

# EXAMINING THE CASE FOR CATALAN INDEPENDENCE IN SPAIN

## Managing the 'Fires of Discontent'

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In a recent poll in the autonomous Spanish region of Catalonia, 80% of voters declared their support for independence from Spain . Although dismissed by Spanish Justice Minister Rafael Catalá as 'useless' due to it lacking official legal recognition, the vote has been acknowledged elsewhere as having great symbolic significance, marking it an important milestone in the case for Catalan independence  . As a study of *Chatham House Online Archive* shows, this is a case which has been argued for many years. By examining a range of documents produced in the late-1970s, as Spain underwent its transition from the dictatorship of Franco to democracy, greater understanding can be gained about the nature of calls for independence, which emanated strongly from within Catalonia. Drawing on the specifics of the Catalan experience over time highlights the strength of the identity which fuelled its claims. The documents analysed will underline how deep-rooted the Catalan cause has been, which helps to explain its continuing assertion today.

Focussing upon one of the key transitional phases of Spanish history – the shift towards democracy

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following the end of Franco's dictatorship in 1975 – provides a useful starting point in contextualising the recent vote for Catalan independence. For there is a sense from the wealth of content contained within *Chatham House Online Archive* that, despite a relatively peaceful transition to democracy, there remained a series of potentially disruptive forces beneath the surface. Taking Robert Harvey's 1980 article, his optimistic interpretation (he expressed his delight that, five years on from Franco's death, the country was marked by 'astonishing stability') is tempered by his belief that separatist organisations posed a 'real threat' to continuing political peace . Swiss writer Dr Arnold Hottinger advocated a similar view. Despite his portrayal of the democratic transition in Spain as 'remarkably smooth', he was nonetheless concerned that no resolution had been found to the Catalan problem, leaving 'fires of discontent' burning in the region . The overriding impression from the content analysed is that, in spite of the relatively peaceful emergence of democracy in Spain, there was still a strong undercurrent of support for greater autonomy.

Considering the recent resurgence in favour of independence in Catalonia, it is worth focussing upon the special attention accorded to the region in much of the *Chatham House* content. In Spanish historian Juan Fusi's speech, for instance, the 'Catalan problem' is deemed particularly acute; their desire

to have self-government restored was seen as ‘an indication of future difficulties’ . This is to the extent that the regional question was deemed the greatest impediment to the unity of Spanish politics . Speaking before the elections which gave later commentators such confidence in the democratic future of Spain, Fusi sounded a far more cautious note regarding the prospects for democratic advancement.

Despite this contrast in opinions between the contributors though, the deep-seated nature of the so-called ‘Catalan problem’ is strongly portrayed. Central to its cause was the potency of the Catalan identity, which had been repeatedly asserted in the past. As former British Ambassador to Spain David Brighty noted in his 1999 Chatham House address, Catalonia had its own powerful vision of its own different identity and special history . At the heart of this belief was its different language and identifiable culture, which fed a heightened feeling of national consciousness .

Furthermore, Catalonia’s sense of a unique identity had been encouraged by past concessions, which lay fertile ground for future attempts at independence. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, for example, the region had made two (unsuccessful) attempts to break away from Madrid, while it even enjoyed special status on two separate occasions between 1911 and 1914, and from 1931 to 1938 . In light of this apparent progress towards independence, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Statute for Autonomy granted to the

region in 1979 received ‘overwhelming’ approval in a referendum .

Yet, considering today’s renewed calls for independence, the desire for greater autonomy in Catalonia has evidently not subsided. This suggests that previous governments had not done enough, a trend noted by two contributors discussing parallel claims for independence in the Basque region. British historian George Hills drew attention in his 1980 article to the anger which the government had provoked among Basque nationalists in the past by refusing to recognise their evidently deeply-held nationalist beliefs: ‘the more difficult General Franco made it for the Basques to pursue the “Euzko” way of life, the more they clung to it’ . Similarly, as Harvey emphasised, by ‘dragging its feet’ on Basque moves for greater autonomy, the government only played into nationalist hands, intensifying feelings of injustice .

Setting these comments against the recent vote in favour of independence in Catalonia may serve to underline the challenge faced by the current administration in resolving the dispute. Should it potentially weaken its authority and finally grant independence to Catalonia, or risk the case escalating by maintaining adherence to the existing Statute? It will be fascinating to observe how the government responds. As an analysis of the material within *Chatham House Online Archive* has shown, the Catalan desire to break away from Spain is deeply ingrained. This may ultimately make the task of Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy and his government all the more challenging. [GALE](#)

## Read and view extracts from referenced *Chatham House Online Archive* articles

Hottinger, Arnold. “Spain on the road to democracy.” *The World Today* 33.9 (January - December 1977) 

Harvey, Robert. “Spain’s democracy: A remarkable first year.” *The World Today* 36.3 (January-December 1980) 

Fusi, Juan. “The Chances for Democracy in Spain.” RIIA/8/3802. Chatham House, London. 30 Nov. 1976 

Brighty, David. “The Spanish Experience of Organising a State of Autonomous Regions.” RIIA/8/6015. Chatham House, London. 10 Feb. 1999 

Hills, George. “Basque autonomy: Will it be enough?.” *The World Today* 36.9 (January-December 1980) 

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