



**“Peace and dialogue in the land of  
the Basques”**

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- Good afternoon. First of all, I wish to express my gratitude to this prestigious University and especially to Mr. John Hume for giving me the opportunity to share with you a number of considerations concerning the current situation in the Basque Country.
- **We are at a crucial time that will affect the history of our land. A democratic battle is being waged between those who still carry on trying to transform the Basque conflict implementing old and failed frameworks and those that want to explore new avenues for peace. In my speech, I will try to explain that the outcome of this debate will determine our future for the coming decade.**
- **Basque society has made it quite clear that violence must disappear from our lives now and forever, but I will argue that we cannot simply sit back and wait for a new opportunity to arise just to go and waste it by making the same mistakes.**
- **We have to learn from the past, ETA and the Spanish government can not decide the future of the Basque people in secret meetings. This future will only be freely decided by the men and women of our country through peaceful and democratic means.**
- **Our main difficulty lies in the reluctance to move from the old paradigm of negotiation between ETA and the Government, to a new paradigm based on all party talks.**
- But, let me start my speech by acknowledging that the name of this city comes from the Gaelic way to say oak, a magic tree for the Celtic culture, but also for the Basques. The Gernika tree that represents the culture and old laws of the Basque people, a symbol that survived the first massive bombing of the German Luftwaffe in 1937, is also an oak.

- Basques are, therefore, like an ancient oak tree whose roots date from the earliest days of recorded history, but, at the same time, we have continued to grow and adapt and the fruit of our endeavours can be seen in every corner of the globe.
- This is just the first of many comparisons that I will try to explain during my talk, proving that the people of this country and the Basques are probably closer to each other than geography might show.

### ***The Basque people today***

- We are a tenacious people, who have successfully overcome many of the difficulties we have been confronted with. Today, the Basque Country is a leading country in terms of human development both in Europe and throughout the world.
- We have formed part of Europe since its origins. Anthropologists and linguists confirm that the Basque people are possibly the oldest people in Europe. Euskera is our language. It is a pre-Indo-European language, (sorry, but older than Gaelic) and is one of the root languages of Europe. Euskera is a linguistic heritage of humanity and is a living testimony to the will of our people to survive.
- As defined in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the Basque Country consists of seven territories currently articulated in three different political and administrative realities, divided between France and Spain by the border along the Pyrenean mountain range.
- On the French side, there are three Basque territories without autonomous government. On the Spanish side, there are four territories grouped in two politically differentiated regions: the Community of Navarre and the Basque Autonomous Community that I have the honour to lead as Premier and is home to 75% of all Basques.
- The Basque Autonomous Community, home to some 2,200,000 people, is one of the leading countries in Europe with regard to social welfare, life expectancy and

education levels, above countries such as Germany, France, the United Kingdom and Spain .

- Our per capita income, according to the latest official data for 2008, means we rank third in the European Union ( behind Luxembourg and Ireland ) and amounts to 34,500 euros, 40% above the European average according to European statistics.
- Our average life expectancy stands at 80.9, placing us in third place at a world level after Japan and Iceland.
- We also enjoy high levels of education and training. 80% of young Basque men and women of between 20 and 24 years of age have a high school or university education.
- Thanks to these high income, education and life expectancy levels, according to the latest United Nations report on Human Development, the Basque community occupies one of the top places in the World Human Development Index, bettered only by Iceland and Norway.
- 70% of our budget is allocated to social expenditure, mainly health, education and social protection. As a consequence of these policies, the poverty risk rate in the Basque Country, in other words, the percentage of people with incomes below 60% of the average, stands at 9.5%, the second lowest in Europe after Sweden.
- All these facts demonstrate that, today, the Basque Country is a competitive and balanced community. A thousand-year-old people among the top countries in the field of Sustainable Human Development.

### ***A People in search of Peace***

- We are a modern, creative, socially aware people at the forefront of Sustainable Human Development but we lack peace.
- Unfortunately, on too many occasions, news about the violence of ETA hides the economic and social reality of a peaceful and hard-working people.

