

Treat or treat

Modern Spain was built on two apparently contradictory bases. Having accepted that the Basque Country would recover the privileged status that Navarra had never lost, regions demanded not to be, and not to have, less than Catalonia. The second principle was the one Madrid loves best: to keep the power of discretionality in its hands. So, the funding of the autonomous governments has always been impossible to justify rationally. In particular, Mediterranean regions are extraordinarily penalized; thus, for instance Valencia, with a per capita income below the Spanish average, has a negative fiscal balance with the rest of Spain.

The funding mechanism of the autonomous governments is reviewed every four years; each time Catalonia has led the claim to improve its position, and each time everybody including, marginally, Catalonia, has improved on the basis that the central government has put more money on the table to be shared.

Now, it is not money that discussions are about, but rather about deficit: how much more debt are communities to be allowed to issue this year. As usual, other

regions demand that Catalonia not to be treated 'differently' from the rest. However, central government cannot yield, because all the Mediterranean regions are approximately in the same position; that is, on the verge of collapsing.

Central government has long since decided that deficit objectives have to be different, but it is unable to have this accepted by the leaders of the various communities run by its own party, who threaten to revolt. Finally, a solution has been coined and accepted: "Catalonia will be treated exactly the same as the rest, and its share will be calculated applying objective criteria and the same parameters that are applied to the rest". Montoro immediately announced that he would start to negotiate with each of those leaders. So, what does that all mean?

In essence, Madrid is going to decide the amounts, as usual, in an utterly arbitrary manner, and that 'objective criteria' and 'parameters' will only appear after the negotiation is finished and an agreement is guaranteed. How?

Imagine you have won a lottery prize and, not needing the money, decide to divide it among your three sons. You do not

want to make equal parts, since their needs, which you consider you know better than they do, are different. But, of course, you do not want to seem to be unfair. What can you do?

If they are dumb enough, you can announce that you will use 'objective criteria' to split the amount. For example, you can decide that those criteria will be number of offspring, income and age; three very objective ones. Now, as any student of elementary mathematics should know, you can split the prize in any way you prefer; the only thing you have to do is to choose the weighting of those three criteria appropriately.

This is exactly what the central government is going to do with the deficit of the autonomies, and at this very moment somebody, with the outcome in front of their eyes, is working out what criteria and what weightings should be chosen. The solution will thus appear to be 'objective'.

I do not exaggerate: every four years a dozen parameters are used to determine the precise amounts of the funding of the various autonomous communities. It's a very old trick which, up to now, has worked beautifully.

RANDOM THOUGHTS

TERRY PARRIS

Flexibility and opinion

Flexibility is a word that often creeps into my mind. The old are said to be inflexible, set in their ways, but this generally means that they have set opinions about, for example, capital punishment, abortion, homosexuality, and politics. These opinions can be in favour or against, and no amount of argument can change their point of view. As, date-wise, I would be considered old, flexibility has become

important, both physically and mentally. Physically, practising yoga is a great help, and daily walks keep the joints supple.

But what about flexibility as regards opinion? Should one living in a country with people of one's own race practising apartheid and racism, vocally strident in their favour, give an opposing opinion? Or should one conform and try to see the other fellow's point of view. Be flexible in

fact. What harm can set opinions have? Is flexibility good?

Seng-Tsan, the third Zen Patriarch said: "If you wish to see the truth/ Then hold no opinions for or against anything.../ Indeed, it is due to our choosing to accept or reject,/ That we do not see the true nature of things." If we withhold our opinions we won't become opinionated, and that is definitely rigid. So, here's to flexibility!

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"What amuses me is how folks on the right who are fine when there's a Republican president, but now, Obama's coming in with the black helicopters." Barack Obama, US President

It may seem funny to you, Mr. President, but there is no fun at all in becoming an Orwellian Big Brother, spying on millions of people around the world.