



MACHIAVELLIAN LESSONS

TRIBUNE

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The Prince, Machiavelli's most famous book, is still today an endless source of political insights. Chapter VI, for instance, provides a succinct outline of one of Catalan independence's main obstacles: "The innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new. This coolness arises partly from fear of the opponents, who have the laws on their side, and partly from the incredulity of men, who do not readily believe in new things until they have had a long experience of them."

Catalan independentists' extraordinary resilience against their many, powerful op-

ponents (the Spanish government, press and judiciary, the EU and most of its constituent government...) bears witness to their aspirations' compelling nature – for otherwise their support of them would, per Machiavelli's assertion, be a lot more tepid. In the last ten years, Catalan independentists led huge, impeccably organised demonstrations with well over a million participants (including a referendum that constitutes the most impressive peaceful civil resistance action ever seen in Western Europe), all of which strongly contrast with the comparatively scarce enthusiasm unionists have shown for similar demonstrations throughout the same period. Why?

Surveys highlight that the average unionist in Catalonia (obviously with a wide dispersion of individual cases) is older, poorer and less educated than the typical independentist. This unionist pro-

file is virtually identical to Trump supporter's in America or Brexiteer's in Britain. No surprise: low-education, low-income voters usually identify more strongly with their national origins while, feeling negatively impacted by cheap labour competition, sternly oppose immigration and globalisation. As in Catalonia, these people are often immigrants or children of immigrants from elsewhere in Spain, this is the national identity they tend to support.

Yet in other countries this voter profile is remarkably active (and aggressive: in 2016 a Brexiteer murdered a Remainer politician, Jo Cox, and in 2021 Trump's supporters stormed the Capitol) whereas its opponents are typically tamer. In Catalonia, conversely, unionist demonstrations are a lot less crowded than independentist ones – although, true to type, they are also, generally speaking, more intimidating (particularly when neo-Nazi types join them). This is evidently because independentists believe in their project strongly enough to mobilise for it en masse, whereas few Catalan unionists really believe they would lose much with the change, albeit their Spanish national identity combines with their fear of Spanish institutions' retaliation to align them against secession – hence they are happy to vote for unionist parties at regular elections but hardly bother to demonstrate against independence.

Under more democratic conditions, a political proposition counting with strong support from over half of the population including its most educated portion, as is the case of independence, would succeed hands down. Yet the Spanish state's repressive actions, together with the threat implicit in the rampant catalanophobia the media foster elsewhere in Spain, not only prevent this but also add to the unionist camp those who, while not rejecting the secession concept per se, regard it as a dangerous pipedream. This is why surveys cannot reveal the true support for independence: only a referendum would, as it would make the possibility of independence real, tangible enough to remove that fear factor from the equation. The state aims to intensify this fear through various forms of abuse, including lawfare, political repression, widespread defamation and an exorbitant fiscal deficit. Yet, if the state's strategists think they are following Machiavelli's advice, they should have read on much more carefully, for Chapter XVII also explains that, while inspiring fear may favour the prince, abuse begets outrage and thus strengthens the opposition.