

COMMENT

Abdication is the king's final gift to a grateful Spain

Charles Powell

King Juan Carlos was a remarkable monarch, indispensable to Spain's transition to democracy. The king – who has abdicated this week – skilfully navigated the turbulent waters of post-Franco politics, consolidating the country's fledgling democratic institutions and defending them from an attempted military coup.

Under his guidance, Spain overcame decades of isolation and irrelevance, joining Nato in 1982 and the European Community in 1986. Even if his reputation is no longer quite what it once was, most Spaniards remain grateful for the king's role.

The question that hung over Juan Carlos during the early years of his reign was whether his own remarkable achievements would win legitimacy for his successor's throne. His grandfather, King Alfonso XIII, had died in exile; his father Don Juan never ruled. Until the turn of the century, the king's main concern was whether the monarchy would survive the transition from father to son in a country that was less monarchist than "Juancharlista". What few of us anticipated then was that, within a matter of years, the position of Juan Carlos himself would be called into question.

Spain's current ills are usually blamed on the financial crisis. The erosion of the king's standing began much earlier, almost a decade ago. Ironically this resulted, in part, from the consolidation of Spanish democracy: by the mid-1990s, media scrutiny of the royal family had increasingly come to resemble that practised by the British press, because editors felt the political system was sturdy enough to sustain it. Nonetheless, it is because of the current economic crisis that the

monarchy (along with other major institutions) has come under unprecedented public criticism and scrutiny.

Many Spaniards blame their country's political and economic elites for failing to anticipate the crisis, and for responding to it with austerity measures that have caused widespread hardship and growing inequality.

In turn, this explains why Spanish public opinion was so intolerant of the king's elephant-hunting trip to Botswana in 2012 (for which he later apologised), and why it has

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responded virulently to allegations surrounding the financial activities of Iñaki Urdangarin, his son-in-law. Still, the inquiry into the activities of Mr Urdangarin – who denies any wrongdoing – is proof that in Spain today nobody is above the law.

There is, however, a deeper reason why some Spaniards are questioning the monarchy. The king played a key role in the establishment of the current political system, and today he is widely seen as an integral part of it. It was therefore perhaps inevitable that, sooner or later, growing disaffection with the status quo would engulf the king and the monarchy as well. Some younger Spaniards, who have barely heard of Franco and take democracy for granted, increasingly see the monarchy as a dispensable institution.

Spaniards are in two minds about the long-term political consequences of the crisis. While some argue that

economic recovery will gradually lessen the current pressure to reform, others believe that institutional change is inevitable. By abdicating, the king appears to have sided with the latter.

His decision to step down should thus be seen as a brave and generous contribution to Spain's long-overdue political renewal which, given the current crisis in Catalonia, may well have to include a badly needed constitutional reform. This was a daring move. But then, Juan Carlos has never been risk-averse.

Time will tell whether Prince Felipe, who is well prepared for his new task thanks to his university education, knowledge of foreign languages and cosmopolitan upbringing, will be able to contribute decisively to this process of renewal. In doing so, he will have to strike a balance between continuity and change, as his father did before him.

His immediate challenge will be to help forge a new constitutional settlement that guarantees the unity of the Spanish state while accommodating the demands of Catalan and other nationalists. This is a daunting task, but the new king will be able to tackle it without his father's baggage.

He will also need to carve out a new role for the monarchy in a society that is far more tolerant, cosmopolitan and secular – yet also more sceptical and demanding – than it was in 1975. If he succeeds he will have shown, yet again, that parliamentary monarchies are surprisingly flexible institutions, which can still render old nations a unique service in times of need.

The writer is director of the Elcano Royal Institute in Madrid and a biographer of Juan Carlos