

Franco's final legacy very wise

Those who think of royalty as a quaint relic from the past would do well to observe His Most Catholic Majesty, King Juan Carlos de Bourbon of Spain.

I had a long off-the-record conversation with him recently that left me both deeply impressed and rather startled. For Juan Carlos is no ordinary king and certainly not the type of powerless figurehead monarch familiar to most Europeans. Quite to the contrary, Spain's 51-year old monarch is a king's king who is setting the pace for Europe's royalty.

I have followed Juan Carlos' career over the past decade with considerable interest and growing admiration, in large part because he seems to personify perfectly the ebullient spirit of the dynamic new Spain that is fast emerging from two centuries of political turbulence and economic despair.

None of this was apparent in 1975 when the youthful Juan Carlos ascended to the throne. A poor and politically backward Spain was still ruled by strongman Generalissimo Franco. The nation was polarized by the violent hatred between right and left that still boiled 36 years after the end of Spain's bloody civil war.

Napoleon's old adage that Europe stops at the Pyrenees was almost true: non-democratic Spain was isolated and shunned.

In his final effort to assure stability for Spain, Franco moved to have the monarchy restored. To universal surprise, Prince Juan Carlos, rather than his exiled father, was named king. How, everyone asked, could such a young, inexperienced man hold the crown?

Most Spaniards even doubted that the monarchy would survive more than a year before violent civil war again engulfed Spain. But Franco's final legacy to Spain



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proved to be farsighted and wise. The old generalissimo had picked the only man who could hold the troubled nation together.

Those who doubted the young king's courage, intelligence and ability were silenced in 1981 when Juan Carlos singlehandedly put down a military uprising and saved Spain's infant democracy. Holding the bridge like Horatio was one thing. Being a respected king who commands respect and wields influence without any real political power is quite another.

Juan Carlos achieved both feats, with the help of his wife, Queen Sofia. In the ensuing years he has managed to nurture the steady development of Spain's democratic system by artful, behind-the-scenes diplomacy. One false step could have cost him his crown.

For the past seven years, Spain has been ruled by the officially anti-monarchist Socialist Party of Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez. One of Juan Carlos's major triumphs has been to develop a good rapport with the socialists and to help nudge the party toward the centre, leaving Spain's once powerful communists isolated and broken. He has also succeeded in helping get the army out of politics and keeping Spain's peppery rightists in line.

The king's strong support for NATO and Spain's integration into the Common Market have helped push his countrymen into modern Europe. Having done all this, the tall, strikingly handsome monarch, who is also an Olympic athlete, could now devote his time to the sports and travel that he clearly loves. Instead, the king gives the impression that his work is only just beginning. He has made no secret that his new interest is rebuilding Spain's economic and cultural links to Latin America.

When I was in Central America, for example, Costa Rica's President Arias spoke to me admiringly of the role Juan Carlos was playing in helping to ease that region's tensions with the United States. Many Latins still look to Spain as we do to Britain: the wise mother country rich in experience and worldly wisdom.

Spain clearly has an important role to play in the Americas, particularly in teaching how to make the successful transition from military rule to mature civilian democracy.

Unfortunately for some less than democratic Latin nations, they don't have a king to moderate and guide this difficult process. One suspects Juan Carlos might be willing to fill this role. It's a bit fanciful, but I could even picture Juan Carlos one day flying Cuba's Fidel Castro to Washington for a private chat in the White House.

Which is going to leave Europe's other royals, including Britain's feisty Prince Charles, who has not yet found his royal footing, looking like they are standing still. Some will grumble about an activist Spanish King. More will follow his example of rolled-up sleeves and hands-on noblesse oblige. Spain's rather revolutionary monarch will bear a lot more watching.