
Geoff Cowling at Vilaweb

Autor:

Data de publicació: 04-03-2014

Catalonia's very real grievances - From Mr Geoff Cowling. Sir, The ... Catalonia's very real grievances ... IN Letters ... It is a nation in its own right within the United Kingdom. ... It took a one-year siege by a combined French and Spanish Bourbon army to break ...

Geoffrey Cowling was the Consul General in Barcelona for Great Britain during 2002-2005. On February 26, Cowling wrote a letter in the prestigious London economic paper Financial Times in which he defended the right of the Catalans to decide their future, in response to an article written by PP MP Cayetana Álvarez de Toledo. In the letter, he wrote that "Catalonia too is a 'nation' as defined by the estatut, an act passed by the Spanish parliament in 2006. To describe both nations as 'tribes' betrays a colonialist mind." Cowling also refutes Álvarez de Toledo's claims that Catalans have distorted historical facts, and after a quick tour through the Spanish Catalan relationship over the last 300 years says, "Catalonia did not voluntarily join Spain, it was brutally conquered."

VilaWeb spoke with Cowling yesterday by telephone.

—How come you sent the letter to Financial Times ?

—We have a free press. I saw Ms.Cayetana Álvarez de Toledo' s article in the Financial Times. I did not agree with what she had said and decided to reply to it. I'm not the only one to have replied - several other people did so as well.

—Do you think your opinion is average in the United Kingdom? Because it is quite in favour of the Catalans.

— I'm a democrat and in favour of practical democracy. The people of Scotland have the right to decide their future because they are a nation. And as I understand the Estatut as approved by Spanish Parliament, Catalonia too is recognised as a nation. Therefore under the UN charter, nations, and therefore the people of Catalonia, have the right to decide their own destiny.

—How come in the UK this is so clear, but in Spain it is not so clear? Is it just because of different traditions?

—The UK does not have a written Constitution. This means that politicians are able to deal with issues in the context of the situation of the day. They are not constrained by a written constitution and the inevitably limited vision of politicians of the past.

—At the same time I think that the average Englishman sees things more clearly than Spaniards. It goes beyond Constitution.

—Indeed. because the UK is not limited by a written constitution we can deal with the situation as it is on the day. In the case of Scotland there was an Act of Union in 1707 when English and Scottish Parliaments united and formed the United Kingdom Parliament in Westminster in London. Since devolution, and the formation of the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, the majority of members of the Scottish parliament have asked for an independence referendum. This was debated and approved by the UK Parliament in Westminster.

—You said Catalans have the right to self-determination.

—If you are defined as a nation under the Estatut then I believe you have that right. But I'm not a Constitutional lawyer, and I'm sure there are a lot of people arguing this point. This is my personal interpretation. Nothing more.

—When you came to Catalonia years ago, were you expecting to find a Spanish region and then discovered that there

was something else?

—I served in the British Consulate General in Barcelona for a few months way back in 1970, before I went to our Embassy in Afghanistan. That was during the time of the Franco era. I was aware of Catalan identity and the part that this played in the Spanish Civil War. But I was very young and I did not take that further. But when I did return to Catalonia as Consul General in 2002 I was aware of it. But to be honest, and you might agree, the whole question of Catalan identity in 2002 was certainly nowhere near as strong as it is today.

—How come it is so strong now?

—Catalan identity has developed along with the greater degree of confidence of the Catalan people. This really hit me when I was in Barcelona on the Diada of 2012. I was astonished by the huge crowds in Passeig de Gràcia, calling for independence and waving the Senyera and Estel·lada. This very strong feeling was coming from the streets of Catalonia. It wasn't a movement dictated by politicians. In fact the reverse happened, because the demonstrations influenced the decision by the President of Catalonia, Artur Mas, to bring forward the elections to November 2012. The result, as you know, is increased support for the independence policies of the ERC and a majority in the Catalan parliament for an independence consultation. Catalan identity and confidence has flourished in the last decade.

—What do you think should be the right move to do by the Spanish government. I have the feeling they are cornered now.

—The Spanish Government is restrained by the Constitution. I believe the issue should be freely debated in the Spanish Parliament. But this is a matter for the Spanish Parliament itself to decide.

—And the Catalan government? Are they taking the right steps? Are they going too slow? What's your opinion from outside?

—The decision is for the Catalan government and the Catalan people, not for an outsider observer like me to pass an opinion.

—According to you, for the EU would it be a good thing or a bad thing if Catalonia becomes a new state?

—This is a difficult one to answer. The same challenges are being put to the Scottish government by the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, who has said it is impossible for Scotland to enter the EU as an independent country. So if the European Commission President is saying that for Scotland, which is going to have a fully recognised legitimate referendum, I presume the same applies to Catalonia.

—Do you think that movements like these are putting the notion of the nation state in danger?

—European Union is made up of nation states. Any member of EU is a nation state on its own right. Some are very old, like UK, some are very new, like the Baltic states. But they are all national states in International law.

—Maybe we are going towards a world where there will be no nation states, but huge entities like EU, and the rest are going to be like regions, more than nations. Do you agree on that?

—I don't believe that, to be honest. Not in the case of Europe. You would not be able to sell that idea in the United Kingdom.

—Have you received any support during these last few hours?

—Yes, a number of people have been in touch with me. The majority are in favour of what I have said, others not so. But we are all entitled to express and debate our views in a free society.

—Are you planning to come back to Barcelona?

—Not for a while.

—Not even for holidays?

- I will be back eventually - don't worry about that!

Thank you for your time, sir.