

# JUAN JOSÉ IBARRETXE

FORMER LEHENDAKARI OF THE BASQUE GOVERNMENT

Photos by Xabier Miquel Laburu

*He will go down in history as the architect of a new political statute for the Autonomous Community of Euskadi, a project that was unable to be realised thanks to a boycott by the Spanish unionist parties who were on the brink of removing him from his post as lehendakari. Ibarretxe is highly regarded by Basque nationalists who saw a leader who could scale the highest peaks. He currently lives away from politics, but who knows whether he will soon hear the siren's call once more.*

*What reasons do we have to be optimistic in terms of present day Europe?*

At a time like this, of institutional, economic and political crises, we have to be very clear that our identity is an added value. Europe can't turn its back on a reality that is much more plural and diverse than the one defined by the states. 'Small is beautiful' is a concept that is valued now more than ever. We small nations are closer, we are more mobile and we have a greater need to get out and bring a breath of fresh air.

*Will the current model of the nation state evolve?*

The only way in which the state will survive is if it undergoes change. The defence of identity, language and the nation form the basis of human development. There's a need for collective rights to join individual rights. As Gandhi said, it's possible and necessary to love what we are without hating what we are not. The principles of Jacobinism, of state centralism, do not have a place within the European Union.

*By defending these principles you were the target of attacks, not only on your ideas, but against your person...*

The Basques aren't violent, and nor are they immature. Consulting the population, participative democracy, shouldn't be traumatic for anyone. The Basques and the Catalans will be whatever we want to be. I'm not frightened by this point, I'm as clear as I was the first day, whatever anyone else says or does.

Let's be clear, I have no doubt that in the same way as the Basques existed two thousand years ago, in two thousand years time we'll continue to exist as a people and speak our language, Euskera. This will happen whether or not the judges or politicians continue to deny us our bread and butter.

*Historically nationalism has been criminalised. Why do you demand a national debate about it?*

Zero-sum nationalism is the problem. It is sometimes carried out by states which reinforce themselves on the basis of denying their internal





differences. It goes against our form of inclusive nationalism, which is open and which has room for everyone. The undercurrent is not against the defence of Catalan and Basque identity. The defence of universality isn't in conflict with the defence of the individual.

The new paradigm of globalisation is that the local moves the world, something that was denied in the past. We must join together the different sovereignties and thereby build a stronger, more cohesive European Union that is capable of facing up to the coming challenges with renewed vigour.

*But the reaction from the Spanish state, in terms of your proposal for a new statute for Euskadi, hasn't exactly been in this direction, has it?*

If Spain is prepared to share its sovereignty with Lithuania, Finland or Sweden, what's to stop it from doing so with Euskadi or with Catalonia? I wish

the ideas that are blowing from the other side of the Channel had some effect here. There's the situation of the Scottish within the United Kingdom. No one in Great Britain will deny the Scottish the possibility of becoming independent if that's what the Scottish citizens want.

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*Some Catalan commentators such as Salvador Cardús and Vicenç Villatoro argue that a proposal such as the Ibarretxe Plan has revealed the pre-democratic nature of the Spanish state. Do you think that the so-called 'Transition' was more one of appearances than of substance?*

They prevent democratic consultations, they're scared of asking the people about certain questions,



they ignore decisions made by the Basque parliament. Some Spanish political leaders are scared of democracy. Shame on anyone who is scared of democracy. I'm not afraid of finding out the opinion of Basque society, even if they think radically differently from what I think or what my party defends. Spain has regressed from a pluri-national

state to a uni-national state. Decisions like those taken by Austria, Germany or Belgium to allow for a greater level of participation by their regions and nations at the European Council level would be unthinkable here. Nowadays Spain shows itself to be a uniform, uni-national state, in spite of its rhetoric of a decentralised state.

*So is there a clear conflict of legitimacy?*

Without a doubt. In this case it's a democratic fight that requires dialogue, mutual understanding and a long term view. In this sense I want to make it clear that I can't imagine that in the future Euskadi won't be whatever the Basques want it to be. Beyond the interpretations of the Constitutional Court or a politico-legal order that's against a plural vision of a state and one which has put a *lebendakari* in the dock.

*What do you think will occur politically in the twenty-first century?*

In the twenty-first century, political violence will have no place among us. The Basque people are not a violent people and will not be dictated to by anyone and least of all by ETA. 'We will be whatever we want to be', as the much-loved poet Miquel Martí i Pol once said. This is the key. I have no doubt that the Basque and Catalan societies will reach a moment in which they decide to initiate their own path by overcoming the current judicial framework, always via democratic means.

Defending one's identity is something common to this century and doesn't mean a return to the nineteenth century. It is all related to economic and social progress. It's knowing where we come from in order to know where we're going.




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**DEFENDING ONE'S IDENTITY IS RELATED  
TO ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL PROGRESS**

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*What do you think about the phenomenon of the referenda that are taking place in Catalonia?*

I think it's an extraordinary event, you Catalans have demonstrated that your heart as a people is still beating. We in Euskadi have seen that you are an optimistic, aware people and that you wish to keep moving forward. A movement of this kind shows that the democratic spirit of the Catalan people is very strong.

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