

BASQUE CHILDREN OF '37 ASSOCIATION UK
Southampton 26 May 2007

Although the majority of those here today speak both Spanish and English, I am going to speak in English as the Lord Mayors of Southampton and Eastleigh are also here, to represent the British People, who so generously welcomed the "Basque Children" to this country 70 years ago.

I would like to start by thanking the Committee of "Basque Children of '37 Association" for all their hard work and their kind invitation for me to take part in the 70th anniversary of their arrival in Southampton in the "Habana". I feel extremely honoured to be here, being able to participate in this event, which awakens so many emotions, and being able to discover the plaque which commemorates their arrival.

I also would like to thank Manuel Moreno for his help, not only with today's event but also for his help in many other commemorative ceremonies in which I have participated as Ambassador of Spain, for example in Jersey where the Germans employed Spanish forced labour during Second World War and at the monument of the International Brigades, amongst others.

Before coming here I had the opportunity to visit the rooms next door in which the terrible ordeal of the "Basque Children" is remembered, where we can realise the atrocities of what happened in Spain and more specifically in the Basque Country 70 years ago, during a horrifying civil war.

The memory of all this brings me to make three comments:

First, I would like to pay homage to the parents of the "Basque Children". There is nothing more difficult for a parent than to give up their children, even though it is for their own good. Putting them on a boat bound for the unknown, although it meant their salvation, was a heart-wrenching act that took a lot of courage and bravery from those mothers and fathers. It reminds me of the Bible when Moses' mother placed her son in a basket and floated him down the river in the hope that someone would find him, so he would be able to live; or of the mother who in the trial presided over by King Solomon, gave up her son, in order that he could survive. We should therefore remember those exemplary parents of the "Basque Children".

The flag of the Second Republic is one of the mementos in this exhibition of what happened 70 years ago. I would like also to say that I

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have a great respect for this flag, because it was the flag of a democratic Spain, also as it was the flag of those who had the misfortune to live in exile, away from their country because they could not or did not want to go back to the Spain where, during so much time the dictatorship of Franco sadly ruled.

A few days ago I went to a seminar about the "Spanish Transition". An eminent professor said that the Franco era was more an authoritarian regime than a dictatorship. I told him that to those who lived under that authoritarian regime, it felt like a dictatorship.

I am 64 years old and Franco died 32 years ago. Only in November of this year will I be able to say that I have lived more years in freedom than under a dictatorship. The "Basque Children" who ended up living away from their home country at least lived in freedom. Their lives, your lives, were not easy but it was also hard for those who stayed in Spain or those who went back whilst the dictator was still alive.

Fortunately nowadays we have once again a democratic Spain. Constitutionally Spain is a Parliamentary Monarchy and our State is divided into 17 Autonomous Communities, one of which is Euskadi, worthily represented here by the Cultural Counsellor and Spokesperson for the Basque Government, Miren Azkarate. The Spanish flag that is here in this room, is a symbol of the democratic Spain of today. It is not the flag of Franco. Neither is it the flag of the Second Republic, but I am convinced that deep down, in the same way as our flag of today must look with reluctance upon the flag of the dictatorship, it looks with friendship upon the flag of the Second Republic, as the latter also represented a democracy.

Last but not least, I would like to thank the British people most sincerely for their generosity and their hospitality when welcoming the "Basque Children" who in one day arrived, barely knocking on the door, and asked for asylum. The British welcome of these children and the memories of this gesture further strengthen the friendship between Spain and the United Kingdom.

Finally, with the aim of making this thank you public and permanent, the Association of the Basque Children has organized a commemorative plaque and Herminio Martínez has dedicated many hours to its design and making. It is a great honour for me to be asked to unveil this plaque.

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Quiero terminar en castellano para señalar a aquellos que no hablan inglés que he agradecido al pueblo británico su generosa acogida a los 4000 niños del “Habana”. Asimismo he recordado a los padres de los niños, que no dudaron en separarse de ellos por salvarles y alejarles de la horrible guerra civil que sufrió España entonces y he dicho, también, que afortunadamente España es de nuevo una democracia.