- Northern Ireland has suffered a similar situation for too long. Nobody knows better than you that violence only generate the suffering of innocent people and tarnishes the good name of the Basques.
- ETA's violence must disappear now, - whether our political parties reach agreements to resolve the political conflict or not, and of course, the political parties must reach agreements whether ETA exists or not. No one should equate ETA with Basque society. Every single sociological survey indicates that 98 out of every 100 Basques reject violence as a legitimate tool to achieve political goals.
- It is, therefore, Basque society that demands that ETA stop killing. Basque society demands that ETA declares clearly and unequivocally its willingness to put an end to its violent campaign now.
- The search for peace in our country also requires that institutions and Basque society itself continue to embrace all the victims of terrorism. The recent Solidarity Act passed by the Basque Parliament is the most ambitious legal framework implemented in the field of reparation and moral recognition for victims of terrorism. For the first time, the rights of the victims and direct relatives will be reflected in a law. As well as previous reparation initiatives, they will have the right to public funding in order to guarantee the best psychological care, housing and higher education. These measures will never make up for the pain suffered but our moral obligation is to convey our warmest solidarity with the victims.
- I am also convinced that the violence of ETA cannot be combated by narrowing democracy but by broadening it. In a true democracy, violence cannot be used as an excuse for the indiscriminate reduction of civil and political rights.
- At the beginning of the 21st century, penitentiary policies that allow isolation and mistreatment, which have been denounced on repeated occasions by international organisations such as Amnesty International, are inadmissible. Human rights are indivisible rights and everyone is entitled to them, including those who are in prison.

## **Reframing the Basque Conflict**

- The Basque people have clearly expressed its will for a peace process based on dialogue and respect for all Human Rights. This is the time for political leaders to make that demand possible.
- After ETA's bomb attack at Madrid airport in December 2006, Basque and Spanish society were further shocked with the news that secret conversations between the Spanish government and ETA had broken down in May 2007. And the subsequent ETA official announcement of the end of the ceasefire was a stark return to the past for all of us.
- Once again the hope that had sprung up during the ceasefire gave way to a general feeling of despondency and resignation. "There is no solution to this problem, we have to get used to living with it", was often heard during those days on the streets of the Basque Country.
- ETA told its members to be prepared for a new campaign of violence. In a best case scenario, this message meant that it would be several years before an opportunity like the one that had just failed came round again.
- The Spanish government returned to a security solution approach: "there is nothing to negotiate with terrorists". Calls for dialogue, for the building of a peace process and for reconciliation, disappeared overnight.
- Let me give you a good example of this dramatic change. The most recent Socialist Party conference held in June 2008 simply banished the word dialogue as a possible future solution to the Basque problem. The very people who had been negotiating face to face with ETA leaders decided to forget about it.
- This return to the past was simply unacceptable to Basque people. We can not accept that nothing can be done, that we are going to have to wait three, four or

even five years before ETA and the Spanish government decide that the conditions for a new peace process are right again.

- We are not going to make the same mistakes again and again. This is the reason why we said enough is enough! We need to approach the Basque conflict in a different way.
- The first thing we needed to do was not to follow the same route that had proven not to work during the last 30 years.
- All attempts to set up negotiations between the Spanish state and ETA since the end of the dictatorship failed because they never included the democratic voice of the Basque people. Basque political parties and elected institutions were never represented in those talks behind closed doors.
- As a result of this secret and bilateral approach, any difficulty during negotiations turned into a major problem. There was nobody to help, to make a failure of the negotiations unacceptable. And what is more important, there was nobody to ask the real opinion of the Basque people about its own future.
- People of this island know better than anyone how important it is to include everybody, and to explain to the public all the changes that need to be done. It is a long and complicated task, but it is the only way forward if we really believe in sharing ownership of the process with our citizenry. Otherwise, they will perceive the whole process as nothing to do with them, and when difficulties emerge, it will be too late to ask for their support.
- I am sure that this audience will also appreciate the importance of solid principles and clear methodology for negotiations. We thought we had learnt the lesson from the past, but unfortunately it was not the case.
- The major question that still remains unanswered is why did the Spanish government and ETA decide to initiate a negotiation process making the same mistakes?

