

BASQUE NEWS

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“On the course we have taken there is no turning back”

Ibarretxe defends the Proposal for the New Statute before Congress

In the end, it was the Lehendakari himself who defended before Congress the Proposal for the New Political Statute for the Basque Country, passed at the end of December by absolute majority in the Basque parliament. Ibarretxe travelled to Madrid after being designated by the Basque parliament to do so as member of Parliament. Ibarretxe's appearance before Congress took place on February 2 amid a great sense of expectation. All the seats in the chamber (344 in total) were occupied by deputies and the guests' gallery was too small for all the representatives of the Basque Government, members of Parliament, representatives of Basque political parties and other authorities, interested in following the course of the



discussions on the spot.

In a quiet, calm manner, the Lehendakari began his address in the Basque language "a thousand-year-old language, in which the Basque people have expressed, generation after generation, their desire for freedom and friendship with other peoples".

During his speech, Ibarretxe made it clear from the very outset that the Proposal he defended was not his own, but of the Basque parliament.

He declared that it was the "legal, legitimate and democratic" right of the Basque people to decide their own future. ➔ ➔

After the rejection of the Proposal in Madrid

The Lehendakari calls elections and demands negotiations

“We have before us a marvellous opportunity to respond calmly and firmly to the rejection by PP and PSE of the Proposal for a New Statute and demand negotiations”, Lehendakari Ibarretxe pointed out in a public appearance after signing the Decree to dissolve the Basque Parliament and to call Autonomous Elections for April 17.

Before beginning his summary of the parliamentary session that is now coming to an end, Ibarretxe stated that he was especially proud of the fact that

the Basque Country is the first Autonomous Community to hold elections in which the recently-passed Law of Equality between men and women will be applied. The Law of Equality establishes the obligation for political parties to present equal numbers of men and women candidates.

For the Lehendakari it is one of the most important new features of the forthcoming elections, which, in his opinion "places us at the forefront of one of the major debates of this century at a world level". ➔

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In summing up, Ibarretxe pointed out that "this parliamentary session is finishing just as it began", in other words, with the two extremes (PP and PSE on the one hand and Batasuna on the other) and a centre group (the tripartite government). In this sense, he stated that it was very painful to see how both extremes join forces "time and time again" in the Basque parliament to vote against the projects presented by the government, and mentioned the recent Land Law as an example. "This government has only been defeated when the PP, PSE and Batasuna have voted together and this has happened more than 100 times during this session".

"The tripartite government will continue to lead this country in the future"

Nevertheless, the Lehendakari warned that the tripartite government formed by the PNV, EA and EB "is not a project to round up this parliamentary session" and he was convinced that this is the formula that will "continue to lead Basque society over the coming years because it is the political force that has received the most support from all the Basques".

After four years of shared government, Ibarretxe declared that he presented himself to Basque society "with a clear conscience and with the conviction that the undertakings we made at the beginning of the parliamentary session have been met".

Among the many achievements enumerated both from the economic and social point of view, the Lehendakari referred to the Proposal for a New Political Statute as another major undertaking of Basque society (once this had been passed by absolute majority of the Basque parliament) to decide its own future. For Ibarretxe, the Proposal is "this country's great asset" and "it is unacceptable that Zapatero and Rajoy, in virtue of an agreement they have reached, impose their will on everyone who lives and works in the Basque Country, without even negotiating". For this reason, he said that the moment has arrived to allow Basque society to voice its own opinion and to "make clear demands for a negotiating process". "We want to negotiate, discuss, decide and make progress, and we have a golden opportunity in the new parliamentary session", he concluded.



Right to decide, obligation to negotiate

The Lehendakari mentioned this right on several occasions during his first speech (later he would also speak again in the question and answer session) which lasted half an hour. In this sense, he reproached Zapatero and Rajoy for having agreed among themselves to reject the Proposal and for having, therefore, "taken a decision for all the Basque people" and warned them that they would not replace the will of Basque society".

For the Lehendakari, the key to a democratic solution of the Basque conflict is based on the right to decide and the obligation to negotiate, for which reason "today I stand before you," he declared, "with my hand outstretched and open to negotiation", a negotiation which, in his opinion, had been rejected both by the PP and by the PSOE, "without even debating the issue".

Convinced that we find ourselves before "a historic opportunity to resolve the Basque problem once

and for all" Ibarretxe urged leaders of both the main political parties in Spain not to waste this occasion by "slamming the door" on the Proposal. Nevertheless, and conscious of the rejection the project for a New Statute was going to receive when it was time for Congress to vote on this issue, the Lehendakari warned that "on the course we have taken there is no turning back" and that in the end, it will be Basque society who decides because "the future belongs to us and we are going to write it ourselves. We will reach agreements with others, but we will sign them in our own hand".

