



Leadership in Europe—it is the courage to express a long-term vision against the populist tide and to the detriment of personal safety.

Former President Jose Maria Aznar of Spain has experienced international terrorism personally. Although he has left office, he continues to actively promote and to bring into sharp focus those political and economic issues and policies in Europe that, if left unaltered, are likely to have negative global implications for all Western Democracies and cultures. Such is the leadership path that Aznar has demonstrated by continuing to engage the global leaders with his views.

I had the opportunity to hear the former President on Monday 19th March 07 deliver a blunt and passionate message on Spanish relationships with Europe, the issues confronting Europe for its long term survival, the importance to Europe of the USA Atlantic alliance and the impact terrorism on all of the western world. As he said “I am in my second world (life) after surviving a terrorist attack in April 1995”. Aznar is eminently qualified as an experienced European Leader to provide stimulating and thought provoking commentary on global issues as they impact on Europe and us all.

When President, Aznar was leader of the conservative Partido Popular (PP) and was in power for eight years from 1996 to 2004. He led Spain through a dramatic period of substantial economic growth via business renaissance and the support of the European Community. He also headed significant political change to confront ETA terrorism and develop alternative international political alliances, notably with the USA and the Middle East.

Spanish influence, both politically and internationally, grew under his watch.

In his speech, Aznar outlined five important policy areas for European long-term survival:-

1. Dealing with terrorism by defining the enemy and then waging the battle against those terrorist elements.
2. Overcoming the current political correctness and paralysis in Europe because the current leadership is incapable of making strategic and difficult decisions to defend traditional western European values.
3. Understanding the European demographic picture and likely future changes. He cites dramatic changes in immigration over then next 10 to 20 years. Immigrants are expected to increase from 12% to 40% of European population during that period with the consequential impact on values, culture and religious mix. This trend has already contributed to the decline in Europe.
4. Ensuring energy independence through less reliance on oil from the Middle East and gas from Russia and North Africa by developing options that include renewable energy and nuclear energy sources. This is an important tie to climate change issues where Europe must take a lead.
5. Strengthening the influence of Europe by promoting stronger Atlantic ties with the USA. Europe should work with the USA and not be a counter weight to it. It is vital to forge an ‘Atlantic Europe’.

Aznar went further and said that Europe has lost power and influence over the last 20 years. During that time Europe has grown faster than the USA, but structural problems have contributed to its decline. In particular Europe has:

1. collectively failed to liberalise its economies,
2. allowed mistrust to fester on key policy areas of foreign relations,
3. not defended the importance of the market economy by allowing a “flood of protection”, and
4. allowed the increase of anti- USA sentiment to influence decisions and activities.

In providing a direction, he states that Europe should develop the posture of an Atlantic Europe by working more closely with the USA and not try to be a counter weight to it. Through this process, Europe would become part of an integrated market which would promote greater trade liberalisation and enhance the values of the European democracies. This alliance would lead to a greater global influence for the European Union (“EU”). As an example of this closer Atlantic alliance, Aznar believes that the role of NATO should be re-directed at fighting global terrorism; Australia as a beneficiary of this policy should be a member of NATO.

He spoke with great confidence about the achievements under his presidency in Spain, pointing out that as a result of his government’s economic, social and public expenditure reforms, the Spanish GDP grew by 64% during his time in office. He notes that prior to his presidency (1975-1996) there was a zero net jobs growth. However, over the eight years following his election, five million jobs were created, the economy grew at an average of 3.4% p.a., budgets were balanced, public debt fell from 7% GDP to almost 0% and the average Spanish income increased from 78% to 87% of the average income of the EU. Finally to-day, Spain is the 8th G8 global economy and is the 6th net capital exporter.

In response to my question about how Europe could achieve energy independence, Aznar said that there is an indispensable need to eliminate energy dependency and to diversify away from traditional gas supplies from Russia and North Africa and oil from the Middle East. This could be done by adopting additional supply options for nuclear and renewable energy. He added that this is best response for addressing global climate change issues where the EU should take a leading role.

The former president speaks with a direct and forthright manner. He embraces lateral thoughts to stimulate thinking about ways to combat terrorism both in Spain and globally. Whilst he did not mention this directly, he greatly changed the Spanish foreign policy by re-directing Spain’s focus to North America away from reliance on France and Germany. He looked to moderate Arab States and to South America for engagement on his political thoughts. He makes no apologies for Spain’s involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan as he sees these as important planks in fighting global terrorism.

His PP Government’s economic and political record gives him the credentials to continue to lead the wider political debate and to speak passionately about the future of his Spain and Europe. Aznar is one of the great modern European leaders whose views should be considered and debated widely. Melbourne was privileged to have President Aznar here and to have the opportunity to listen to his thought provoking global views.