

Catalonia: Ada Colau re-elected as Barcelona mayor—but at what price?

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Compare these two scenes, which took place in Barcelona’s central St James Square after the election of the city’s mayor, the first four years ago and the second on June 15.

On June 13, 2015, successful candidate Ada Colau, former spokesperson of the Mortgage Victims Platform (PAH) and leader of the radical mass-meeting based movement Barcelona Together (BeC), takes ten minutes to lead the city’s 41 newly elected councillors in their traditional walk across the square from the town hall to the Catalan government building on the other side. An enormously enthusiastic crowd presses in on all sides to greet her, to endless shouts of Si, se puede! (“Yes, we can!”)—a celebration of the conquest of Barcelona Council by BeC’s anti-establishment, participatory, ecological and feminist. radical municipalism.

Fast forward to June 15, 2019. This time the newly successful Colau crosses the square to a chorus of whistles, boos, and ugly sexist abuse from a small group. The councillors wearing their red sashes of office walking with her is also one representative short. Missing is Joaquim Forn, leader in the council of Together for Catalonia (JxCat), party of exiled Catalan ex-president Carles Puigdemont.

Brought under police guard from Madrid’s Soto de Real jail to attend the investiture, Forn is barred from joining the other councillors for the exchange of institutional greetings with Catalan president Quim Torra. In a surreal scene, the huge screen projecting the day’s events shows Forn being put into a police car to make the 600-kilometre journey back to jail at the same time as that ceremony is taking place.

Previously, Forn's speech to the investiture as JxCat group leader session had been greeted with deafening applause and cries of "freedom" from a packed square in which Catalan independence supporters outnumbered their BeC counterparts.

Enter Valls

The last link in the chain of events that produced this scene was a June 13-14 internet consultation of BeC members in which they were asked to choose between two options. The first was "an agreement for government between BeC and the Party of Socialists of Catalonia (PSC) with Ada Colau as mayor". The second was "an agreement for government between BeC and the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) with [lead candidate] Ernest Maragall as mayor".

If they voted for Maragall, election winner by just 4800 votes, the ten ERC councillors plus the ten BeC councillors would still fall one seat short of the 21-seat majority needed. However, providing no alternative majority was presented, the ERC's Maragall would still win because in such cases Spanish electoral law awards the mayoralty to the ticket gaining the highest vote.

As for a BeC-PSC alliance, it would guarantee Ada Colau only 18 seats—the BeC's ten and the eight of the Party of Socialists of Catalonia (PSC), the Catalan franchise of the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE). So why was she even bothering to stand? The answer—not mentioned in the BeC choice of options but known to everyone—was that Colau had been assured the support of three other councillors. They would come from an unlikely source—the group of Manuel Valls, the former French Socialist Party prime minister now back in his Catalan birthplace after achieving record unpopularity levels in France.

Lent electoral registration by the new right Citizens and bankrolled by the big end of Barcelona, Valls had said during the election campaign that "Colau and Maragall are two sides of the same coin" and that "the balance-sheet of Mrs Colau's mandate is so disastrous that citizens could be tempted to vote for any other candidate to get her off their backs". He had promised voters that he would never support the "populist" incumbent.

But, as Valls explained when offering "without conditions" the three votes needed for Colau to achieve a 21-seat majority: "This is an historic moment: either a pro-independence mayor or someone who isn't [...] the priority is to stop Barcelona from becoming a lever for the Catalan Republic."

Vall's offer, made on May 29, set off a stormy debate. Was it even conceivable to accept the votes of this mate of the investment funds that are buying up swathes of Barcelona real estate, evicting the very people that Ada Colau used to defend when she was PAH spokesperson? Valls, who as French interior minister expelled thousands of Roma from the country in 2013, represents everything BeC opposes. Sworn enemy of the Catalan right to self-determination and a French "republican" champion of the Spanish monarchist state, he had promised during the campaign to recruit 1500 extra municipal police in order to rid Barcelona of its itinerant African street sellers (the Top Manta). He was also exposed by the June 13 *Ara* as having been funded by various "business identities" to the tune of €20,000 a month during the campaign [1].

Ada Colau had said before May 26 that "I don't entertain any sort of weird alliance with Mr Valls", but his offer was exactly timed and targeted because it was the only way that she could survive as mayor—with his group's three votes the numbers were suddenly there. It also appealed straight to the strong sentiment within BeC that the continuing success of the project that it had launched in 2015—seen to be a global beacon of progressive municipalism—depended on the charismatic Colau continuing in charge: it could not to be entrusted to anyone else, certainly not the 78-year-old career

politician Maragall.

Within the world of the “Commons”—the generic name given to the various Catalan radical left coalitions that have included the term “en comú” (together) in their name—the wing most opposed to the independence movement urged support for a deal that would see the ERC kept from running Catalonia’s second most important institution. On May 29, Lluís Rabell, ex-leader of the former Commons’ group in the Catalan parliament, Catalonia Indeed We Can (CSQEP), stated that “after the ambiguities of the Commons, with their yellow ribbons [in solidarity with the Catalan political prisoners] on the front of the Town Hall and their complicity in October 1, accepting this support is not only legitimate, but also amounts to a democratic imperative.”