- Especially when ETA had accepted for the first time that political matters should be dealt with by political parties. They even made a public statement announcing ETA would only negotiate with the Spanish government the “demilitarisation of the conflict”, in other words, prisoners and weapons.
- Yet, right from the outset, events did not measure up to this declaration of intentions. ETA and the Spanish government conducted the negotiations forgetting that political matters were going to be dealt with by political parties and that prisoners and weapons were the only things to be negotiated with ETA.
- In that context, several European countries generously offered to collaborate in the peace process. But instead of expressing sincere gratitude, ETA felt it was in charge. “If we are so important that all these countries are interested in us, then we can ask for more” they wrongly thought once again.
- That was just the beginning of the end, the same miscalculation we have experienced in all the other negotiation processes that have been set up in the same way.
- One of the key reasons for the breakdown was obviously this infantile and militaristic behaviour of ETA – so far away from social reality. But nobody should be surprised at that: ETA has acted the same way during every negotiation process of the last 30 years.
- This is the past, a failed but worthy effort from which we have to learn. But we are here to talk about the future.
- When negotiations broke down, instead of resigning ourselves and blaming ETA and the Spanish government for what happened, I decided as Lehendakari that we should make a new effort to reframe the way we approach the Basque conflict.
- It was our duty to democratically rebel against the return to this spiral of violence and lack of dialogue that has dogged the Basque conflict for the last 30 years.

- That is why I decided to put forward a new Road Map for Peace. A proposal that gives back the legitimate leadership of the process to the Basque people, to their democratic institutions and political parties.
- Thousands of opinions and comments have been published about this road map, but the truth is that I just proposed that the Basque and Spanish Governments reach an agreement on the principles and methodology necessary to call for all party talks. I imagine this will sound very familiar to you.
- I also proposed two moments in which Basque society would be asked to participate directly in order to strengthen dialogue and avoid a stalemate. The first moment would be a non binding popular consultation to support the idea of setting up all-party talks and the second to either support or reject any agreement reached by the political parties, thus closing the process.
- This Road Map was openly discussed and supported by the majority of the Basque Parliament last year. Additional elements were included in order to make the initiative stronger, the most important of these being the proposal to reach a preliminary agreement between the Spanish and the Basque Government about the principles and methodology of the all party talks.
- Obviously this agreement that I offered to President Zapatero was actually a Basque-style “Downing Street Declaration”
- “Let us sit down together, without the threat of violence, and lay down the democratic foundations upon which a peace process should be built” I said to President Zapatero. “This is the same thing that the British and Irish governments did so that the paramilitary organisations did not have the control over the peace process”, I explained.
- Unfortunately President Zapatero did not interpret this offer of dialogue as an opportunity, as a Basque way to follow the successful route marked by those courageous leaders in this part of the world. But he never presented an alternative, neither did the rest of the political parties.

- On the contrary, he interpreted my proposal as a political threat. According to the journalists that work closest to him, the Spanish President had reached the conclusion that he had already run sufficient risks by talking to ETA and with the general elections just around the corner, he did not want to look “weak” to the Spanish public.
- The opposition party in Spain focused their electoral campaign last year on defending national unity against terrorism and the socialists believed that they had to compete on this same battle field.
- I acknowledge we should have spent a lot more time and thought to explaining the real aspirations and motivations of our proposal because unfortunately once the socialists won the elections in Spain, there was no possibility of a u-turn. The Basque Government’s proposal had been publicly rejected on so many occasions, that there was no room for a change in relation to this issue.
- I have wondered on many occasions what would have happened if the Spanish President had accepted my offer of dialogue and we had reached an agreement similar to the Downing Street Declaration.
- I am totally convinced that an agreement was easy to reach. In fact, as I said directly to him during a meeting held last May, the Basque Government and I were more than willing to accept as a basis for negotiation, a document that had already been approved by his own party and which he, himself had agreed to sign with the Basque Nationalist Party and the illegal party, Batasuna.
- I even proposed, that very day, that we sign the document and began a new process there and then.
- Here I have that it is beyond my comprehension that the Spanish President was willing to negotiate with ETA but has consistently refused to negotiate the same issues with me or with the Basque democratic institutions.

