

Interview with Marcelino Oreja published in La Libre Belgique (21 December 1979)

Caption: On 21 December 1979, in a long interview given to the daily newspaper La Libre Belgique, the Spanish Foreign Minister, Marcelino Oreja, defends Spain's European and Western vocation.

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Spain in its relations with Europe, NATO and the world

‘Neither neutrality nor third-worldism’

Born the posthumous son of a traditionalist (Carlist) MP murdered by anarchists in the Basque Country in 1934, Marcelino Oreja, at the age of 43, today takes over one of the most inspiring, albeit at times thankless, tasks in Spain’s new democracy: the conduct of its foreign policy. Inspiring because, after 36 years of the Franco regime, Spain has had to rediscover all its horizons at one and the same time: Europe, both East and West, the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, South America and Asia. That stage is now almost complete and Madrid can now look forward patiently to gathering the economic and political fruits now ripening in the shade of the many embassies which Spain has opened or reopened around the world.

Thankless because, when storm clouds gather around the borders, Mr Oreja is immediately accused of having failed to predict the change of weather. This was, in particular, the case last February when Algeria managed to convince a majority of the Member States of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) that the Canary Islands should be regarded as a ‘Spanish colony in Africa’. Mr Oreja responded successfully to this challenge, and the Canary Islands ‘issue’ fell into virtual oblivion at the OAU summit held in July in Khartoum.

However, for Spain’s top diplomat, a number of long-term tasks still lie ahead. The first of these is Spain’s accession to the EEC. Others include the creation of an ‘Iberian–American Common Market’, possible Spanish accession to NATO and the defence of its interests in North Africa.

In pursuing these objectives, Mr Oreja holds a particularly strong card, support from the Crown. Indeed, King Juan Carlos is often regarded as the ‘brain’ behind Spain’s foreign policy. It is, perhaps, not entirely fortuitous that, every evening for several months now, Spanish television has closed the day’s viewing with a picture of the monarch standing beside the head of his foreign service.

In the still uncertain context of Spain’s new foreign policy, the caution which marked the interview granted us by Mr Oreja is hardly surprising. We have, however, taken the liberty of drawing on comments from reliable sources, in many cases within the Spanish Foreign Ministry itself in order to ‘shed light on’ some of the Minister’s replies.

Ch. G.

— *‘Spain, a part of Europe, a neighbour to Africa, having with the peoples of Iberian America special links shaped by shared ways of life and forms of culture ...’ This description, taken from the speech you gave in New York, on 2 October last, to the United Nations General Assembly, is perhaps a fair reflection, Minister, of the three major aspects of your foreign policy. In which order would you put them?*

— My government and my political party have clearly defined Spanish foreign policy as being European, democratic and Western. There can be no doubt as to how the scope of those terms should be understood. As for the other aspects to which you refer, not only do they not conflict with that basic position, they are, in fact, entirely in keeping with our commitment to Europe and the West.

The key concept is not therefore that of an order of priority, but rather that of complementarity.

(Editor’s note: ‘Iberian America’ designates, in Spanish political terminology, Spain, Portugal and all the countries of Latin America, including Brazil. No secret is made, at the Santa Cruz Palace, home of the Spanish Foreign Ministry, of the desire to give institutional form to the concept of Iberian America, to make it a new ‘Common Market’ with ambitions that are not only commercial but also political. This long-term project could be given initial impetus by a summit of all the Heads of State concerned, convened in Madrid

under the aegis of King Juan Carlos.

Spain, with one foot in the European Common Market and one foot in an Iberian common market, would begin to look like a vital hub, a special point of contact between two continents. Madrid's political and economic influence would be greatly enhanced as a result).

Europe

— *You chaired, early in November in Madrid, a meeting of the Spanish Ambassadors to the nine EEC countries. What conclusions can you draw from that meeting with regard to the outlook for Spanish accession to the Community?*

— *A number of working meetings, chaired by myself, were indeed held on 6 and 7 November with the Spanish Ambassadors to the Nine and with our representative to the EEC. The purpose of the meetings was to arrive at an assessment of current relations between Spain and the Community, with a view to my country's accession to the EEC, and to review the political and economic status of our bilateral relations.*

The presence in person at the meetings of the Prime Minister (Adolfo Suarez) and the active participation of the Ministers for Relations with the European Communities, for Industry, Labour and Agriculture, are clear proof of the importance we attached to the working meetings and to the periods of reflection.

As regards the outcome, I would say that it was both positive and enriching. The positive political commitment on the part of the Community countries with regard to Spanish accession was confirmed, as was the existence of specific difficulties in a number of sectors.

I am convinced, however, that these difficulties will not constitute a serious obstacle to Spain's accession to the Common Market, the latter being essentially and, above all, a fundamentally political undertaking.

(Editor's note: This Madrid 'summit' devoted to EEC enlargement has provided an opportunity for Mr Oreja to assert himself as the political authority coordinating Spain's relations with the Community. Leopoldo Calvo Sotelo, the Spanish Minister for Relations with the EEC, was not involved in all the activities, and his role would seem today to be more 'technical' than political.

That relations between Mr Oreja and Mr Calvo Sotelo are strained is a matter of public knowledge in Madrid.

It would seem, too, that, in the course of the working meetings referred to above, Spain's Ambassadors received 'campaign' instructions designed to influence the decisions to be taken by the EEC Council of Foreign Affairs Ministers at its meeting on 19 and 20 December next, when it will be delivering its verdict on the Opinion drawn up by the European Commission concerning Spanish accession).

— *At the start of next year, France will be taking over the EEC Council Presidency from Germany. Given the French Communists' opposition to Spanish EEC accession and the reservations of their Socialist counterparts, which the French Government cannot entirely disregard, is the change in the Presidency a worry for Madrid?*

— *Not in the least. Above all, the rotation of the EEC Council Presidency cannot, of course, mean that Community policy should change tack every six months, and it is a fact that today the Nine are in favour of Community enlargement.*

But, more than that, we have no feelings of mistrust towards France, whose support for Spanish accession has been expressed at the highest level on a number of occasions. And while technical problems do exist and are of concern to the parties, these will have to be resolved through negotiation.

As for the preconditions referred to by a senior member of the (French) Opposition, they seem to us

unacceptable and do not, of course, reflect a truly European view of Community integration.

(Editor's note: The senior French politician to whom Mr Oreja referred is François Mitterrand, First Secretary of the Socialist Party. As for the Communist Party led by Georges Marchais, its 'unshakeable' opposition to Spain's entry into the Common Market is sometimes construed in Madrid as an extension of Soviet desiderata, the USSR wishing to stifle the creation of a strong, 'capitalist' Europe).

— *Is it not fair to say that Spain's commitment to a European future is dictated more by geography than by a fundamental decision in favour of a particular societal model?*

— It has never really been possible to imagine Europe without Spain. We are Europeans not only geographically but also by virtue of our history and our very way of life. As for the societal model to which you refer, Mr Suarez recently declared before the UCD (Union of the Democratic Centre, the party around which the Government is formed) that we have no wish to build a model distinct from that of the Europeans but rather that 'We stand for the establishment in Spain of the Western European political model, so that everyone understands what we are saying and knows what we are trying to achieve.'

[...]