clearly different from what the right wing is voting for in Spain. ANC and Òmnium — particularly Òmnium — have carried out important work on social cohesion and the idea of social justice.

Òmnium launched a campaign called Lluitas Compartides (Shared Struggles), which placed the struggle for self-determination on an equal footing with struggles in neighborhoods to have a health center, a school, and public transportation. It is true that this connecting thread is not yet shared by 100 or even 80 percent of the pro-independence movement. There is a struggle for hegemony in the pro-independence movement that has not been won, but we have progressed in recent years.

PCT

Left-wing pro-independence positions are often very difficult to understand in the rest of the Spanish state, particularly with respect to the financing of regions. Many people think that if Catalonia becomes an independent state the region will stop contributing to the common financing system and the public services of the poorest regions in Spain will be damaged. How would you explain the left-wing pro-independence position to a person from Andalusia or Extremadura?

LS

There are two arguments. On the one hand, we have always said that our pro-independence project would facilitate the breaking of the Spanish political regime, thus this would imply the beginning of a process of constituent and political change within the Spanish state. If the popular classes in Extremadura, Andalusia, the Canary Islands, and so on are well organized and fight for their rights, they will have the chance to change the system to favor their interests.

But also, independence does not necessarily mean that we — a wealthy region — will stop giving money to poorer regions overnight. The CUP is an internationalist project, we believe that there must be equality and justice across the world. We who enjoy privileges must renounce some of them to support those who need help.

But it does not make sense to maintain such a system on a permanent basis. That would not imply structural change, it would be more like Catholic charity. The aim is to promote structural change that would allow Andalusia to keep its public services thanks to changes in the reorganization of work and wealth in the region, without the help of other actors. This would be the most revolutionary thing.

PCT

Some years ago, Catalan president Artur Mas [then of Convèrgencia, now called PDCat] was forced to access the parliament by helicopter because the building was surrounded by 15-M demonstrators protesting the austerity policies his government approved. Now, PDCat leaders are cheered in the streets while austerity measures remain in place. Can you imagine a scenario where Catalonia does not achieve independence — we return to the status quo — but the former Convèrgencia party is whitewashed and the PP is reinforced due to the exaltation of Spanish nationalism in the rest of the

country?

LS

That would be the worst possible scenario. It is possible but I don't think it is likely. To go back to the previous situation, the Catalan right wing must return to a dynamic of agreements with the state. This would not whitewash them; quite the opposite. We are defending them because they are in an attitude of rupture; if they abandon it, they will lose our support. These are people — members of the Catalan government — who are under threat of imprisonment right now. In this situation, I believe that the first point of agreement is the defense of democracy, defending our institutions and fighting against repression.

This does not mean that we are not critical regarding their social policies. For instance, this summer there have been strong clashes [between CUP and PDCat] regarding tourism. And in the city councils there are harsh debates over social issues. The current conjuncture does not mean that the class struggle and ideological struggle have disappeared. However, it is true that we prioritize the issue of democracy and repression.

PCT

The Catalan parliament has proclaimed independence — backed by Junts pel Sí and the CUP. The Spanish government has responded by imposing Article 155, dissolving Catalonia's institutions and autonomy. What happens next?

LS

Since October 1 we have said that there was a referendum that the state tried to prevent, but it couldn't do it because of the people's resistance. The results are binding, as stated by the laws [the Referendum Law and the Juridical Transition Law, approved by the Catalan parliament and invalidated by the Spanish Constitutional Court].

PCT

The Electoral Board did not function and there were not the same conditions as there would be in a normal electoral process. Can the result be deemed legitimate and binding, taking this into account?

LS

We believe so. It is true that the conditions weren't normal, but even within these exceptional conditions, people voted, there was an electoral census . . . it worked. At the end of the day, a higher proportion of the electorate voted "yes" than voted for Brexit in the United Kingdom. Therefore, if Brexit is legitimate, we consider that the referendum that took place here is legitimate as well. Thus, Catalonia proclaimed independence and pursued a republic with the aim of affirming that we consider ourselves a sovereign actor.

We now believe there must be an international mediation between us and the Spanish state. And there must be a control of the territory, we must try to develop our own public policies in central strategic sectors such as taxes, health, and education. This must be demanded of the government, but we also know that, in the current context, the mobilization of the people will be a necessary element to guarantee this.

We will see how the state reacts. If we enter a situation of more repression — which is likely — we will still have the people, so we will fight and defend their dignity. Nobody expected the current situation a month ago, so we don't know where we will be in a month's time. We consider that this is a process of popular empowerment, a constituent process and a process of demolishing the existing regime. We must apply pressure to have the Republic recognized.

PCT

Several European Union spokespersons have said that an independent Catalonia would have to be outside the EU. Is this a problem for you?

LS

The EU has been pushed so strongly by those in power and in the media that people have a feeling of belonging to its market community. Therefore the possibility of Catalonia being excluded from the EU provokes a feeling of uncertainty and insecurity. It is not an economic problem because I believe that all European actors are interested in the continuity of trade relations.

We are against this EU; therefore, we are interested in having a debate on whether we should remain or not. Indeed, one of the interesting facts of these days is that many people who used to feel very close to the EU are noticing what the EU really is [due to the weak response of the Union to the repression practiced by Spanish police on October 1]. This had already happened regarding refugees. There is an important questioning of what the EU means, and this places us again in a conjuncture to challenge established power.

PCT

Last Thursday, Catalan president Carles Puigdemont announced that he would convoke regional elections, as requested by the Spanish government. He changed his mind some hours later and stated that a declaration of independence would be voted for in the Catalan parliament. Are Puigdemont and his PDCat still trustworthy allies?

LS

What happened on Thursday was a maneuver of the Catalan and Spanish elites. But when it became clear that Article 155 [which the Spanish government used to suspend Catalan autonomy] would be applied anyway, that path was closed. This is also because people took to the streets to demand the declaration of independence. Now there are doubts, which is normal, but in this situation, we need to be united in the construction of the Catalan Republic. At the same time we need to defend ourselves from the attacks that the state will perform through Article 155. We will be on the same side of the barricade with those who fight for democracy.

PCT

What is your assessment of the proclamation of independence?

LS

It was a very happy day. The majority of Catalan people who voted on October 1 asked us to proclaim the Republic and that is what we have done, what the parliament had to do. From now on, we must be conscious that what awaits us is a situation in which we will have to build the Catalan Republic from the streets and the institutions. We will have to stop Article 155 and the repression. But we have made a step forward. The game is not over; it goes on, but now we have a clear and determined mandate from the Catalan parliament.

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**P.S.**

\* Jacobin. 10.30.2017:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/10/catalonia-independence-referendum-catalan-republic>

Adapted from Contexto y Acción: <http://ctxt.es>

The full version of this interview is available in French on ESSF.

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