



On March 14th 2004, general elections were held in Spain. It is impossible for me to commence a reflection on these elections without recalling the terrible terrorist attack carried out in Madrid, three days before on March 11th. This tragic event led to 192 persons losing their lives. Their absence will be a constant remainder for me, and the Spanish government as a whole, of the absolute necessity of combating terrorism in each and every form of terror it may adopt. The Socialist government will endeavour, as far as possible, to ensure a safer society.

Spaniards gave the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (the PSOE) our electoral victory on March 14th this year. We, the Socialists, won the trust of 11 million Spaniards, three million more than in the previous elections. No party in the

votes on our candidates. We have awoken from abstention many voters who had previously turned their backs on us. We have recovered moderate citizens who had previously opted for the Popular Party (PP). And we have convinced the majority of young persons, many of whom voted for the first time.

My party's electoral triumph is essentially a response to an unstoppable desire for change. This desire had been building up over the life of the last parliament. Spaniards had already manifested their desire for change in the municipal and regional elections which took place in May 2003. The PSOE was at that time the most voted for party in the country as a whole. Opinion polls corroborated this tendency. The distance between the PP and the PSOE had narrowed over the last four years. In the general election held in the year 2000, the PP had outpaced the PSOE by 10 points, whereas opinion polls this time round suggested a closely tied result.

Paradoxically, whilst the majority of Spaniards were of the opinion, weeks before the election, that the winner would be the PP, that same majority of citizens recognised their desire for my party to win. Desires and beliefs did not coincide. And yet desire prevailed. Such is democracy: nothing is settled in advance under this system.

Over the last few years, discontent amongst Spaniards had been on the increase. Citizens have felt increasingly uncomfortable with the way the government of the day was running the country. There had been little understanding and dialogue. Transparency had been insufficient. I am not exaggerating if I say that people in general were scandalised by

Letter from the Frontline: Merecemos una España mejor

José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero

history of democratic Spain has obtained the support of so many of its citizens. Our voters are numerous and heterogeneous. My party's votes have increased in all the Autonomous Communities (the 17 regions of Spain). Our support has grown throughout society's sectors: amongst workers, the unemployed, professionals, students, retired citizens and housewives. We have been able to retain the votes, within our electorate, of those who had trusted us in the past. But we have also been able to expand our electoral base. Left-wing citizens, endowed with highly differing sensibilities, have concentrated their

the way the PP government dealt with the terrible terrorist attacks of March 11th. Nevertheless, for many Spaniards the government's reaction had clear precedents.

Spaniards had not found their government responsive to their daily needs. Their worries had remained unaddressed. Citizens had perceived that the conservative project did not offer enough. All that could be expected was not being delivered. Spaniards wanted more. They laid their trust in a manifesto, that of the Socialist Party, which promised a better way: a path involving the renewal of political life; a path offering solutions to their daily problems. A path offering much more than merely economic growth. A path in which social welfare is clearly placed on the centre-stage and in which citizens' civil and political rights are enhanced.

Spaniards have found, in our political party, the three basic elements for change, to wit: a deeper undertaking of democracy's rules on the part of the Socialist representatives; a greater concern in offering solutions to the daily problems of citizens; and, a project of general progress for the country.

Over the last four years in opposition, I have endeavoured to convey our deepest respect for the rules of democracy. I understand that respect for the rules of democracy implies much more than not violating them. Over these years, this respect has translated itself into making political opposition a useful and constructive task. This has been the behaviour of my party throughout the life of the preceding parliament, acting with respect and responsibility throughout.

I have always held the firm belief that the government 'control' function must not be guided by political calculation on how to obtain advantage from somebody else's mistakes. The opposition must contribute to good government. We, the Socialists, have been consistent with these principles. At no moment in time did our

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opposition to the PP government degenerate into a baseless criticism of the adversary. Our opposition was not an exercise in destruction.

Throughout these years, the Socialists' purpose has been to show that the democratic game is not incompatible with understanding. Our message has reached Spaniards. For some time now, the majority of citizens have considered that the PSOE is more open to dialogue than the party that, until a short time ago, ruled Spain.

I have promised a style of government that will materially contribute to improving the quality of democracy. Citizens have manifested their discontent as to the way the PP had governed over these years. The majority believes that the PP government abused its overall majority. Citizens have matured. Presently, they are much more demanding with their politicians than before. My party shares with Spaniards the profound desire to renew public life. I have undertaken to preside over a cabinet willing to listen, responsive to criticisms, in the pursuit of compromises whenever possible; a



government that does not put obstacles in the way of parliamentary control, answerable for its actions and that explains its decisions; a government that does not resist judicial review, intent in not reducing the independence of judges; a government that does not hinder media coverage, that encourages pluralism; a government that intentionally respects citizens and that under no circumstances falls into the temptation of questioning or limiting the right of citizens to manifest their discontent; that does not avoid without justification complying with the promises made.

Our purpose of renewing public life foresees a spectrum of limited reforms of the Constitution. We want to amend it in order to improve it. We defend self-rule and we want a more cohesive Spain. We will consider reforming the Senate, reinforcing its territorial

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character. We will amend the rules of succession to the Crown to adapt them to the principle of non-discrimination against women. We will include in our Constitution a reference to the forthcoming European Constitution.

