

Spanish state: what does the Sánchez cabinet portend? - An overview

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At the June 8 ceremonial hand-over of portfolio briefcases from outgoing People's Party (PP) ministers to their incoming Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) substitutes, the contrasts were pretty dramatic. A bunch of reactionary lifetime political operators and religious obscurantists were giving way to what new PSOE prime minister Pedro Sánchez boasted was a "progressive", "feminist" and "Europeanist" alternative.

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The PSOE leader replaced deposed prime minister Mariano Rajoy's 15-member ministry of ten men and five women with an 18-member team of 11 women and seven men, easily the most "feminist" in Europe and pushing Sweden (12 women and 11 men) into a distant second place. It also featured two gay ministers, former National High Court senior judge Fernando Grande-Marlaska as interior minister and Máxim Huerta, TV presenter, journalist and novelist, as culture minister.

However, there have already been some glitches. The flamboyant Huerta, a special choice of Sánchez's and former fixture on Spain's most popular midday TV chat show, soon set a record as the country's shortest-lived minister after a media report that the courts had fined him €364,938 for constituting himself as a "company" for tax evasion purposes. He had lasted eight days.

Clouds also hang over Luis Planas, the new agriculture minister. Planas, who occupied the same portfolio in the regional government of Andalusia between 2009 and 2012, was until recently under investigation for allegedly consenting to the theft of water from an important aquifer to boost strawberry production in the province of Huelva. In October 2017, the examining magistrate removed Planas as a defendant in the case, a decision the prosecution formally protested two months later.

On a June 18 TV interview on Spanish public television, Sánchez said he would probably not have appointed Huerta had he known of his tax affairs but stood by Planas.

These glitches aside, the theatre of the presentation of the new ministry was strong. It was the end of the road for the PP's national-Catholic nostalgists, like the cabinet ministers who this year sang "The Fiancé of Death" at Malaga's Holy Week as the grisly wooden statue of the "Christ of the Good Death" was carried in procession by strutting and chanting Spanish legionnaires.

Out went defence minister Dolores de Cospedal, who last Easter had the Spanish flag flown at half-

mast on all military installations to mourn the crucifixion of Jesus. She regularly threatened to use the armed forces to defend the unity of Spain against the Catalan independence movement. In her place came Margarita Robles, who as secretary of state for the interior in the mid-1990s was responsible for pursuing the Armed Liberation Groups (GAL), the anti-ETA paramilitary terrorist organisation run by senior figures in the same ministry. Robles is still resented in sections of the PSOE, the Civil Guard and the Spanish National Police for her pursuit of “our people”.

Out went PP attorney-general Rafael Català, executor of the Rajoy government’s strategy of having its mates in the senior levels of the Spanish judiciary persecute the Catalan independence process and stick its leaders in preventive detention. In his place came Dolores Delgado, prosecutor for the National High Court and close to suspended judge Bathasar Garzón, responsible for pursuing Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet. Delgado led the successful prosecution for crimes against humanity of the Argentinian naval officer Adolfo Scilingo and was also responsible for the Spanish court’s rejection of a Swiss extradition request for whistle-blower Hervé Falciani.

Delgado, who has been active in the campaigns for the reform of Spain’s ramshackle legal system, was a thorn in the side of her PP-aligned bosses who declined to investigate the crimes of the Franco dictatorship. In November, she left the position of spokesperson for the National High Court prosecutor’s office because of disagreement with her superiors’ actions in relation to last year’s terrorist attacks in Catalonia.

Out from the portfolio of education, culture and sport went blue blood Iñigo Méndez de Vigo, the Ninth Baron of Claret. Defender in his student days of the “legitimate violence” of the extreme right, up until June 1 Méndez de Vigo was the oily and condescending spokesperson for the Rajoy government. His replacement as education minister and as government spokesperson is Isabel Celaá, education minister in the 2009-2012 government of the Socialist Party of Euskadi (PSE, the Basque Country affiliate of the PSOE), author of a novel in English and promoter of trilingual education in the Basque Autonomous Community (Euskadi).