Colau’s return would also make BeC one of the few survivors of the “councils of change” that had won major cities across Spain in 2015. Nearly all had now fallen, mainly to the PSOE, but also, in the case of Madrid and Zaragoza, to the right-wing alliance of the People’s Party (PP), Citizens and the ultra-right Vox. In the few days between election night and Valls’ offer, the tone of BeC changed from seeming resigned acceptance of Maragall’s win to talk of the result being a “technical draw”.

Game of vetos—opening moves

In opening negotiations, the issue of the mayoralty did not arise, with BeC proposing a tripartite ERC-BeC-PSC administration. This would be, as Ada Colau wrote in a May 31 open letter to *El Periódico*, “a broad agreement of the left forces of Barcelona so as to together build a shared project for the city, with each contributing its own trajectory and nuances and putting Barcelona at the centre of our priorities”. She added: “The answers to the big challenges that we global cities face, like climate change, the pressure of real estate speculation or social inequality, will be more courageous if we administer them with broad left governments than if they are run by or with the right wing.”

For Colau, such a governing alliance could also be a way out of the conflict between pro-independence and Spanish-unionist forces in Catalonia: “We are making a commitment to overcoming the vetos among progressive forces and to finding political instead of judicial solutions.”

But the outgoing mayor had vetos of her own: “In no case will I open negotiations for an agreement with Mr Valls or Mrs Artadi, given that they represent models of city counterposed to what we have been advancing in the council over the past four years.” In bracketing Valls with Elsa Artadi, the effective leader of the JxCat group with Forn in prison, Colau was also voicing the ruling BeC view that Spanish unionism and the Catalan independence movement represent equal and opposite blocs that need to be broken down to facilitate social progress. She was also making it clear that BeC would not accept an ERC-BeC-JxCat coalition, the opening proposal of ERC, which is junior partner to JxCat in the Torra government.

For PSC council leader Jaume Collboni, any alliance would have to exclude the ERC and JxCat. The PSC, which on May 26 had won back votes from Citizens in the working-class, more Castilian speaking, neighbourhoods of Barcelona, would “do whatever it takes to stop Barcelona having a pro-independence mayor” (words of PSC leader Miquel Iceta).

In the background, the mobilisation of opinion for the various options for alliances to run the council began with one manifesto [2], “Barcelona as capital of social rights and freedoms” supporting the ERC-BeC option and another, “For a Left Government of Barcelona City” [3], supporting the tripartite proposal. A later manifesto in support of a BeC-PSC government was called “Colau for mayor” [4].

Middle game—ERC drops JxCat

The opening mutual prohibitions could not last, with the ERC being first to shift position. On June 3, after visiting Forn in jail to explain that the ERC would be dropping its insistence on including JxCat in any agreement with BeC, Maragall proposed a ERC-BeC government in which Colau would occupy the position of deputy-mayor and portfolios would be shared half and half.

The BeC response, in the words of outgoing third deputy mayor Janet Sanz, was to question whether ERC had really dropped JxCat at all: “We know they are sitting down together and Elsa Artadi is talking constantly of policies and concrete proposals with regard to the new council session. We can’t bring ourselves to trust or believe them, given the facts, which speak for themselves.”

At the same time, Colau maintained the campaign for a three-party coalition of the left, in which BeC was painted as the only force putting the interests of Barcelona before those of “the parties”. In a June 4 YouTube message she said: “The majority of Barcelona citizens are clearly calling for an end to the politics of exclusions, vetos and lines in the sand, and that we begin a new stage of dialogue and non-confrontation. A tripartite agreement has to be possible, because the ground for agreement over practical policies exists.”

Colau ascribed the hostilities between the ERC and PSC to the need, in the face of possible Catalan elections, for the former to appear more independentist than JxCat and the latter to appear more Spanish-patriotic than Citizens. She pointed out that the ERC and PSC had found no difficulty in reaching investiture agreements in centres other than Barcelona.

This was, at best, disingenuous. It was the PSC-PSOE that had made stopping the ERC from winning Barcelona a matter of life-or-death in the struggle against the independentist threat. The day before (June 3) Collboni had even refused an ERC request for a meeting, stating in his letter of reply that his party has begun negotiations with BeC over a council administration that would be “progressive and not subordinated to the [independence] process”. He later refused to take part in a three-a-side meeting with ERC and BeC.

As to the desires of Barcelona citizens, a June 4 Feedback poll for the pro-independence El Nacional (with a small sample of 800) found 54.1% in favour of a ERC-BeC governing coalition as against 35.3% in support of a BeC-PSC alliance backed by Valls. Of the BeC voters consulted, 67.1% supported an ERC-BeC pact with only 20.3% in favour of an alliance with the PSC.

