

The Catalonia car crash



Richard Torné

THE tragic farce played out in Catalonia at the weekend was all too predictable - but it could have been avoided.

It's the role of responsible politicians to seek deals, achieve compromise and steer a path through seemingly intractable problems, but the Spanish government through president Mariano Rajoy chose instead to stick its head in the sand, first by hoping that the clamour for independence would fade and then, when it wouldn't, by quoting the Spanish constitution as though it were one of the Ten Commandments.

The Catalan separatists meanwhile indulged in petty nationalism, which is based on self-victimisation, and a distorted sense of entitlement and national grandeur.

It did this while conveniently ignoring the failings of their own regional leaders, who did not cause the economic hardship of Catalans - that's a global problem that began in 2008 - but contributed to it with

their own ineptitude and corruption.

Watching how Spaniards and Catalans goaded each other with inflammatory slogans a day earlier on TV was a bizarre experience, more so when it's clear we are living in a world that's increasingly inter-de-

pendent, both economically and environmentally, and where decisions, at least in Europe, are ever more reliant on the whims of the EU.

though a piece of coloured cloth can adequately sum up a whole lifetime of experience, define one's achievements, or provide any meaningful insight into who we are.

On the opposing side, a pro-independence Catalan woman attacked a conservative politi-

storming polling stations, dragging voters away and firing rubber bullets into crowds, has seriously undermined his claims of legitimacy.

It's an own goal that has played straight into the hands of the separatists. And all because he failed to understand that you cannot suppress ideas of national identity by force, however misguided they may be.

He should have agreed to hold a referendum last year, which would have allowed him to set the agenda. Had the autonomous government then rejected the terms, he could at least have claimed the moral high ground by accusing the separatists of being inflexible.

But the damage has been done, and the fear now is that Catalonia's relationship with Spain has been permanently damaged.

Optimists are hoping the harrowing scenes in the streets of Catalonia will force the hand of Rajoy to agree to greater concessions on self-government and perhaps hold a proper referendum.

This looks like wishful thinking, judging by Rajoy's televised speech hours after the debacle. The underlying fear in Madrid and the rest of the country is that an independent Catalonia will trigger a domino

effect, with other regions demanding to break away from Spain.

But like it or not, the only way forward is through negotiation. The separatists knew this from the start because this ill-conceived referendum was only really intended as leverage, since it lacked all the necessary checks and balances to guarantee a modicum of legitimacy.

Failure to reach an agreement will have terrible consequences in a country that has been torn apart by internecine wars all too often.

Ramón María de Narváez was one in a long-line of 19th century generals who put down a number of civil uprisings through tough military rule. On his deathbed he said: "I have no enemies - I have shot them all." Time proved him wrong, of course. Spain continued in its downward spiral of chaos for another hundred years, culminating in a bloody Civil War and Franco's dictatorship.

It looks like some of Spain's rulers are seeking a re-run.



Footage of the brutal crackdown, including scenes of riot police dragging voters away has seriously undermined Rajoy's claims of legitimacy
Photo: EPA

One elderly Spaniard absurdly remarked that "you're nothing without a flag", as

cian for her anti-referendum stance on twitter, saying she deserved to be gang-raped, no less.

But at the end of the day, the buck stops with Rajoy. Footage of the brutal crackdown, which included scenes of riot police

dragging voters away and firing rubber bullets into crowds, has seriously undermined his claims of legitimacy.

Richard Torné is the editor of Costa Almería News. Aside from having been a reporter at the paper for more than a decade, he has also freelanced for the Sunday Times, Open Democracy and Cedar Publishing.