Women in ‘hard’ portfolios

In Spain’s new PSOE government the new women ministers aren’t only concentrated in the customary “spending” ministries—social welfare, health, education, housing and environment (now called “ecological transition”)—they also have responsibility for economy and business, treasury and industry. Economy and enterprise minister Nadia Calviño, the coordinator of the economic portfolios, moves back to Spain from the position of director-general of the European Union budget while new treasurer María Jesús Montero moves to Madrid from the position of health minister in the PSOE government of Andalusia.

The new government’s most difficult challenge—managing relations with the pro-independence Catalan government of president Quim Torra—has also been entrusted to a woman minister, the Catalan Meritxell Batet of the PSOE’s Catalan affiliate, the Party of Socialists of Catalonia (PSC).

This women-strong ministry is overwhelmingly the result of one factor—the extraordinary five million-strong outpouring of women on International Women’s Day this year. Sánchez got the message on that day, saying “we are facing an historic moment for Spanish society, one led by the women of this country. From today onwards, nothing will be the same in the struggle for equality.”

It is also the result of the fact that Sánchez had a free hand in forging his team. He owed no favours to any of the PSOE’s internal interest groups, certainly not the party’s regional premiers (barons) who have tried to sabotage him at every turn. His cabinet preserves the usual balances among

Spain's regions but the choices of its individual members were Sánchez's alone and in a number of instances he anointed local rivals of the barons. With this move to create contenders to PSOE barons, Sánchez was using his minister-making powers to strengthen his own still-incomplete factional structure inside Spain's social democracy.

The new ministry also owes little to the small band of supporters who stuck with Sánchez in his initially lonely crusade to win back the federal secretaryship of the PSOE after his sacking had been contrived by the barons in October 2016. Of these, only one, PSOE organisation secretary José Luís Ábalos, has made it into the ministry (as infrastructure minister).

In the words of Juan Luís Sánchez, commentating in the June 7 edition of eldiario.es: "No prime minister has ever had the opportunity to dream up a government so rapidly that it allowed hardly any time for factional conspiracies, pressurings or filterings out."

Continuity in economic policy...

What, however, will this highly educated, technically proficient cabinet do—given that it was not elected on any sort of detailed platform but installed as the result of a successful no-confidence motion against its corrupt PP predecessor? And how progressive is it really—not compared to the very low bar set by the Rajoy administration but in terms of the policies needed to start hauling Spain out of its vast sewer of problems? Maybe the best way to tackle these questions is to begin with what it will not do, the ways in which it will still be "Rajoy".

Firstly, in economic policy it will continue to abide by European Commission directives as far as budget discipline and the overall parameters of economic policy are concerned. Some cosmetic increases in taxes on the wealthy are not excluded, but it is very hard to imagine incoming economics and enterprise minister Calviño who at portfolio handover thanked her PP predecessor Román Escolano as "my preparer and friend", violating Brussels economic orthodoxy. In a June 16 interview with *El País*, Calviño said:

"We need robust, sustainable and fair growth: this government has to have a lot of brains but also a lot of heart. We have to find the way that growth reaches all citizens. Make compatible the commitment to budget stability with a fair sharing out of economic improvement so that no-one's left behind."

What this will mean in practice is anyone's guess. While supporting a growth model "that can't be based on lowering wages and massive job destruction every time a crisis arrives", Calviño was vague on the actual choices economic policy faces, including commitments made by the PSOE (such as to a guaranteed minimum income).

The Spanish economy has been growing quite strongly since it climbed out of recession at the end of 2013, but the benefits of this growth have certainly not gone to the 28% of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion. At the same time, the growth that has taken place has not come from the recovery of investment (private and public) but due to more vulnerable factors such as a low-wage based growth in exports, the decline in the economy's massive energy import bill and the ultra-loose monetary policy of the European Central Bank.