End game—‘It’s about holding the mayoralty’

In response to BeC’s insistence on a tripartite agreement, Maragall next day (June 5) announced a pause in negotiations. He called on Colau to give a serious answer to “a project for a progressive city that with ERC generates stability and ... the instability of an administration conditioned by and beholden to the figure and vote of Manuel Valls. Let them say where they stand and stop the auctioning of the mayoralty that they’re carrying out.”

The ERC was beginning to detect that BeC’s number one priority was to return Ada Colau as mayor. According to “a senior ERC figure” cited in the June 5 El Periódico: “What they are trying to do is drag out the farce of the proposal for a tripartite administration—which is impossible—so as to arrive at June 15 without any apparent agreement, propose Colau for mayor and magically have her elected passively with the votes of the PSC and Valls.”

On June 6, BeC repounded with the announcement that Colau would stand for mayor. This move was

also directed at forcing the PSC to drop its condition of a prior BeC-PSC agreement over council administration and positions. Now the PSC would have no choice but to vote for Colau if it wanted to avoid the ERC taking Barcelona.

BeC kept insisting that their preferred option was still a tripartite government, blamed “the blocs” for its failure and painted a Colau mayoralty as the only guarantee of a progressive tripartite administration. A June 7 meeting of BeC activists voted 457 to 27 in favour of Colau standing again.

By now it was obvious that Colau was prepared to accept the votes of Valls and company to win re-election. On June 13, announcing the poll of BeC members, the outgoing mayor admitted as much: “For us the difference isn’t between the ERC and PSC. It’s about holding the mayoralty. That’s very important for setting priorities [...] It’s an issue we don’t like and has given us a lot of doubts, but we have decided not to give up governing.”

Vague talk of a last-minute offer to split the four years of mayoralty half and half between Colau and Maragall was in vain, as was the June 13 editorial proposal of Ara (daily newspaper closest to the ERC’s orientation) that, with the battle now lost if the BeC membership backed the PSC-Valls deal, the ERC should offer to accept Colau as mayor on the basis of a BeC-ERC agreement.

When the result of the BeC poll was announced it was 71.43% to 28.57% in favour of the Valls-supported deal with the PSC, with 40.42% of the registered membership participating—making the mayoral investiture vote and the scenes in St James Square on June 15 inevitable.

Consulting the BeC membership?

In announcing the results of the BeC process of membership consultation, the leadership had described it as an “unprecedented example of transparency and honesty”. How accurate was this claim? A June 15 article on the web site of Viento Sur by BeC member and rank-and-file trade union activist Josep Bel commented on the decision-making process:

[The refusal of the other parties to agree to BeC’s tripartite formula] left three options: that of reaching an agreement with the ERC alone, or with the PSC alone, or of going into opposition, but these options were not discussed with any clarity. The debate took place in a plenary a week before the deadline, in a meeting of 450 activists (including all the BeC people on the council payroll) in which the leadership proposal was adopted: to stand Ada for mayor in order to strengthen the BeC negotiating position. Only this formula could be voted on, with a yes or no of the mass meeting and without even the possibility of abstention.

In this way other options were eliminated and the open debate that was needed became impossible. It was said that this was so as to put on pressure for the tripartite formula and that the risk of going into opposition was being accepted, but nothing was further from the truth. The same people who said this afterwards acknowledged that opposition was never an option, the only important thing was to run the council, preferably with the PSC. That is to say, we were discussing in the abstract whether we wanted Ada as mayor or not (it’s obviously normal that all BeC people want that), but what should have been discussed in the mass meeting was whether we wanted to reach an agreement with the ERC, or with the PSC, or to go into opposition if a tripartite administration proved impossible.

On June 12, having announced that a tripartite administration was now impossible, BeC issued a communiqué in which it announced the membership consultation and the prior decision of the BeC coordinating committee to support the proposal for a BeC-PSC government, because that alone

would make possible the June 7 mass-meeting decision to stand Colau for mayor. And so, without any mention of the need for Valls' votes, the BeC membership was asked if it wanted a BeC-ERC pact without Colau as mayor or a BeC-PSC pact with Colau as mayor. As Maragall commented darkly, this was like asking Barcelona FC fans whether they wanted their team or Real Madrid to win the next match.

The core question

By contrast, the issues that never got debated properly within BeC were discussed extensively within the broader Catalan left and its media, in particular the web-based journal *Crític*. The core question of the debate—not always explicitly posed but always effectively answered—was what weight the ongoing and unresolved struggle for a Catalan right to self-determination should have in the decision on an alliance to run Barcelona Council. What importance should be given to the 2017-18 suspension of Catalan self-rule by the PP government of former prime minister Mariano Rajoy—supported by the PSOE-PSC—and the present Supreme Court trial of former Catalan leaders, some of them in preventive detention for up to 600 days?

