

SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

TRIBUNE

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The generally heated debate on the reasons that motivate Catalans towards independence is perfectly understandable. It is also reasonable that for the most ardent Spanish nationalists there is no reason at all. Or is there? For even they agree on one explanation: that the quest for independence is nothing but a matter of sentimentalism. So, independentists are pursuing a lost cause, which, beyond its romanticism, does not deserve further attention, at the risk of opening up old agendas.

Granted, it is inherently sentimental feeling oneself Estonian, Irish, Portuguese, or also Catalan. All nations, by definition, are bonded by a shared feeling of purpose, of community and of shared values. Most often, all of this manifests itself in a common history, a language, similar customs and practices, and even with a unique civil code. All of this can be grasped by any a foreigner who visits Catalonia.

While debating with unionists, this author has always been amazed by their persistence in telling me (or us) what the Catalan pro-independence process is all about. If we follow their line of reasoning, we should accept that only feelings are at stake here. Yet, an examination of any of the mass rallies calling for independence tells a different story. In fact, it is only because of the many people from different backgrounds and with different origins, each with their own set of reasons, is it feasible that today Catalonia is

contesting Madrid's ruling.

One of these motives, and apparently a very rational one, is the notorious fiscal deficit against the Catalan speaking regions. This is one of the constants in the relationship between Madrid and the Balearic Islands, Catalonia, and Valencia, i.e. the huge gap between their respective tax revenues and what finally comes back as "investment" from Madrid. In the case of Catalonia it has oscillated between 6.6% and 8.9% (as a percentage of Catalan GDP) in the period 2003-2016. The financial crisis of 2008-09, with the associated budgetary constraints for all sides, was an eye opener to many: people who previously did not bother, started reckoning that

maybe Catalonia, and themselves, would be better off without an imposed ruler, especially one that has proved itself to be corrupt (starting with its undemocratic monarchy), authoritarian and incapable.

Democracy at stake

Furthermore, the past 10 years, chiefly after the repressive authoritarian reaction from Madrid, have shown that what is at stake is democracy itself. The outrageous mass beatings of people voting three years ago in the independence referendum on October 1, the incarceration of political prisoners, the forced exile of others, as well as the detention (including torture) of tens of activists after bogus terrorism accusations, all of it should have

no place in a Western democracy. Indeed, it has also been a turning point for many who have remained neutral in this contest until late.

Therefore, the usual frenzied reaction from Spanish nationalists, when confronted with Catalonia's will to become independent, must be triggered by a denial to be confronted with something that does not fit the narrative of a made-up perfect democratic transition. Just a glimpse at Madrid's poor record in establishing rock solid democratic institutions: the Audiencia Nacional and, especially, the Tribunal Supremo high courts, both key legal institutions used by Madrid to repress Catalans, are a continuation of the Francoist Tribunal del Orden Público. The anomaly is that there is no such equivalent elsewhere in the EU! In fact, nowhere else in Europe has a fascist dictatorship been as uncontested and indulged as in the Kingdom of Spain.

Note: Author's original title: Sense and sensibility in and around Catalan independence.



Spanish nationalists at rally in Barcelona. ALBERT SALAMÉ