This growth remains dependent on the maintenance of the country's two rounds of labour market "reform", strongly supported by the European Commission and the IMF, but a direct creator of Spain's new generation of working poor. As a result, while the Rajoy administration just kept boasting about the Spanish economy's higher-than-EU-average performance, the Sánchez

government will face a host of accumulated expectations from the millions to whom Rajoy's recovery gave nothing.

Calviño's acceptance of the European Commission's economic policy outlook will greatly restrict chances of making any serious inroads into the country's main social afflictions—youth unemployment, poverty-wage levels for newly created jobs, a critical situation in terms of income inequality (especially gender wage inequality) and misery-level social welfare.

Calviño has so far been silent on two new taxes proposed by the PSOE's economic policy secretary Manuel Escudero, a Tobin tax on international financial transactions and a surcharge on bank profits, and this when tax income in Spain is 7% of national income less than the European Union average. Escudero himself probably missed out on an economics portfolio because his preoccupations with income inequality, guaranteed minimum income and a shorter working week would have frightened the economic establishment, while none of Sánchez's three women economics ministers have so far shown any tendency towards such heterodoxy.

In her *El País* interview Calviño reacted evasively to three immediate challenges for economic policy in Spain:

** Repeal of the PP's 2012 labour law?* "Rather than repeal or amend the labour law what's needed is a new 21st century labour framework based on social consensus."

** Meeting the European Commission's public sector deficit target for Spain in 2018 of 2.2% of GDP when the Commission itself is predicting that it will reach 2.7% and is calling for a €6 billion cut in spending?* "The macroeconomic scenario and the implementation of the budget will have to be analysed with a view to negotiating the budget in autumn."

** Funding the €18 billion deficit for 2017 in the pension system through a bank tax, as floated by Pedro Sánchez?* "It is premature to talk about tax measures because we are in the phase of establishing spending limits."

On June 13, Sánchez and the incoming labour minister, Magdalena Valeria Cordero, who has promised to change the PP's 2012 labour reform because it "promotes casualisations and wage devaluation", met with the heads of Spain's main business umbrella groups and the leaders of the two main union confederations, the Workers Commissions (CCOO) and the General Union of Workers (UGT). Afterwards, the union leaders expressed their concern that "repeal" of the reforms looked like turning into amendments at the margin.

...and in the national question

Next, this government cannot solve Spain's most chronic problem: the permanently troubled relationship between its component nationalities—most immediately the pro-independence Catalan government—and the central Spanish establishment.

Asked about the issue at her first media conference as government spokesperson, Celaá said that any discussion of a Catalan right to self-determination, as suggested by former Catalan president Carles Puigdemont, was "absolutely outside" discussions to take place between the Spanish and Catalan administrations.

Batet, the new minister in charge of relations with the rebel region, confirmed that "we are not contemplating the possibility of considering the right to decide" in any rewriting of the Spanish

Constitution that the new government will propose to entrust to an all-party commission. At the same time, she offered to reopen discussion on 45 of the 46 points contained in a Catalan log of claims on the Spanish government presented by the sacked government of president-in-exile Puigdemont.

The 46th point, celebration of a negotiated referendum on Catalonia's relation with the Spanish state, was rejected. Given this starting point, the PSOE will have to provide an awful lot of benefits under the other 45 points if it is to persuade a large slice of the 75%-80% of Catalans who support the country's right to self-determination via a Scottish-style referendum to give up on that right.

Batet argued in a June 3 interview on the Catalan web site *Naciódigital* that the Catalan national question was too complicated to be solved by plebiscite (which the PSC supported up until 2012, when it first started to look like a real possibility):

"I don't support resolving big challenges with a question. In the end, a question is solved in a moment, in a minute, with a vote. You can never ask everything needed so that all citizens feel represented. We are all heterogeneous, no matter how much people want to pigeonhole us in blocs or parties. We are heterogeneity. And we in the political parties have the responsibility of channelling this heterogeneity. And that means negotiating and arriving at broad agreements and broad consensuses that represent 80% or 90% or 100% of citizens. Everyone will be unsatisfied, for sure, and that will mean it is a good agreement."