For councils other than the Barcelona's, even for those of major cities like Sant Cugat and Figueres, forces that both supported and opposed the 2017 referendum and the article 155 intervention made deals over local issues to run councils after the May 26 election. For example, the PSC did 25 deals to run local councils with JxCat and 18 with ERC. Some of the combinations arising from the results included ERC and CUP councillors voting to throw out JxCat mayors, JxCat councillors voting to support PSC mayors and even a Citizens' councillor voting to support an ERC mayor. In the industrial city of Badalona, in order to avoid the PP's racist and xenophobic Xavier García Albiol from becoming mayor, the pro-sovereignty and pro-independence forces voted to support the unionist PSC, which had won only six of the council's 27 seats.

In Terrassa, Jordi Ballart, the former PSC mayor who had left the party over the article 155 suspension of Catalan autonomy, led new formation All for Terrassa (TxT) to a May 26 victory on the basis of promising a conscience vote to TxT councillors on all issues related to the national question. He will run a city divided between a more middle-class Catalanist city centre and Castilian-speaking working class outer suburbs in alliance with the ERC. This agreement has not stopped the local PSC, dethroned after 40 years in power in Catalonia's fourth-largest city, calling the TxT-ERC government "pro-independence".

However, it is one thing to do deals with the PSC and/or ERC in centres where local politics dominates and quite another in Barcelona, where what was involved was the political position of the PSOE-PSC on the major issue of politics in the Spanish state and one of the major issues in the European Union. Those arguing for a BeC-PSC alliance had to offer some answer as to why, in spite of the PSC-PSOE's own record of supporting article 155 and denying any Catalan right to self-determination, it was still better for BeC to ally with it and not the ERC.

Arguments for Colau as mayor

In the *Crític* debate, however, most contributions in support of the need to maintain Colau as mayor actually avoided addressing the need for a BeC-PSC alliance, arguing instead in favour of BeC's tripartite formula as if the PSC's rejection of this throughout the whole negotiation period did not exist.

For Ricard Gomà, former Initiative for Catalonia (ICV) Barcelona councillor and Ismael Blanco, fellow lecturer at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, “a battery of arguments” supported the option of Ada Colau’s not giving up on the mayoralty, three of which were “key”. Writing in the June 12 *Crític*, they said:

Firstly, the consolidation and broadening of the change agenda. It is key to provide future horizons for issues like the climate plan, urban and social green spaces and tram network connectioni, recovery of sovereignty over public goods, policies in support of urban rights and the strengthening of democratic authority in the face of the agents of the extractive economyii.

Secondly, the consolidation and extension of global municipalism. In times of Brexit and Salvini, of Trump and Bolsonaro, Barcelona has woven networks with New York, London, Naples, Vienna ... as spaces for democratic and inclusive responses to structural challenges (human rights, gentrification, the climate emergency). In times of strong competition among cities, Barcelona has succeeded with vanguard projects of collaboration: from the European Union mobility institute to the European supercomputer and the greatest investment in public research infrastructure.

And in third place, the consolidation and broadening of the logic of democracy, of Barcelona as a space for defusing the politics of trench warfare, on the basis of a commitment against repression and for the freeing of the political prisoners, based on popular and republican Catalanism.

Ada Colau as a point of reference on an international scale is basic to strengthening these three dynamics.

For former Workers Commissions Catalonia secretary Joan Carles Gallego, writing on June 7:

Barcelona, like the rest of the municipalities, must create a proposal for governability as a function of local autonomy, city governance and citizen-oriented policies. Of course, the building of alliances can’t ignore political context, but this can’t be allowed to paralyse all initiative, condition the future or manipulate it by imposing objectives foreign to those of the city.

Gallego also gave this justification for a BeC-PSC administration facilitated by votes from Valls if a tripartite alliance proved impossible:

Certainly, listening to Valls’ offer to vote in favour “in exchange for nothing” can leave a certain bad after-taste on aesthetic grounds (and on those of principle) and it can correctly be adduced that nothing is ever for free: but isn’t it legitimate for Valls to play his cards in the name of his own political strategy and his own personal future? Given that that’s what he has actually done and regardless of the end result, he has already cashed in by getting back onto the political stage from which his actual vote [on May 26] had removed him. That, however, can’t invalidate, nor instil doubts about, the ability of other political forces to create a proposal for an autonomous left-wing administration; nor can it be used to impose vetos on other left forces in any possible negotiation and agreement.

However, what also leaves a bad aftertaste on aesthetic grounds (and on those of principle) is the refusal to negotiate an agreement for a left administration by vetoing forces (whom, by the way, you’ve accepted as allies in other cities of Catalonia) in the knowledge that the non-existence of an alternative automatically gives you the mayoralty without you having to explain on what conditions you’re taking it on or what policies you are committing to implement [...]

If the logic of opposing fronts wins out in the end or vetos make agreement impossible, someone will have to take on the responsibility and the commitment to lead a joint left administration and, if necessary, counterpose this on June 15 to one or more possible alternative proposals.