Finally, I have undertaken to preside over a government that does not turn its back on its citizens. Parties in a democratic system must not be slaves to the dictates of public opinion. Political manifestos need not be programmes 'à la carte'. Political representatives can and, indeed, on occasions ought to act with independence. Nevertheless, we must

not confuse independence and arbitrariness. One is independent when one does what one thinks one ought to do. One is arbitrary when one does what one feels, with little apparent reason. This way when political decisions collide with citizens' opinions, interests or rights it is crucial not only for such decisions to be backed by serious reasons but also for the government to be able to explain them. Pedagogy is necessary to ensure citizens support decisions they initially do not share.

Citizens, political parties and social organisations felt that the PP government lacked sensitivity vis-à-vis some of their opinions. The turn in Spanish foreign policy lacked support. The previous government did not expend effort in convincing people on its position. The government did not attempt to win support. We want to recover consensus in foreign policy. The Socialist government is committed to Europe. My government will not overlook the ties that unite us to Ibero-America and the Mediterranean. My government will preserve its friendship with the United States. My government will be on the side of international legality, favouring peace, and advocating multilateralism and preventive diplomacy.

The trust Spaniards have deposited in the PSOE also responds to the effort we, the Socialists, had made to approach citizens. We have endeavoured to understand their worries. Over the last few years, Spain has encountered new problems that had not received attention, problems that had remained unaddressed: Spaniards have had to face an astronomical increase in house prices. Four years ago, the home was not a

problem for families. Presently, access to a home is one of the most serious problems in the country.

Additionally, Spanish society suffers from precarious work contracts that had not diminished over the last

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few years. Industrial accidents have increased. Dialogue with social organisations and, most particularly, trade unions had deteriorated dramatically. In relative terms, social expenditure has fallen. It is an urgent priority to reinforce attention towards dependent persons, children, the elderly and the disabled. We must improve the quality of our health system. We must improve the living conditions of the socially disadvantaged. We shall address the new social needs.

The Socialist Party is a progressive party. The 11 million citizens who have placed their trust in it know that not all parties are the same. Our manifesto is not, nor could it be, a right-wing party programme. My concerns, my priorities, my goals and my dreams are not, nor could they be, those of a conservative leader. They are different. They are 'other'. But ours is not a dogmatic programme, nor a sectarian one, nor an exclusive one. Many can find themselves at ease within our programme.

One of my main priorities as President of the government is to modernise and give a boost to the economy, in order to develop our welfare state. We are committed to respecting the principle of budget stability, as well as not increasing fiscal pressure. We support a model of balanced and enduring economic growth, whose driving forces are the increase of productivity and of savings. But our identity, our ideals, prevent us from settling for growth. We want more. We want to improve our welfare system. In our project, education takes centre stage. Education guarantees equal opportunities. Education is a prerequisite for future growth. We will also invest in research and development. Science is another of our priorities. Economic growth also calls for investment in infrastructures. Moreover, we are determined to achieve healthier development, a more rational use of natural resources and a decrease in pollution.

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The PSOE has also committed itself to giving the concept of citizenship a new meaning. We socialists have historically been at the forefront of the fight for equal civil and political rights. The challenges faced by contemporary societies are no longer those faced at the beginning of democratic times. We are now faced with new objectives that are, however, equally essential. Our project gives centre stage to guaranteeing equality between women and men. We aspire to eradicate violence against women. We aspire for women to gain access to employment

in equal conditions with men. We aspire for family responsibilities to be shared. We aspire for equal participation in power. I firmly believe that gender equality should not be merely formal. It is not enough to champion equality. Authorities must lead the change towards a society without discrimination. Out of loyalty to my commitment and to that of my party, I resolved to constitute the first government with an equal balance of genders in the Spanish democracy. Today it is my honour to be its President.

Our concept of citizenship not only contemplates real equality between genders. Women are not the only ones to suffer discrimination. Many citizens suffer discrimination on the grounds of their sexual preference. The Socialist Party is committed to guaranteeing each individual's right to live in

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freedom. This commitment is not only a formal statement for us, either. We have resolved to modify our laws so that all, homosexuals, transsexuals and heterosexuals, are equal citizens.

No reflection on citizenship in many contemporary democracies can eschew the problem of immigration. Spain is rapidly becoming a heterogeneous society. The PSOE considers it essential to foster a policy of social cohesion, improving the control and management of immigration flows and promoting integration policies.

Our project not only steadfastly defends citizens' freedom and equality. We also strive for a society that values and preserves its culture. In addition, the State must not be left at the sidelines. My government defends the cultural exception principle because

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we firmly believe that culture must not be treated as merchandise. Culture cannot be strictly bound to the law of supply and demand. Culture is our past. Culture is our future.

Spaniards placed their trust in us on March 14th because they wanted to move in a new direction. Citizens were longing for a different style in politics, a style in which dialogue, proximity, rationality, responsibility and understanding were paramount. Citizens were longing for a government that took notice of their values, their interests, their concerns, their daily problems. And we had promised a gentle change. We proposed to renew public life, to recover consensus on foreign policy, to strengthen social policies, to modernise and propel the economy, to increase citizens' civil and political rights and to give a boost to culture.

The Socialist Party has come into power with the support of citizens from very different regions, social strata and with very different political views. We will do what we believe we ought to. We must improve Spain. And we will do so from the standpoint of our principles and of our values, which are those of a progressive party. But we will do so listening, discussing, taking

on suggestions and accounting for our decisions, because improving Spain means improving its democracy as well.



José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero is the newly elected Spanish Prime Minister.

José Luis took over the PSOE leadership after 14 years as a Member of Parliament for Leon, after becoming the youngest Spanish MP in 1986 (at only 26 years of age).