Batet has indicated that she would "look favourably" on the transfer of the Catalan leaders in jails near Madrid to jails in Catalonia, even while noting that this would be a decision of Supreme Court judge Pablo Llarena. On June 18, Sánchez himself said it would be "reasonable" for the prisoners to be moved to Catalan jails, but only once they had been charged.

Not that Catalonia is to be handled by Batet alone. Her polite but Jesuitical approach is to be backed up by the intellectual and political thuggery of new foreign minister Josep Borrell. The Catalan Borrell, author of a fallacious text aimed at proving that Catalan tax income does not subsidise expenditure in the rest of the Spanish state and sworn enemy of Catalan aspirations to independence, told the Sexta TV channel on June 10 that "Catalonia is on the brink of a civil clash".

When PSC leader Miguel Iceta said last December that "wounds should be healed in Catalonia", Borrell, also a lead speaker at demonstrations organised by the unionist Catalan Civil Society (SCC) in October last year, remarked that "they need to be disinfected first" (incidentally repeating a concept against the Catalan independence movement that Francoist propagandists had often used against Republican Spain during the Spanish Civil War).

Borrell's main job as foreign minister will be to recover the political ground that the Spanish state has been losing in the other countries in Europe and within the European institutions for its handling of the Catalan crisis. Borrell will also be the bearer of a more aggressively "pro-European" line as a supporter of a Europe made up of its existing states rather than one shaped by application of the right to self-determination. Denying the Catalans a referendum on their future is a precondition for such a Europe, just as French premier Macron has denied one to the Corsicans.

After Brexit and now that Italy is in the hands of the Lega Nord-Five Stars coalition, Borrell will also promote Spain as a reliable number three partner to Germany and France. His appointment was welcomed by former PP foreign minister Josep Piqué, who commented:

"We cannot leave France isolated and Germany as prisoner of its own internal, and to a large degree, psychological limits. With the disaffection of Italy, the distancing of Holland and the Nordic countries and the rebellion of the Visegrad countries, it's up to us to play an essential role."

Another hawk against the right to self-determination will be Fernando Grande-Marlaska, the new minister for the interior who was twice responsible in his days on the bench for jailing Basque left-nationalist leader Arnaldo Otegi. Interviewed on June 8 by the Madrid PP-aligned daily La Razón, Grande-Marlaska named the Catalan independence movement “along with ETA’s terrorism and corruption as the rule of law’s three biggest challenges.”

Grande-Marlaska’s other main claims to notoriety are: the fact that he presided in six of the nine cases in which the European Court of Human Rights subsequently condemned the Spanish state for not investigating torture claims against Basque detainees; his shelving of the investigation as to whether the Spanish defence department had any responsibility for the death of 62 Spanish soldiers in the 2003 crash of a military transport plane in Turkey; and his pursuit of young Catalan independence supporters for burning photos of King Philip.

In short, this government means that the right to self-determination will continue to be denied in the Spanish state. A looming test of the real intentions of the Sánchez government in relation to Catalonia will be how it handles the show trial of Catalan pro-independence leaders set in motion by the Rajoy government and presently being finalised in the Supreme Court. If it goes ahead without any intervention from the Sánchez administration, the essential PP-PSOE agreement on the sacredness of the unity of the Spanish state will have been reconfirmed.

...and discontinuities

Notwithstanding such critical shortcomings, the backwardness of the Spanish state, establishment and PP government has been so pronounced that it will not be hard for Sánchez administration to win definite gains in some important areas. Some of these are the subject of 40 draft bills that the PP-Citizens’ majority on the Congress speakership panel have so far kept from coming before the chamber. Major areas include:

* **Refugees:** The Spanish government offered on June 12 to accept the Doctors Without Borders vessel Aquarius with its 629 rescued refugees, previously rejected by Italy and Malta. It remains to be seen whether this was a one-off show or the beginning of a policy of actually abiding by the quotas set by the EU (and not met by any member with the exception of Malta);

* **Minimum wage:** According to labour minister Magdalena Valerio on June 14, negotiations with the major trade union confederations are on track to lifting the minimum wage to €1000 a month by 2020. (The minimum wage is presently €735,90 a month: the Rajoy government had promised to raise it to €850 by 2020.)