On June 14 (the day the BeC membership consultation closed), Eloi Badia, the BeC's outgoing councillor in charge of water and energy, explained in *Crític* "Why I'll be Voting For Ada Colau as Mayor". For Badia the position of mayor was critical ("councils are extremely presidential institutions") and Maragall's history and his team gave no confidence that he would continue the 2015-2019 policies of BeC. This was despite the reality that:

[T]he left program on which we ran in the elections is a priori much more viable to implement with the ERC than with the PSC. During this last mandate I've been able to confirm that differences with the PSC have always arisen with greater force at the point our actions on behalf of the common good were upsetting the status quo of the economic powers-that-be operating in the city. The restaurant sector with the ordinance regulating terrace use, the hotel lobby with the Tourist Accommodation Special Urban Plan,ⁱⁱⁱ the real estate groups with the 30%^{iv}, AGBAR blocking the multi-consultation pushed by the citizens.^v I've been able to sense very worrying organic links here.

However, for Badia, despite this evidence of PSC sensitivity to the interests of Barcelona's big business lobbies, the ERC's own negatives were greater: four years' of opposition for opposition's sake (including to the proposal for a council funeral service aimed at undercutting the city's obscenely high private funeral prices). Only when Maragall replaced Bosch in late 2018 did this orientation start to change.

Nonetheless, Maragall himself was a career politician, responsible both for the planning regulations that converted Barcelona into a speculators' paradise when he was on the council and also for government subsidies to sex-segregated private schools when he was minister for education in the Catalan government.

For Badia, two particular realities spoke against allying with the ERC. The first was the placing of Elisenda Alamany, the former spokesperson for Catalonia Together-Podemós (CeC-Podem) group in the Catalan parliament and later founder of the platform Sovereignists, as number two on the ERC ticket: this meant "committing to someone who has burnt all bridges with CeC".^{vi}

The second was ERC's message during the election campaign that it was committing to an alliance with JxCat (as in the Catalan government), in particular Maragall's May 26 victory speech when he speculated that ERC would either govern alone or in alliance with JxCat. Badia argued:

Obviously there's also a national dimension to the administration of the city. In my case, however, I don't subordinate the left axis to the national framework. In fact, it is the paralysis in which the Catalan government has gotten immersed, with a Parliament that doesn't add up, which makes me reaffirm that it has been an historic and strategic error of the left forces in our country to subordinate left policies to national ones. The deals with the governments of Convergència^{vii} have brought us no social advance nor greater quotas of sovereignty, neither institutionally nor at the popular level. It has been a mistake of pro-independence left forces to have abandoned left majorities at the moment of forming administrations. In this sense, I cannot agree with the ERC proposal to hand the city over to JxCat instead of committing to a model of governance backed by 60% of the electorate and 28 councilors.

As for the necessary support of Valls, this was no problem for Badia—if the former French PM wanted to vote to enable a left project for Barcelona, so be it: "I've never abandoned any left project on the basis of who might support it."

Arguments for a ERC-BeC Alliance

Writing in *Crític* on June 13, Ruben Wagensberg, refugee rights activist^{viii} and ERC MP in the Catalan parliament, acknowledged that “during these four years the ERC has not always carried out the best of possible oppositions”, voting for “many things that are complicated to understand” and contributing to “a climate of distrust with the Commons”. In a reference to the electoral alliance between the ERC and Sovereignists he added that his party “maybe also has to recognise that certain of the movements made in recent months to get closer to the space and voters of the Commons has ended up generating controversy and irritation more than rapprochement.”

Nonetheless, noting that “politics isn’t exactly overloaded with candour towards the voters and the rest of the citizens”, Wagensberg said that BeC’s appeal to “break down the blocs” and its censure of the alleged mutual vetos of the ERC and PSC did not address “the complexity of the situation with sincerity”.

Despite the fact that [a tripartite administration] would be one between accusers and accused (it can’t be overlooked that the PSOE, via the Spanish state solicitor-general, is asking for years of prison for ERC politicians), Maragall has offered Collboni up to two meetings to talk about Barcelona: the first bilateral, the second of all three groups, just as Ada Colau was demanding. In both cases the PSC has refused to sit down to talk. Not even that: talk. The explicit proof of a willingness to break down blocs arrived the day Ernest [Maragall] went to Soto de Real to tell the candidate of JxCat—who has been locked up in prison for almost two years—that he would not be counting on him to run Barcelona. A difficult—and brave—step given the situation of repression Joaquim Forn is suffering but also because of the strong pressure of certain pro-independence sectors opposed to the rapprochement [with BeC].

Wagensberg concluded that if BeC were serious about breaking down the blocs:

[I]t is obvious and widely known who has tried, skilfully or not, to do that in order to facilitate the resolution of the conflict.

If what was wanted was an administration that most works for social justice,

[C]oalition with the party that has blocked rescue vessels in the Mediterranean is definitely not the best idea for a city that did the biggest demonstration in the world in favour of welcoming people seeking refuge. Moreover, in writing this, I can’t help remembering the role of Collboni in the debate about the Top Mantax, also organised by “Our House, Your House”, where all the socialists’ proposals for itinerant street-sellers revolved solely around the theme of public security, adopting the framework of the most racist right wing. Not one social proposal.