As expected and after a long session of seven hours in which all the Parliamentary groups stated their own position on this issue, the Proposal for a New Political Statute was rejected with the votes against of PSOE, PP, Izquierda Unida, Coalición Canaria and Chunta de Aragón. The representatives of the different nationalist parties voted in favour: PNV, EA, Nafarroa Bai, Convergencia i Unió, Ezkerra Republicana de Catalunya and the BNG of Galicia.

Together, the PSE and PP would obtain the same number of seats as the PNV-EA coalition

The Partido Popular and the Partido Socialista de Euskadi would together obtain the same number of seats as the coalition formed by PNV and EA at the forthcoming Autonomous Community Elections on April 17, according to a survey by the Basque Government.

The survey indicates that the PNV-EA coalition would receive the highest number of votes at the forthcoming elections with 32 seats, the same number as the PSE (19) and the PP (13) would obtain if they joined forces. Ezker Batua's position would remain

unchanged with 3 seats, as would the candidates of the radical left with 7 members of parliament.

According to the survey, the new features of the forthcoming parliamentary session will be the disappearance of Unid Alavesa from the Basque parliament, as it would lose its only representative, and the first seat obtained by the Aralar party.

Moreover, the results of the survey carried out by the Government point to a shift of votes from the PP to the PSE. All the votes lost by the PP in each of the Basque provinces are gained by the PSE.

SEATS		
	PREVIOUS RESULTS	FORECAST
	AUTONOMOUS ELECTIONS 13-05-2001	18 JANUARY-2 FEBRUARY 2005
EJ-PNV+EA	33	32
PP	19*	13
PSE-EE	13	19
EZKER BATUA	3	3
EH; OTHER PARTIES OF THE RADICAL LEFT	7	7
ARALAR	-	1
UA	*	0

* PP AND UA PRESENTED A SINGLE CANDIDATE

A power station in Mutriku will use waves to produce power

Next spring, the coastal town of Mutriku will have the first power plant to use the energy generated by waves. The power station will have 16 turbines (which makes it the only one of its type in the world) and will include a new seawall for the port, which will be constructed as work is done on the power station.

This project was presented recently by the Ministers for Industry and Transport of the Basque Government who justified their initiative as the response to the need to look for alternative sources of generating clean power.

Specifically, the new wave power plant will produce electricity for 1000 people for one year and will avoid the emission into the atmosphere of 1000 tonnes of CO₂.

In reality, the Mutriku power station will be built more for research purposes than to produce energy as the aim is to accumulate renewable sources of energy in the Basque Country. If the results of this experiment proved to be satisfactory, the plans of the Basque Government will be to build more power stations in other ports along the Basque coastline. To do this, the government has set aside 15 million to

the year 2010.

Similar system to a siphon

The electricity generating system to be used by this Basque power station is relatively simple and works in similar fashion to a siphon. The dock will contain a chamber in which seawater enters and leaves by natural means. On entering, it compresses the air in the chamber, which on leaving the chamber drives a turbine. When the water leaves the chamber, the vacuum absorbs the air, enabling the turbine to continue operating. The turbine drives a generator that converts this energy into electricity.

Until now, there were only two other plants in the world similar to Mutriku: one in Scotland and the other located on the island of Pico in the Azores. Nevertheless, this Basque plant is the only one that uses 16 turbines compared to the plants in Scotland and in the Azores which, also on an experimental basis, use only one. Likewise, and as those responsible for the project explained, the impact on the landscape will be negligible because the plans will be built into the structure of the new seawall which is to be constructed at the same time.

300 wetlands in the Basque country receive protection

A total of 300 wetland areas in different parts of the Basque Country will be protected according to the Wetlands Areas Sector Plan passed by the Basque Government. Six of these areas –Txingudi, Urdaibai, Salburua, Lagunas de Laguardia, Salinas de Añana, Lagos de Caicedo and the end of the Ullibarri reservoir– have been selected from among the most important 1400 wetlands in the world, in view of their ecological, botanical, zoological and hydrological importance.

Coinciding with the International Wetlands Day, the Department for the Environment presented this Sector Plan for the protection of 300 wetland areas in the Basque Autonomous Community whose ecosystems are essential for maintaining biodiversity and the natural milieu. These areas contain marshland, swamps, bogs and peat lands where both salt and fresh waters form pools or currents.

Specifically, the efforts of the government have focused on guaranteeing the conservation of these wetlands, recovering the most undamaged areas from the landscape viewpoint and flora and fauna and establishing guidelines to re-evaluate natural resources. For this purpose, among other measures, the Sector Plan establishes regulations for the uses and activities permitted in these areas.

Natura 2000 Network

Likewise, over recent years, the number of protected spaces in the Basque Country has increased from 14 to a total of 58, which means that 20.3% of the surface area of the Basque Country must be maintained by law in a state of favourable conservation.

