

# Mutual Respect

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**Immigration is a recurrent theme across Europe. And after years of relative neglect by a large part of the Spanish political spectrum and the media, it has also become a top priority in Spain and especially in Catalonia.**

This is because Catalonia is probably the country in Europe that over the last 8 years has received the highest number and the greatest diversity of immigrants in the shortest time. Furthermore, it is one of the countries in which immigration, apart from the usual problems of health care, housing, working conditions, etc, raises the question of identity far more than anywhere else. With the aggravating circumstance that in Catalonia we have two languages, one of which – Catalonia's own language, Catalan, which is fundamental to its collective identity – could easily become marginalised. And Catalonia is politically weak with all this.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that this issue – presently affecting all Europe and Spain – is even more acute in Catalonia.

Fortunately, Catalonia has a long and positive tradition of immigration and integration. This country has been a model in this sense throughout the twentieth century. Proof of this can be found in the current President of the Generalitat – President of Catalonia, as I also like calling the position – who himself was an immigrant at one time. There are some people, and they are not few, who do not want Mr Montilla as President; they would prefer someone else for political, ideological, social reasons, etc., but not because he comes from outside Catalonia. Apart from his personal merits – one of which was to have made an effort to integrate – Montilla has become president because the outlook, approach and values of Catalonia and the Catalans have helped to make this possible.

This fact is borne out into a recent survey carried out by the Opinion Research Centre of the Generalitat, which highlights the highly positive appraisal of Catalonia in the eyes of the vast majority of immigrants. To the extent that 75% even recommend their relatives or friends to come to Catalonia. An extremely high percentage in Europe.

Despite Catalonia's difficult political situation and scant resources, and the current high influx of immigrants, its tradition and proven capacity of integration raises hopes that Catalonia will be able to offer a warm reception by providing the necessary attention and facilitating the advancement of the people (i.e., ensuring that they accede to the ascenseur social (social elevator). Despite this challenge, Catalonia will continue to uphold its prevailing favourable coexistence, safeguard its social cohesion and consolidate its identity as a country. This requires us to be aware of the scale of the problem and the risks involved (that is, we cannot bury our heads in the sand), to devise a good welcoming policy, to ensure positive social promotion, and to guarantee, as much as possible, the

rights of new-comers, especially in health care, schooling, work, social services, etc. It is Catalonia's duty to do this. And it must be doing much better than other places in Europe and Spain itself, otherwise 75% of immigrants would not cite Catalonia as a better destination than others. This calls for an effort from public institutions (Generalitat, City Councils, etc...), and also from the population as a whole.

It also requires immigrants to make an effort. An effort to adapt, to respect the host country's fundamental values, customs and norms, and an effort to learn Spanish and Catalan and speak them – especially children and the youths – or at least understand them. Overall, they must make an effort to accept and integrate into the life of the host country, in this case Catalonia.

A difficult conversation I had with a Uruguayan immigrant recently helps to highlight one aspect of this issue that we cannot ignore. The subject of respect arose – respect for immigrants' rights and respect for Catalonia's values and identity. He remarked with unequivocal emphasis that “mutual respect” was needed. Mutual respect. Okay, but what did he mean by this? The case of Uruguay provides a good example.

Uruguay has had four presidents called Batlle. The last – Jorge Batlle – was president until two years ago. The Batlle family is a political institution in Uruguay, and as its name suggests, it is of Catalan origin. They left Sitges many years ago, although they have fond memories of Catalonia and of Sitges. Jorge Batlle, before becoming president, spent some days in the Generalitat's Casa dels Canonges. And he was very happy to have done so. When he was invested as President, he invited some very distant relatives from Sitges to attend. This gave the Catalans an immense feeling of pride. But neither Jorge Batlle nor the most famous President Batlle – Batlle Ordóñez – regarded themselves as Catalans. They were and felt Uruguayan. They had fully integrated into Uruguayan society. Had they not done so, and felt truly Uruguayan (and had the rest not viewed them thus) they would never have been able to become presidents. Or the Mayor of Montevideo, or of Paysandú. Nor would they have represented Uruguay in anything. Nor would Uruguay have regarded them as their own.

When the Batlles arrived in Uruguay, they were able to enjoy all their rights. Even that of preserving the memory of Sitges over generations. But Uruguay had the right to demand that if they wished to stay, they would have to begin a process of mental, cultural and linguistic adaptation into Uruguay. Uruguay had the right to claim respect for its identity, its language, its culture, and its institutions. This was a successful case of mutual respect. What does mutual respect mean? On the one hand, it means respect towards the Batlles and their personal rights, on the other, it implies a respect for Uruguay, its citizens, its institutions and its identity.

We return to the case of Mr Montilla. When people say that now an Andalusian is the President of the Generalitat, he responds and specifies “Not Andalusian; born in Andalusia”. And in his investiture speech he said, “I cannot say that Catalonia is the country of my parents, but it is the country of my children and it will be that of my grandchildren”. He is right. Respect for the memory, especially for the adult and older generations, but above all respect for the present and future, respect for the society where one lives and will live, respect for its values and its existence.

This is applicable to Catalans who emigrate to America, where they raise their families – or to Catalans who have settled in Andalusia – and it is applicable to the Americans, Romanians and Senegalese who settle here.