If what was wanted was an administration that supports civil rights and freedoms,

[I]t would seem more advisable to govern on the side of those suffering retaliation rather than those applying repression. And that, obviously, without even mentioning the votes of Citizens. It has to be said without mincing words: the Commons would only have to listen to the final trial statements of Forn, Rull and Turullxi to see in them, despite all the obvious ideological differences, a worthy source of support and a perspective for work that would be shared in many spheres. Apply the criterion of “breaking the blocs”: the dignity and the “torrent bursting out in the Supreme Court” (words of Xavier Domènech), are the most trustworthy demonstration of the growth of awareness and the rapprochement by members of the old Convergence with civil rights. [...] The sorely missed Jordi Sànchez regretted not having been conscious of the harshness of preventive detention and used the few minutes of his closing statement to demand a deep-going reform of the penal system.

Bravo.

For documentary film-maker Jordi Oriola, BeC had a simple choice to make: would they connive in the Valls-Iceta scheme to stop Barcelona having a pro-independence mayor or not?

It's understandable that Colau should propose a tripartite left administration along the left-right axis which would, moreover, allow her not to line up with either "side" with regard to the territorial conflict. But here we're not talking only about rights and lefts, only about the territorial conflict, the most serious issue is that social and political rights are being violated and that reality should take precedence over everything else for as long as the damage done is not repaired. Are we giving approval to the Spain that is perpetrating this abuse? Or do we have to stand up against it?

And it's a truth that has to be recognised that the Commons have stood up many times, also specifically breaking with the PSC of article 155xii. A PSC that has never taken any distance from 155, nor recognised its mistake, nor asked for pardon, but has threatened it again. Pedro Sánchez regretted the police violence on October 1 and threatened to censure the performance of the Spanish government, but after the King's October 3 speech, tilted over to 155 and continues along this line of violating rights so as to defend the State.

The fact of the matter is that, right now, the PSC is not with the 80% of Catalan society that rejects repression and wants a democratic solution in the form of a referendum on self-determination. The PSC is the same as that which supported 155 but the situation is now more serious, because the PSOE is in government in Spain and is more responsible for the violations and for preventing a solution.

Oriola conceded that Alfred Bosch, when leader of the ERC in Barcelona Council had "carried out a very ugly, confrontational opposition", treated the Colau administration like an enemy and "blocked everything". The ERC would deserve to be given the same treatment were something more important not at stake—the possibility of carrying out left wing policies and defending political rights.

Oriola also stressed that the standard BeC use of the tickets "left" and "right" obscured real political dynamics.

JxCat is labelled as right-wing and is ruled out because of that [...] It is certain that they must retain something of [formerly ruling alliance] Convergence and Union (CiU), but it's also true that they've been suffering a whole series of abuses and experiences normally reserved for us people of the left, which certainly would have produced some learning curves and values for them. In contrast, the PSC has been carrying out policies of repression and taxation that are normally the operations with which the parties of the right get their hands dirty. And so, while JxCat is right-wing but has been heading leftwards, the PSC is heading rightwards, and so I don't know where the two parties are to be situated right now... But it's definitely the case that, although JxCat starts from a certain ideological position, right now it stands for denouncing and correcting the Francoism that survives in Spain.

Reasons for a decision: the evolution of the Commons

Why a BeC-ERC alliance didn't happen is being ascribed in the discussion in Catalonia to many factors, one of which was Maragall's refusal to consider sharing or even ceding what BeC most wanted—the mayoralty. Joan Tardà, former lead ERC MP in the Spanish Congress and long-time supporter of united action between pro-sovereigntist and pro-independence forces, suggested as

much in an Ara interview in which he confessed himself “angry, sad, fed-up and disappointed” with the outcome on Barcelona Council.

To achieve a superior good, you have to pay penalties. At times not only one, but two or three penalties, even huge and unfair ones.

However, whatever the supposed tactical errors of the ERC when confronted with someone who was determined to remain mayor, the underlying cause of the BeC’s pact with the unionist PSC was the progressive weakening of the pro-sovereignty pole within the BeC universe itself.

The April 2017 founding congress of CeC, which added BeC to the ICV, EUiA and the all-Spanish green party Equo, had adopted by very large majority the perspective of “the creation in Catalonia of a social, democratic and environmentally just Republic, as the highest expression and realisation of its national sovereignty” . The problem, however, was the relation of the CeC’s horizon for Catalonia with the concrete “process” adopted by the pro-independence majority of the Catalan parliament and the Puigdemont government, which culminated in the October 1, 2017 referendum.^{xiii} As this made headway, with the growing involvement of masses of aligned and non-aligned people, the Commons’ “equidistant” position—against Spanish state repression and intransigence but not for the referendum process or independence—fragmented.