* **Environment:** Teresa Rivera, the new minister for the ecological transition (and former head of the Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations) announced on June 11 at a meeting of EU energy ministers that “Spain will no longer be a drag” in the struggle against climate change, announcing that backward PP policies such as a tax on solar energy and the elimination of subsidies supporting its once world-leading solar thermal industry would be reversed. Spain would also support the highest renewable energy targets being proposed for the EU (by Denmark) as well as developing a “just transition” for the coal-mining regions of Asturias and León. Also likely is a more rapid phasing out of Spain’s aging nuclear reactors, kept in operation beyond their use-by date by the Rajoy government.

* **Public health:** Carmen Montón, the new minister for health, shifts to the position from occupying the same position in the regional government of the Valencian Country. Known as the “red minister”, Montón restored universal access to public health (cut for “illegals” by the Rajoy government),

eliminated the surcharge on pharmaceuticals and prosthetics, waged war on pseudo-medicine like homeopathy and reversed the first hospital privatisation implemented by the preceding PP administration. This last effort was carried out in the face of a fierce lobbying campaign from business and diplomatic circles, including a US ambassador to Spain pleading the case of the US hospitals operator Centene.

The Sánchez government has already announced that it will re-introduce universal access to public health services.

* **Historical memory:** Just under 130,000 disappeared on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), mainly buried by the victorious Francoists in 2591 mass graves, remain to be located and identified. The work, being done in accordance with a 2007 law of the last PSOE government, is underfunded and lagging well behind schedule. Boosted funding for the project, combined with the closure of Franco's mausoleum in the Valley of the Fallen would be an easy way for the PSOE to rebuild credibility as an anti-Francoise force.

On June 18, the PSOE announced that it would be reviving the proposal of the last PSOE government to convert the Valley of the Fallen into a memorial centre on the Civil War, with the removal of the remains of Franco and Falange leader José Antonio de Rivera as part of the plan.

* **The monarchy and constitutional change:** The parliamentary committee on constitutional change, established as a price for PSOE support for the application of the Rajoy government's article 155 intervention in Catalonia, will provide an arena in which the Sánchez government will be able to promote its project for a new, "federal" structure for the Spanish state. This, however, is most likely to go nowhere, given the extreme polarisation of opinion on the issue. The PSOE's ongoing commitment to the Spanish monarchy also stands in the way of real advance towards a democratic constitution.

Acid test for Unidos Podemos

The formation of the Sánchez cabinet repeats the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* time warp movement that allowed Sánchez to re-win the PSOE federal secretary's position in 2017. First, "it's just a jump to the left"—because the social majority and social mood lies to the left, reflected politically in the existence of Unidos Podemos (UP) and the alliances in which it takes part—"and then a step to the right", to assure the powers that be that their core interests are not under threat.

El País, Spain's one-time "journal of record", which in the face of the Catalan independence challenge became indistinguishable from the rest of the conservative media "cavern" and which pursued Sánchez with special venom, has picked up this movement and adjusted to it. Having been the campaign paper for the barons against Sánchez and then for the Spanish state against the Catalan "secessionist menace", and having editorialised against Sánchez's no-confidence motion and in favour of early elections, it greeted the new ministry on June 7 with an editorial entitled "A Good Cabinet", then changed editor-in-chief and set about recovering the democratically minded readership it had lost during its months in the "cavern".

Given the PSOE's weak position in the Spanish congress (with only 84 seats compared to 71 for UP and its allies), how it governs in practice will be greatly influenced by the strategic and tactical skills of the UP leadership. Key to success is to understand that this PSOE government is also an anti-Podemos government—not in the sense of opposing anything UP proposes, but in that of being absolutely determined to prove through its control of office that the PSOE is the natural, inevitable and indispensable leader of the left.

