



## **FLAGGING LEADER TACKLES TERM OF EU PRESIDENCY**

It is no secret that Zapatero has stepped into the rotating presidency of the European Union at the worst moment since he took over the leadership of the Psoe and became prime minister. Debilitated by the ruinous impact of economic crisis, which he began by under-estimating and has tackled in contradictory ways, Zapatero also faces a political and leadership issue: the socialist decline was heralded by losing to the Popular Party at the European elections on June 7<sup>th</sup> 2009, and has been confirmed by all subsequent Gallup-polls. The last such for January this year gives the Pp a nearly 4-point lead over the Psoe.

The Pp may also be favoured by the shared programme semester priorities. The socialists have been discussing this since the second half of September; it was ratified by the Congress of Deputies on 15<sup>th</sup> December with the Socialists, Populars, Catalan centre (CiU) and moderate Basque nationalists (Pnv) voting for it, and the Catalan republican nationalists (Erc), the Galitian nationalists (Bng) and the Navarre-Basque nationalists (*Nafarroa Bai*) abstaining. The plan is a gesture of goodwill by the Pp showing they can put aside party strife when there are targets affecting the country's interests and prestige. The socialists have met this with an obstinate insistence on handling the crisis on their own, rejecting the Pp's olive branch, though this runs counter to Zapatero's own brand of pact-based politics which he was happy to launch under the second Aznar government. No doubt mindful of the outcome to that strategy, which greatly assisted the socialist victory, and perhaps because they believe the Spanish economy will pick up in time to smooth the next general election (scheduled for 2012), the socialists have chosen to go it alone. Thus the government tactics announced in late January – a drastic 50 billion cut in public spending spread over four years and increasing the pensionable age from 65 to 67 – mark an abrupt change of tack and are seen implicitly to acknowledge that time has been wasted so far in inefficient half-measures. Though the issue of surmounting the crisis and rebooting the economy is a central one in Europe, many are now wondering what sort of contribution can possibly come from the presidency in the hands of a country that has taken a greater hammering than

others, is still floundering in the crisis and has embarked on the new year with a public deficit of 11.4% over GDP and unemployment verging on 19%, the highest since 1998. Not to mention a nearly 6% drop on the Madrid stock exchange on February 4<sup>th</sup>.

For months the Spanish press has been harping on this semester as an opportunity for Zapatero to divert public opinion from the chaos at home. Even those not overtly hostile to him have been saying so. At the same time it is noted that this term of presidency corresponds with an important turning point in the process of Europe-building. The obstacles dogging the path of the Lisbon Treaty have been surmounted and it has come into force at long last. There have been weeks of uncertainty and conjecture over who would get the top jobs, and as many weeks to get over disappointment with the names that came out of the hat, but now Europe has started moving again and the new institutional model must feel its way into a functional *modus vivendi*. Hence the Spanish media have been construing this Spanish term of office as one of managing these teething problems. It is not just any rotating presidency establishing a profile, but the first country to head the EU after Lisbon came into effect. This distinguishes it from the experience of 1989, 1995 and 2002. The focus is on relational channels among the rotating president of the day, the President of the Commission (Barroso), Belgian President of the European Council Van Rompuy and the High Representative for Foreign Policy, Britain's Ashton.

The priorities for the Spanish presidency were set forth by Van Rompuy and Zapatero in a joint article appearing in *El País* on January 3<sup>rd</sup>. Targets of the semester are: wholesale application of the Treaty so as to achieve better coordination of national policies and ease economic revival and sustainable social-environmental development; giving Europe greater clout on an international level; and shortening the gap between institutions and citizenry. The two leaders announced that they will be pressing for full EU adherence to the European Convention for the Rights of Man and throwing themselves behind the EU Plan for gender equality 2011-2015, approval of the Stockholm Programme Action Plan, and common management of immigration as a strategic priority. Managing the crisis in common and preserving the European social model were also ambitions emerging from the three Presidents' Moncloa meeting on 8th January in preparation for the informal European Council summit on 11th

February where rebooting the economy and combating climate change are on the agenda.

On January 20th Zapatero outlined his own programme at the European Parliament. The *El País* editorial next day especially appreciated the leader's sense of perspective and the prioritizing of energy as one of the mainstays of the semester, in practice meaning setting up a single energy market so as to reduce Europe's energy dependency, fixing rules in common, and drawing up a plan to connect up national systems. The *ABC* editorial took quite the opposite view, branding the Spanish leader's speech as "mediocre and run-of-the-mill".

At Davos Zapatero was on the defensive and failed to shine. The latest news is that Obama's tour has slid to the second half of the year when it was originally planned for the first. The decision robs this first presidency of one prime target: signing the New Transatlantic Agenda for relations between the EU and USA. This was to replace the agenda signed in 1995 by Felipe González and Bill Clinton.

As this low-profile Europe creaks back into action we lack giants capable of making a dent. The six-month presidency itself has been scaled down by application of the new Treaty and the new institutional jobs; only so much can thus be expected of it. With the Spanish presidency the EU sees the return of a pro-European leader by tradition and vocation. Weakened though he is, Zapatero has the country united behind him in supporting the European integration process; the Spanish are aware of the benefits of belonging this last quarter century; it is a road on which they can but go forward, however slowly. No-one can expect miracles of a six-month president and the citizens of Europe anyway know that miracles are not forthcoming from Brussels and Strasbourg.

Zapatero is expected to help make the quadrumvirate in charge of the EU more authoritative and collegiate; to give a boost to the programme extending rights of citizenship in the Union, as he succeeded in doing in Spain at a happier hour of his leadership. Though out on a limb compared with the emerging new realities of the Far East, he is expected to use Spain's historical and cultural ties to make progress in trade and cooperation with the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean (ALC) towards the Sixth EU-ALC summit scheduled for Madrid on 18<sup>th</sup> May. Lastly, it is hoped he will inject new vigour into the Process of Barcelona by trying to improve its institutional status and by identifying strategy

priorities in each sector after the mess Sarkozy has caused in the Union for the Mediterranean.

That doesn't sound much these days, but it's already something.

*Alfonso Botti*