At one pole, CSQEP MPs Lluís Rabell and Joan Coscubiela spoke out in the Catalan parliament on September 6 and 7, 2017 against the enabling laws for the referendum and its aftermath: at the other, Commons’ members and minority groupings were already involved in organising the referendum—against the judicial, and later police, warfare of the Spanish state.

After intense internal debate the CeC membership resolved to take part in October 1 as a “mobilisation” but not as a real referendum, and the leadership later stated that they did not recognise the result as sanctioning the October 27, 2017 declaration of independence.

The weakening of the pole within the Commons that is committed to building the actually existing movement for a Catalan right to decide (and not just to the right to self-determination as a principle or to some negotiated independence referendum in the distant future) dates from the splits in the CQSEP parliamentary group on September 6-7, 2017. It was, however, set in train by the last minute refusal of Podemos Catalonia, then under the leadership of former pro-sovereignty general secretary Albano-Dante Fachín, to take part in the founding of CeC [5].

The fragmentation of this pro-sovereignty space has since been marked by the following events:

- The October 2017 overruling of Fachín’s attempts to create a left pro-sovereignty alliance, potentially involving the ERC and CUP, for the December 28, 2017 Catalan elections. This was done via a referendum of the membership in Catalonia with a leading question formulated by the Spanish state Podemos leadership of general secretary Pablo Iglesias. Fachín subsequently resigned as general secretary of Podemos Catalonia after Iglesias’s proposal for a Podemos-CeC alliance won 70% support.
- The emergence within ICV in February 2018 of the current “Federalists with Initiative”, which ascribed the poor results of CatECP in the December 21, 2017 elections, especially in Castilian-speaking neighbourhoods, to “the vagueness and ambiguity of the Commons with regard to the Catalonia-Spain relationship”.

Leaders of the Commons have excessively repeated words and gestures of sympathy with the “process”—the Catalan Republic as a political proposal, the banner and yellow ribbon on Barcelona Town Hall, the break with the socialists [...] The process has shredded the inclusive and mixed

Catalanism of the “one single people” (the people who live and work in Catalonia), substituting it with a fundamentalist Catalanism based on an emotional and political rejection of Spain that leaves out more than a half of Catalan women and men.

- In June 2018, due to the opposition of ICV, CeC coordinator Xavier Domènech’s proposal to elect the unaffiliated supporter of Catalan sovereignty Elisenda Alamany as co-coordinator has to be shelved, with Ada Colau assuming the position instead. The new executive sees many Domènech supporters replaced.
- On September 4, 2018, Domènech, who in the meantime has also been elected secretary-general of Podem, announces his decision to return to academic life, abandoning all his political responsibilities, due to “exhaustion”.
- On October 23, 2018, Alamany, supported by EUiA national coordinator Joan Josep Nuet, launches the platform “Soberanistes” inside CeC. It’s founding statement reads: “Too often, the demand for sovereignty, even though it is one of our founding values, has been left aside. In this way the [pluralism] of the CeC space, which was one of the characteristics which made the project of the Commons a winner, has been put at risk. Many supporters of sovereignty today feel completely orphan within this political space.” On October 29, Alamany resigns as the CeC’s parliamentary spokesperson.
- On October 25, the two main figures on Barcelona Council with marked pro-sovereignty positions, first and third deputy mayors Gerard Pisarello and Jaume Asens, distance themselves for the “Sovereignists” initiative. According to Asens, “trying to appropriate a founding value for oneself seems to me to be a mistake.” Pisarello calls the initiative “incomprehensible” and “unacceptable”, both in form and content.
- On February 19, Alamany leaves the CeC parliamentary group to sit as an independent, to be followed by the March 18 announcement that Sovereignists will stand Nuet and Alamany in alliance with the ERC, respectively in the April 28 Spanish general election and May 26 Barcelona municipal election.
- On March 7, in an effort to hold onto its pro-sovereignty vote, CeC announces that Asens will be its lead candidate and Pisarello its number three candidate for the Spanish Congress elections. One result of the choice is that federalist and outgoing Podemos senator Òscar Guardingo refuses to occupy the 11th spot on the CeC list.

The result of this process of dispersion of the sovereigntist forces within the Commons was to strengthen the more unified federalist-unionist camp. The pro-sovereignty forces were divided between currents coming from EUiA, Anticapitalists and BeC, while the centre of gravity of the federalist camp was one single organisation, ICV. This, along with the BeC central leadership around Ada Colau, naturally also formed the grouping most predisposed to allying with the PSC and swallowing the votes of Valls.

In the absence of a united, organised and persistent intervention by the divided sovereigntist forces within the Commons, a victory for the ICV-BeC alliance was a foregone conclusion, both in the BeC activists’ meeting of June 7 and in the June 12-13 BeC membership poll. Given this weakness, the fact, confirmed later in the Barcelona Council June Post-Election Barometre (p. 29) [6], that nearly twice as many preferred an ERC-BeC to a BeC-PSC alliance ((20.3% to 10.5%), couldn’t have any weight in the face of the overwhelming priority of maintaining the mayoralty.

