

VIVA ESPANIA



I would love to be a fly on the wall at the first meeting between the new Spanish Home Secretary, Snr Jose Bono, and the British Prime Minister. In respect of the war on Iraq, Snr Bono is on record as describing Mr Blair as “un gilipollas integral”. Press reports are currently translating this as ‘a complete dickhead’. It promises to get diplomatic relations with the socialist government of Spain off to a racing_start.

Far more important than the personal relationships between the 2 governments, however, is an understanding of the political implications of the Spanish elections. Only days before, the Socialist Party were not in with a prayer. The train bombings in Madrid, and the government's desire to blame this on ETA profoundly changed events.

In Britain, there is a fierce debate between whether the election was a victory for the anti-war movement or for al Qaida. Only a small number of papers have picked up on the fact that whilst Aznar may have pledged himself into the Bush ‘war-camp’, the Spanish people never did. On its own, this would not have been enough to give the Spanish Socialist Party an election victory. But the bombings touched something deeper.

Spain has its own living memories of oppression, bombings, civil war and resistance. Its people know the pain of war and the bitterness and resentment that year’s of oppression leave behind. No one sided with al Qaida, they just knew that an illegal war would bring with it acts of reprisal and revenge. The government believed that if they could blame the bombings on ETA they would be re-elected on a platform of standing firm against internal terrorism. They knew too that, if it was admitted to be the work of al Qaida, the government would be punished for an international folly that innocent lives in Spain has paid a heavy price for.

Those who describe the Spanish elections as a victory to al Qaida need to consider this: nothing has given a greater victory to al Qaida than the war on Iraq . Whether it was for oil, for his dad, or for a new US hegemonic empire, George Bush broke the international coalition against terrorism by his war on Iraq. No one else has turned the secular (if tyrannical) Iraq into a haven for al Qaida fighters. No one else broke the United Nations in its attempts to avoid a war, and in being the only body that (through a second resolution) could have made a war legal. This is the wreckage we now have to pick our way through.

Societies that have had to deal with their own terrorist movements know they must do so in three ways. They have to penetrate the terrorist movements to identify its structures and leaders. They have to use the intelligence gained to avert the terrorist plans they can find out about, and to protect themselves against ones they can anticipate. And there has to be a political process that genuinely engages with the issues and communities that would otherwise provide cover for the terrorists. Politically, this is the area of Britain’s greatest failings.

We pretend to be liberating Iraq whilst taking most of their assets from them. Oil is seized by US corporations. Reconstruction contracts are given to Bush's friends. Constitutions get re-written to support privatisation rather than public ownership. Ordinary people see their lives torn apart by free-trade fundamentalists and fall into protective arms of religious fundamentalists. They know the West is unconcerned about oppression and tyranny because we do so little to enforce the UN resolutions that would restore rights to Palestinians. By our actions and inactions we give daily affirmations to the charge of 'double standards'.

How do the Spanish elections connect with this? First, we have an incredible expression of public opinion that refused to throw itself into the bunker of increased internal repression of civil and human rights in response to acts of terrorism. Second, you have the reality that, given the choice, people voted for a party that opposed an opportunistic and illegal war. Third, there is now a firm timetable for their troop withdrawals that will begin to force Bush into a decision that cannot be ducked. Will the UN be allowed to be the lead body in a process of Iraqi self-determination that may well want to reclaim its own assets, or will the US have to remain as an army of occupation in order to retain the wealth for corporate America?

The criticism that has come from the Labour Party about the leadership's support for Bush's war was never about the sincerity of Tony Blair's beliefs. It took issue, not with his character but his judgement. Even when the war started it was still the case that the only MPs who continued to oppose the war, on a principled basis, were Labour MPs. That is why we have to say to our own supporters that you must stay in the Party and occupy the same space. The only reason people in Spain could vote for a Socialist government that opposed the war was because sufficient people, inside the Socialist Party, had held this line. We have to do the same for Labour.

Being in the Party is the essential first step in bringing it back to a position that is pro-international law, pro-UN, pro-diplomacy and pro-social development. If people in Spain deserved this choice, so do the people in Britain.