

Basque threat to Spain

William Chislett

When Franco died some Basques in Guernica, the traditional heart of the Basque country destroyed during the Civil War, toasted his death with French champagne. But when the dictator's system was effectively buried last month with the approval by the lower house of the Cortes of the new democratic constitution, there was no celebrating by the Basques. Deputies from the ruling Centre Party, socialists and communists gathered in a bar near the Cortes to drink champagne, but members of the Basque Nationalist Party were nowhere to be seen. They walked out just before the vote protesting that the constitution had cheated them of full autonomy.

The occasion was marred not just by the Basques breaking the spirit of consensus that has reigned so remarkably in Spain but, more seriously, by the killing of an army general and his *aide-de-camp* on the very morning of the vote. It now appears that in all probability they were shot by the Basque separatist organisation ETA, and it was no coincidence that they were killed on that day. The officers were the first to be murdered since the Civil War, apart from the assassination in 1973 by ETA of Franco's first prime minister, Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco. No wonder that King Juan Carlos, who should be an exceedingly happy monarch now that he has been (almost) confirmed in his much quoted role as 'king of all Spaniards', is a worried man. He may be king of the Catalans, the Castilians, the Andalusians, the Aragonese, the Extremadurans, but he is still not king for the Basques.

Why is it that only now - nearly three years after Franco - the armed forces have come under attack? There have been plenty of occasions in the past when the main cornerstone of the regime could have been in the firing line of political extremists; but it is almost as if those wishing to throw the country off its democratic course have considered the military sacrosanct until now. Policemen, civil guards, Francoist politicians, industrialists have all fallen in the last three years, but not the military. Were the shots fired at the two officers the first in a new campaign or just an isolated incident? Adolfo Suarez, the prime minister, told the Cortes after the killings: 'I would like to remind you that whenever we have been on the point of entering a new phase in this political process... terrorism has intervened with the exclusive end of terrorising the country and of breaking the confidence of the government.'

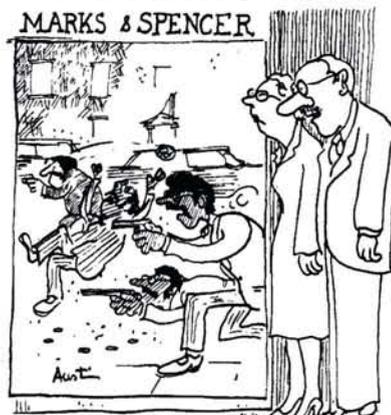
The one part of Spain which internal and external forces can exploit for their own ends is the Basque country. It is worth

remembering that the Basque country is the only region of Spain which the King, a tireless traveller, has not yet visited. (He did go there once when he was prince to receive an honorary degree.) In 1974, soon after the death of Carrero Blanco, ETA made serious plans to kidnap Juan Carlos and his family in southern France while they were on holiday - a little-known detail. ETA would have used them as hostages for a political amnesty, but the plot never got off the ground because one of the organisers informed the police.

The king recently returned from an official trip to China (as head of state Franco never went further than Hendaye to meet Hitler and the Portuguese border to talk to Salazar), but his advisers still won't let him go to the Basque country. 'Argala', the man who set off the explosives which caused Carrero Blanco's car to be blown up and whom I met last year in the Biarritz golf club, is still in hiding in the French Basque country, although recently he has been to Algeria where ETA have done much of their training.

Is Spain now to be subjected to a 'strategy of tension' from ETA, which, in spite of its influence, numbers no more than a hundred activists? And will the Basque Nationalist Party recommend that its people abstain when the constitution is put to the nation in a referendum this autumn? The last time there was a referendum in 1976 over the Suarez government's political reforms the abstention rate in two of the four Basque provinces was not far short of 50 per cent. A similar result this time would leave the Basque country open to further extremism.

The problem is further exacerbated by the unresolved issue of the province of Navarre, where last month's San Fermin festival in Pamplona was called off after riot police charged into the bullring and produced another martyr. Navarre, the size of the other three provinces put together and



'It keeps them off shop-lifting'

the least populated of them, does not form part of the sham 'pre-autonomous' General Basque Council set up earlier this year to the chagrin of Basque nationalists. Once a kingdom of its own, its Carlist *requetés* supported Franco in the Civil War and afterwards Navarre was ironically given a special status while the autonomy granted to the other three provinces by the Republican government was ruthlessly taken away.

The Centre Party controls Navarre, which has always been a right-wing bastion, although now it also has a radical left, exploited by ETA. In an agreement reached with the other political parties a referendum to decide whether Navarre should join the rest of the Basque country will *only* be held if an absolute majority of the new Navarran *diputacion* is in favour of the idea. The Centre Party is expecting to win the municipal elections in Navarre, which have still not been held. Opinion polls in Navarre point to a minority in favour of joining the other three provinces.

After the summer recess the constitution will go to the Senate, the upper house of the Cortes, before the national referendum and some attempts may well be made to water down the autonomy clauses, to ensure that they cannot be used some day as arguments for secession. The armed forces have 'as their mission to defend the unity of Spain' and the hierarchy is obsessed with the idea. The day that King Juan Carlos goes to the Basque country will be much more significant than his visit to China.

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