Speaking anonymously to El Periódico journalist Roger Pascual on the day Colau announced her

candidacy, a “member of the Commons most in favour of marking distance from independentism” commented: “This great gesture gets rid of ambiguity. Now the road map that we should have left behind after the results of the last Catalan elections [December 21, 2017] will change. [...] The important step has been taken. Now there’s no turning back.”

The anonymous ICV interviewee did not comment on the issue of where the mass of ordinary BeC voters who want both progressive social policies and defence of Catalonia’s right to self-determination will now place their trust.

Aftermath

The decision of the BeC to ally with the PSC and accept the votes of Valls-Citizens to maintain Ada Colau as mayor is a setback for progressive politics, not just in Catalonia but the whole Spanish state, reinforcing as it does anti-democratic Spanish unionism in its PSOE variant. By contrast, a BeC-ERC administration, with all its inevitable tensions, would have been better placed to continue with the policies set in place in Ada Colau’s first term at the same time as making Barcelona Council an important point of support for the Catalan right to self-determination and of denunciation of the repression of the Spanish state.

PSC leader Iceta was perfectly right to attribute it that importance and to initiate the operation that led to Valls’ irresistible offer to Colau.

Getting an accurate assessment of the likely size of the setback requires above all abandonment of BeC’s falsely symmetrical vision of Catalan politics as a war between two equal and opposite “blocs”, as if the Catalan movement for its right to self-determination (denigrated as “processism”) and the Spanish state war of attrition against that right represent equal and opposite forces and Manuel Valls and Elsa Artadi are representatives of equal and opposite right wings within these blocs. The real truth of the relation was dramatised by the presence under police guard of Joaquim Forn at the June 15 Barcelona Council investiture.

Colau’s re-election with the support of the PSC and Valls:

- Strengthens the unionist camp and makes the BeC and Colau more vulnerable to its pressures;
- Strengthens the PSC within the unionist camp, especially as immediately following the investiture of Colau, Citizens broke with Valls, accusing him of supporting “populism”;
- Further weakens the Commons by reducing the weight of those within it who support the ongoing struggle for Catalonia’s sovereignty and right to decide and not just the principle of a Catalan right to self-determination. It will also accelerate the process of the shrinking of CeC itself into little more than an ICV-BeC alliance;
- Potentially weakens the ERC in its struggle for hegemony within the independence camp, making it vulnerable to the charge that a single, united pro-independence ticket would have won the extra seats needed to make it impossible for the BeC to retain the mayoralty. As Puigdemont tweeted on the day, commenting on this scene of Valls applauding the newly inaugurated Colau: “This image ought to be a correction to the strategies that have led to it’s being possible. Without any resentment or blaming, and with all the self-criticism required, recovering unity again becomes the priority.”
- Torpedoes the Commons’ strategy of seeking to detach ERC from JxCat. If CeC’s incessant harping about the “rightist neo-convergents” of JxCat has had no success in drawing ERC closer to it in a

period in which Europe's biggest mass movement consistently pressures its leaders for unity, June 15 in Barcelona Town Hall will have killed off practically all remaining possibilities of rapprochement.

Unless arrested by dramatic action—much more than restoring the yellow ribbon to the front of Barcelona Town Hall—a variant of the PSOE's re-swallowing of Podemos [7] at the level of the Spanish state now looms in Catalonia. The supporters of Colau's tactic hope that the Valls' incident will be forgotten as her administration continues to roll out progressive policies in its second term. But will radical action be possible after hanging onto power in such a fashion and when surrounded by such "friends"?

Having burnt bridges with the ERC — closest to BeC in program — Colau will now be hostage to the PSC and Valls, both of whom during the election campaign described her ideas for Barcelona as "disastrous". Hanging over her head will be the threat of a no-confidence motion if these "supporters" think she is being too radical. Of course, she may adjust her behaviour to avoid that fate, but whose mayor would Ada Colau then be?

Dick Nichols

P.S.

• June 30, 2019 — Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal:
<http://links.org.au/ada-colau-re-elected-barcelona-mayor>

An initial version of this article has appeared on the *Green Left Weekly* web site.

• Dick Nichols, based in Barcelona, is European correspondent of Green Left Weekly and Links—International Journal of Socialist Renewal. A member of Barcelona Together, he voted for it to administer Barcelona in coalition with the ERC.

Footnotes

[1] https://www.ara.cat/en/Operation-Manuel-Valls-campaign-funded_0_2252174857.html

[2] <https://www.bcndretsllibertats.cat>

[3] <https://esquerresperbarcelona.cat>

[4] <https://colaulcaldessa.cat>

[5] <http://links.org.au/un-pais-en-comu-new-catalan-political-space-hurdle-cleared-on-road-to-left-unity>

[6] http://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/premsa/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/r19016_Barometre_Post_Electoral_Juny_Resum_V_1_0.pdf

[7] ESSF (article 49625), [Elections in Spain: Podemos implodes, Catalan right to decide](#)

[reasserted.](#)