A precondition for implementing this strategy was to create an exclusively PSOE ministry, rejecting UP calls for a coalition ministry and giving the message that government “naturally” belongs to the PSOE. Any measure that UP advances that the PSOE agrees with will need the PSOE government to be implemented, driving home the message for the next Spanish elections that the PSOE is indispensable as the “left of government”.

In a June 9 interview in the web-based daily *eldiario.es*, Iñigo Errejón, Podemos’s candidate for the premiership of the Community of Madrid in the May 2019 elections and leader of the trend within the radical formation most inclined to collaboration with the PSOE, identified two traps UP has to avoid in this new political phase. The first was:

"That of exercising a role of spending all our time warning of possible disappointment, angry when Spain's progressive people are full of hope—the permanent “I told you so” role that the traditional left plays. That leaves you as a very subordinate force, one that doesn't lead the way but only complains. And there is another risk. That of being a crutch whose support is taken for granted such that it's always the other side that leads.

You have to navigate between both risks. How? You have to become a force that doesn't foresee possible disappointments. If that means running the risk of being naive, well so be it. You have to point out the things that can be done, demonstrate that we have the strength to back them [the PSOE] if they dare to make the changes needed: always show that things can be done in a different way, that there is an alternative. Lay out concrete, feasible, practical proposals, with numbers, which we get known out there in society in order to be able to say that the strength needed for these changes exists today. And that tomorrow we could be repealing the gag law, which even Amnesty International criticises. Legislating against the gender wage gap. Unblocking the renewal of [public broadcaster] Spanish Radio and Television. Repealing the PP's labour market reform and struggling against casualisation.

If the government chooses the path of serious change we have to be very loyal to it."

And if the PSOE government doesn't adopt “the path of serious change”, which it won't in economic and territorial policy? Here the challenge for UP will be how concretely to articulate its opposition to the PSOE from the left at the same time as Citizens and the PP will be attacking it from the right, often with demagogical, left-sounding arguments. The parliamentary balance of forces will create a permanent pressure on UP to support PSOE proposals as inadequate but definite improvements—a pressure to which it will often have to yield given the alternative of leaving reactionary and repressive PP laws on the statute book.

In this context, it will be vital for UP and the alliances of which it is part to drive (and be seen to be driving) its own agenda of deep-going democratisation and cleansing of the putrid and authoritarian Spanish state. This will involve unbending defence of the right to self-determination of its component nations and the opening up of a constituent process, the first step in which can be a referendum on whether Spain should remain a monarchy.

In a June 14 media statement, UP spokesperson Pablo Iglesias said: “In a democratic country privileges are out of place and, in my opinion, monarchies are out of place. The connection of the [Spanish] monarchy with corruption is clear.” The recent decision of the speakership panel of the Parliament of Navarre (Navarra)—to have the chamber call on the Spanish government to hold a referendum on the issue (against the opposition of the PSOE's local affiliate)—shows the way forward.

It is certainly true that UP should continue to pay special attention to consolidating the broad “left

and nationalist” bloc that won the motion of no-confidence against the Rajoy government (and in which UP played a key role), even shifting the issues that such a bloc can support up the agenda so as to give progressive Spain a whiff of gains after the mediaeval darkness of the PP years.

At the same time, however, UP will have to point out every piece of PSOE backsliding and carefully explain what a fully progressive alternative could and should be. This is especially so in economic policy, the area of the Sánchez’s greatest continuity with the PP and where UP can champion an alternative that includes items discarded from the PSOE’s own policy.

Most importantly, the UP will need to help build the movements for democratic and social rights, making the political price of ignoring them as high as possible for the PSOE.

Dick Nichols

P.S.

* June 20, 2018 — Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal:
<http://links.org.au/spanish-state-what-does-sanchez-cabinet-portend>

* Dick Nichols is Green Left Weekly’s European correspondent, based in Barcelona. An initial version of this article has appeared on its web site.