The Council of Europe recently gave the green light to the inclusion of new spaces in the Basque Country in the Natura 2000 network registry, thereby bringing about a considerable increase in the number of these areas, which is interpreted by officials of the Department for the Environment as a reward for the "work done by Basque society in the field of sustainable projects". This means that these will be priority areas for receiving European aid. According to province, Alava has the largest percentage of protected natural spaces, representing more than a quarter of its total surface area (26.4%). A large majority of the spaces (approximately 70%) belong to the community.

The government asks for a higher level of commitment to comply with Kyoto

The Basque Government has asked for a greater commitment from society to comply with the undertakings made at the Kyoto summit on the reduction of emissions of contaminating gases into the atmosphere in order to stop global warming. In spite of the fact that of all the autonomous communities, the Basque Country has the best track record, limiting the emissions of the substances to 15%, it still continues to contaminate more than it should. Specifically, in order to comply with the Kyoto agreement, it will need to reduce its levels of contamination by 10% over the next seven years.

To do this, the Basque government seeks to involve all sectors of society in the defence of the environment. Some of the recommendations made by the Basque government include the correct maintenance of the 800,000 vehicles on our roads, driving at under 100 km per hour, using lower consumption light-bulbs, reducing heating levels and using efficient household appliances, among others.

In this way the catastrophic consequences of the climate changes that might occur at the end of this century, according to a survey conducted by 400 experts, would be avoided. As far as the Basque Country is concerned, the report points to a possible rise in sea levels along the Cantabrian coast (which would put buildings such as the Guggenheim Museum and the Kursaal conference and concert centre in danger), a temperature increase of between three and five degrees and a drop in rainfall, among other effects.

The major Basque cultural infrastructures have reason to celebrate. The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao has obtained good results both in the quality of its artistic programmes and in the numbers of visitors and the Kursaal Conference Centre in Donostia and the Euskalduna Conference Centre in Bilbao both beat their occupancy records last year. During the seven years that have elapsed since its inauguration, the Guggenheim Museum has generated for the economy of the Basque Country almost 1,200 million

euros, an amount which exceeds by five times the amount of public funds invested in the construction of this colossus of titanium, work of the

The major Basque cultural infrastructures enjoy great success



Canadian architect Frank Gehry. Moreover, the number of visitors to this Basque art gallery continues to rise year after year and now stands at almost

one million. In total, it is estimated that since its inauguration, the Museum has been visited by seven million people, which makes it one of the most

popular museums in the Spanish State. Just a few metres from the Guggenheim Museum, the Euskalduna Conference Centre has also obtained spectacular results according to its directors. Last year, this Centre registered record occupation with 632 events and more than 400,000 visitors, which means that this Centre was occupied for 90% of the year. The occupancy levels of the Kursaal Conference Centre in San Sebastián were almost identical. With events that covered 91% of its calendar, these two huge cubes of glass finished 2004 with profits and record occupancy, in addition to receiving the best scores (eight out of ten) by the promoters of events.

A short film directed and produced in the Basque Country has been nominated for an Oscar

A short film directed and produced in the Basque Country has been selected by the Hollywood Academy to compete for an Oscar for the best fiction film in short format. This film, entitled 7.35 de la mañana was directed by Nacho Vigalondo and produced by the company owned by the Ibarretxe brothers. This short film has received more than 50 prizes both at national and international film festivals and belongs to the genre of musical comedies. Made in black and white, it was filmed in two days and a half with a budget of 18,000 euros. It tells the story of a man who, in order to attract the attention of a woman, organises a musical comedy performed in a cafeteria covered with explosives. The Minister of Culture, Miren Azkarate, is expected to attend the Oscar ceremony in representation of the Basque Government.

The Lehendakari is presented with the facsimile of the Lazarraga Manuscript which demonstrates the use of the Basque language in Alava in the 16th century

"If there are miracles, it is a miracle that in the Internet age we can still discover previously unknown treasures". The Lehendakari, Juan José Ibarretxe, received one of these miracles with these words: a facsimile copy of the Lazarraga manuscript, dating from the 16th century, which demonstrates the use of the Basque language at that time in Alava.

The Lehendakari received the text from the President of the Provincial Council of Guipúzcoa, Joxé Joan González de Txabarri, in Zalduondo, a small village in the province of Alava, 10 km from the Torre de Larrea, where, between 1564 and 1567, Juan Pérez de Lazarraga wrote the manuscript. Since then, the fate of this document was completely unknown until an officer of the

Documentary Heritage Department of the Basque Government found it in an antique shop in Madrid. One year ago, the Provincial Council purchased what experts consider to be the "most important philological discovery in decades, both from the linguistic and literary points of view", for 66,000 euros.

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