Frustrating the Catalan referendum

by Simon Belt

Sunday saw some extraordinary scenes in Spain as police, dressed for riot control with tactical support units, descended on polling stations across Catalonia to disrupt an independence referendum. It had been ruled illegal by the Spanish constitutional court, but the show of force by the state, doling out beatings to those voting and administering the vote was dramatic and reprehensible.

Images of balaclava covered police seizing ballot boxes was a clear presentation, through the media, that this attempt at a referendum would not be tolerated. How can a referendum be seen as such a dangerous thing in contemporary Europe?

Despite all the provocation and threats, turnout in the referendum organised by the local administration in Catalonia was reportedly 42% with an overwhelming majority for more independence, whatever form that may be. Whilst not supporting the campaign for separation of this region from the rest of Spain, before or after the treatment from the national government and police, it's vital to recognise the widespread desire of the populace to have a vote on the matter.

The response of the national state machinery to try and intimidate the electorate into submission should be opposed unequivocally as an attack on the democratic will of the people. That many responding to the attacks by the police called on the EU to step in seemed to be particularly odd given that the EU exists in order to circumvent and oppose the popular will of the people, preferring a technocracy to better manage our lives for us, because we're clearly not fit do it ourselves. Is that just sour grapes towards the EU and their Remain fan club?

Lets have a look at some trends around the EU referendum in the UK, not that there's a equivalence of content in the referendum, but I think as a desire to have your voice heard and acted on as opposed to simply being told how things will be, there clearly is. The form of opposing the referendum may have been rather more brutal in Spain this weekend, but in content I think there's a similarity for sure.

The referendum on the UK's membership of the EU was opposed by all major political party leaders in the UK even though there was a desire for the referendum in the UK. It took that desire to have a referendum being expressed in the growing support for UKIP from Labour and Conservative voters to force a change in strategy - namely for the Conservative to offer a referendum if they were elected in 2015. Labour didn't give ground and opposed to offer a referendum, saying that such an important decision shouldn't be entrusted to the electorate. The

Conservative government under Cameron did indeed offer a referendum as they said they would, even though he didn't want to Leave the EU, which Labour said was reckless and dangerous.

Despite the electorate voting in the largest numbers in any vote in the UK and supporting the withdrawal of the UK from the EU, many then turned to thwart the will of the popular vote by using the courts and even the Lords to derail the will of the electorate. Wealthy people using the courts might have all the trappings of sophistication and being ever so proper about thing, but in content I really don't see anything but bad faith towards the electorate.

The image of the Spanish police taking away the ballot box in the weekend's Catalan referendum is simply a more brutal expression of denying the vote to the electorate in the first place as in the UK referendum on the EU, and then trying to wipe out the vote when it happened through backdoor legalese of saying the referendum was informed by lies, people who voted Brexit weren't informed enough, the referendum was just advisory and shouldn't be acted on, judges or the unelected Lords should make the final decision. It's all trying to remove the popular vote from record, and attempting to thwart the popular will.

Catalan leaders may have been wrong to go ahead with the vote in the way they did, but the response to that action is symptomatic of the tendency that helped grow the EU into what it is today - an instinct to claw back from the populace having too much say in their form of government. Police battons and trying to undermine the vote in the UK to Leave the EU by backroom stitch ups have more in common than the expressions of outrage over the weekend seem to present.