- Everything could have been different. ETA would no longer have the capacity to monitor the negotiations and Basque political parties would have recouped the leadership they deserve.
- In my opinion, this is one of the fundamental lessons learned from the peace in Northern Ireland. After the Downing Street Declaration was signed, the political debate moved from secret negotiations between the British Government and the IRA to all-party talks.
- The message that your two governments sent out to all parties involved was crystal clear at all times. Talks would be inclusive, all parties simply had to accept a firm commitment to using exclusively peaceful and democratic means to achieve their goals and the people of this country had to be consulted directly about the changes for the future.
- This is precisely the same route we need to follow in the Basque Country. It is a real challenge for everybody, including myself, but there is no alternative.
- Our main difficulty lies in the reluctance to move from the old paradigm of negotiation between ETA and the Government, to a new paradigm based on all party talks.
- In Northern Ireland, the Basque Country and any conflict anywhere around the world, it is always easier for us, political leaders, to carry on behaving in the same way, rather than to search for new paths to peace.
- Let me give you an example of the old paradigm. I do not think that any international observer would ever criticize the British and Irish governments for having supported the transition of the republican movement towards a total and unequivocal peaceful strategy. Our problem is that any attempt to conduct a similar effort in the Basque area is still considered as weakness in the face of terrorism.
- This is the old paradigm but a new one can still be created. We need to reinforce the leadership of all political parties. And we have to do it accepting all the

consequences, even though the end result of the peace process may be unexpected and on many occasions difficult for those who were the front runners.

- In relation to this matter, I would like to stop my presentation for a moment and use this opportunity to express to John Hume, the recognition of the Basque People. You represent the best of humankind, the power of dialogue against violence, the capacity of political leaders to solve the real problems of their people, the necessity to fight peacefully the most violent battles and the resilience to overcome opposition in the most difficult conditions. Your whole life is a source of inspiration for political leaders all around the world who have to face up to similar circumstances.
- I cannot leave your birth place without saying to you through the ancient words of the Basque people, thank you. *Eskerrik asko*. Thank you for having given us that ray of hope that shines as a guiding light in times of difficulty.

## **Conclusions**

- A few days ago a good friend of mine asked me whether the effort of presenting this new peace proposal had been worth it. If, after so many difficulties, and the exaggerated reaction of the Spanish institutions, this attempt to reframe the Basque conflict had brought us any closer to a peace agreement.
- I was working on this presentation and I replied, yes, of course, the effort has been worth it. I am convinced that we will never achieve peace if we carry on making the same mistakes. We have to learn from Northern Ireland and many other conflict zones that have been able to transform positively even more difficult situations.
- All of them have had the same cornerstone: violence has to disappear and give way to sincere dialogue between all political parties. And those societies that have suffered conflict need to regain ownership of the major decisions that are taken, both before, during and at the end of the journey.

- We still have many challenges to face, but even so reality shows us that this new route is already giving initial results. Until we made our proposal, all eyes were on possible secret negotiations between the Spanish Government and ETA. Now the debate is focused on parliamentary debates, dialogue between political parties and honoring the opinion of the Basque people.
- We are at a crucial time that will affect the history of our land. The fact of the matter is that a democratic battle is being waged between those who still carry on trying to transform the Basque conflict using old and failed tools and those that want to explore new avenues for peace. The outcome of this debate will determine our future for the coming decades.
- Basque society has made it quite clear that violence must disappear from our lives now and forever, but we cannot simply sit back and wait for a new opportunity to arise just to go and waste it by making the same mistakes.
- ETA and the Spanish government can not decide the future of the Basque people in secret meetings. This future will only be freely decided by the men and women of our country through peaceful and democratic means.
- These principles have guided my actions as President of the Basques. Changes will need to be made, but we will never compromise our commitment to peaceful means and inclusive dialogue to build a peace process. It is the legacy of John Hume that has demonstrated that the word “impossible” Today, can be transformed into “reality” Tomorrow.

Thank you.