



Managing the disagreementⁱ

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The conflict of self-determination in Catalonia is bound to become chronic, unless there is a significant change in attitudes and positions. Right now, though, this option seems very distant: political confrontation is feeding off a spiral of grievances.

From a theoretical perspective, the Spanish legal framework could be adjusted in response to the aspirations for self-determination represented by a majority of the Catalan Parliament. There are formulas that allow for a much more elaborate debate than the dilemma between independence referendum: yes or no. However, in practice, this option seems implausible because the confrontation has given rise to very closed mental and emotional frameworks. Today, political opponents perceive each other as enemies and focus their efforts on de-legitimising the claims of the other. Political aggression prevails over persuasion and transaction.

Conflicts of self-determination are especially difficult to address because the opposing positions challenge the identity, the very essence of the parties to the dispute. However, there are examples of conflicts that have found a way out through dialogue and negotiation, which is not necessarily a definitive solution but which provides a temporary framework of social coexistence and institutional collaboration, such as in Greenland (Denmark) or Quebec (Canada).

The conditions for a social and political dialogue can be summarized as:

1. Acknowledgement of the problem. There is no need to demand a consensus about the roots of the problem, nor about the degree of responsibility of the different actors involved: starting here would lead to a dead end. But without acknowledgement of the existence of a conflict, and of co-responsibility in its resolution, progress cannot be made.
2. Agreement to disagree. Difference must become normal again: People must be able to agree or disagree with aspirations for independence. They must be able to agree or disagree with the Supreme Court ruling on the *Procés* [the Catalan independence movement]. And they must be able to defend what they think without their legitimacy being questioned. The criminalization of the independence movement and the demonization of Spanish democracy must stop.
3. Willingness to compromise. It does not make sense to enter into a negotiation process without the willingness (and the ability) to compromise on certain points that initially seem untouchable. No one has to compromise their principles and aspirations. It is not a question of finding a midway solution. It is about reaching cross-cutting agreements on mechanisms and new rules of the game that can be accepted by broad and cross-cutting majorities.

Apart from these three basic conditions, dialogue and negotiation processes also need:

- Creativity. There are no obvious or easy solutions for complex problems. Nobody has the recipe for how to solve the problem. The challenges of the 21st century require a search for alternatives that are unprecedented.
- Inclusion. The conflict will not be resolved only with a negotiating table between governments. Every social, economic and political actor affected by the conflict must be able to feel that they are co-participants of the solution. The higher the level of collective ownership, the more options for success there will be. Therefore, it will be necessary to launch multiple dialogue processes with the participation of different actors, and to consider multiple negotiating tables.
- Audacity. In order to build bridges, it is necessary for people to be willing to step out of their comfort zone. It is a risky task because it can be viewed with suspicion or hostility by friend and foe alike.
- Dignity. A series of political opinions, court rulings and media reports have been perceived as a humiliation by a large number of Catalan citizens. On the other hand, the independence movement has been perceived as condescending and hostile by anti-independence sectors of Catalan society, and it hasn't measured the effect that questioning the health of Spanish democracy has on Spanish citizens.

The conflict started long ago and will not end anytime soon. While it lasts, we must learn to live with it without harming each other as a society. Apart from the suggested guidelines, it is important that we learn to treat each other with CaReS, which could be summarized as: Curiosity about those who think differently; Respect for people regardless of their ideas; and Self-Criticism, because no one owns the absolute truth.

Conflict is inherent in human nature. Conflicts are natural, inevitable and even necessary. The democratic health of a society and its institutions can be measured based on their ability to manage conflicts constructively. If this conflict becomes chronic, Catalan and Spanish politics will have failed, and we will join the growing list of democratic countries with difficulties in managing disagreement. This is a challenge that is calling out to individuals, social organizations, political parties and institutions.

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