**Europe's rebellious regions**

*Nov 13th 2003*
From The Economist print edition

**Why the ambitious regions of Europe have lost faith in Brussels**

AS JORDI PUJOL, the gnome-like but powerful boss of Catalonia's government, paces his office in his medieval palace in central Barcelona, he does not look like a man on the brink of retirement. But on November 16th, after 23 years in office, Mr Pujol will leave the stage. He has every reason to feel satisfied. He survived imprisonment by Franco in the 1960s, to see fascism fall in Spain and self-government return to Catalonia. The Catalan language has revived and Barcelona has become one of the most fashionable cities in Europe. Yet Mr Pujol does not seem relaxed. He fears that the Spanish government is trying to roll back some of the hard-won powers of regions such as Catalonia and the Basque country. But, he says, the Catalans (and Basques) want more, not less, autonomy. The next few years, concludes Mr Pujol, will be “a critical period”.

What happens in Catalonia is of more than local interest. Europe's nation-states are being challenged from above, by the growing powers of the supranational European Union, but also from below, by increasingly assertive regions. Some theorists talk of a new layering of power in Europe. Although national governments continue to dominate such things as the organisation of welfare states, on bigger issues like trade, the environment or monetary policy it is the EU that nowadays decides. But in such matters as education, cultural identity or economic regeneration it is Europe's regions that are coming to the fore. This symmetrical squeeze on the nation-state sounds appealingly neat in theory. But, as the controversies in Catalonia show, the reality can be a lot messier. Across Europe, governments and regions still squabble over how power should be distributed.

Thus in Germany, the only big west European country with a long-established and reasonably settled federal system, the regions (*Länder*) complain that their powers are being simultaneously eroded by Brussels and Berlin. In France, the government is committed to decentralisation, but its devolution plan for Corsica was messily rejected in a recent referendum. In Italy, the Northern League, which wants more political and economic power for the north of the country, is threatening to bring down the coalition government of Silvio Berlusconi unless regions are given more clout. In Britain, Tony Blair's government set up a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly in its first term in office; it is now, somewhat reluctantly, adding elected assemblies for some of the regions of England. In Belgium, Dutch-speaking Flanders continues to demand ever-greater autonomy from the rest of the country.

Where does the EU fit into this back-and-forth struggle? Many European regionalists have long seen it as
a natural ally against the centralism of nation-states. In Scotland, nationalists have seized on the idea of Scotland's European vocation as a way of counteracting the idea that independence might lead to isolation or poverty. Visitors to the office of John Swinney, head of the Scottish Nationalist Party, find two flags prominently displayed, Scotland's cross of St Andrew and the yellow stars of the European Union. Elsewhere, however, regionalists are beginning to have their doubts about Brussels.

Thus Mr Pujol, a passionate "pro-European" for all his political life, now believes that "the EU is no longer encouraging regionalism". Efforts by Catalonia, Scotland, Flanders and the German Länder to have a bigger role for regions written into the draft of the new EU constitution were rebuffed by the convention on the future of Europe, partly thanks to pressure from Spain and France. The Committee of Regions, based in Brussels and headed by the suitably named Sir Albert Bore from Birmingham, England, is a byword for tedium and toothlessness. Its weakness owes something to its unbalanced nature: genuine powers, such as Mr Pujol's Catalonia or Edmund Stoiber's Bavaria, sit alongside feeble local councils from Britain and Sweden.

**The enemy in Brussels**

Some regional enthusiasts now see the European Commission as an enemy. The Länder complain loudly that EU competition rules are eliminating their traditional practice of dishing out aid to local industries. In Italy, Umberto Bossi, leader of the Northern League, who once saw the EU as an ally in his struggle against the Italian state, now dismisses it as a plaything of big government, multinational corporations and paedophiles. The League, whose attempt to preserve the cultural purity of northern Italy (Padania) has entailed virulent anti-immigrant rhetoric, fears that the EU is trying to impose political values that may lead to a direct clash with the aims of the party.

The European institutions in Brussels have reasons of their own to be wary of regionalism. On a theoretical level, Eurocrats may be attracted by the idea of a layering of levels of political power (with the EU naturally at the apex). But the commission dare not overtly encourage regionalist ambitions, for fear of antagonising powerful member governments. And, as one official points out, "It's already a nightmare trying to secure agreement between 15 member states, and it's going to get worse after enlargement to 25. It will be totally impossible if we have to deal with more powerful regional governments as well."

The expansion of the EU is undoubtedly contributing to the feeling of rebelliousness in the European regions. Some new member countries, such as Malta and the three Baltic states, are both smaller and poorer than such regions as Catalonia or Flanders. Mr Pujol admits that it has been a "psychological shock" to see these midgets take their place at the EU's top table, while Catalonia must content itself with being represented by Spain. He wants Catalan to become an official working language of the EU, pointing out that it is more widely spoken than several others. But Mr Pujol still stops short of demanding that Catalonia take its place in the EU as an independent country. Whether his successors will be as moderate is an open question.