This page was exported from - Shelburne Free Press
Export date: Sat Oct 31 16:35:54 2026 / +0000 GMT

Catalan Pimpernel

by GWYNNE DYER

Carles Puigdemont, the self-exiled leader of the Catalan separatist movement, aspires to become the new Scarlet Pimpernel. Last week he left Belgium, where he has lived as an unwelcome guest since he led a failed attempt to secede from Spain seven years ago, and had himself smuggled back to Barcelona, the capital of the region of Catalonia.

He chose this moment because a new regional coalition government was coming to power that included one of the Catalan nationalist parties. In the eyes of hard-line separatists they were traitors, and Puigdemont's duty, as he saw it, was to mock and humiliate them.

His plan was to appear suddenly in Barcelona on the day the new regional government took power. Collaborators got him safely to the city, and last Thursday Puigdemont showed up near the regional parliament building, surrounded by around forty people wearing Puigdemont masks.

He gave a short speech denouncing his various political enemies, disappeared back into the same crowd of Puigdemont look-alikes, then into a car and away. By Friday, he was back in Belgium.

Boldness, precise timing and a lot of luck ? could this be a new Scarlet Pimpernel for our times? In the words of the song that accompanied the original ?Scarlet Pimpernel' play, changing only the name of enemy from ?Frenchies' to Spaniards.

They seek him here they seek him there

Those Spaniards seek him everywhere.

Is he in Heaven or is he in Hell?

That damned elusive Pimpernel!

Well, yes, but could Puigdemont match the deeds of the fictional Sir Percy Blakeney, aka the Scarlet Pimpernel? Sir Percy was a rich, foppish and not too bright habitué of London clubs during early years of the French Revolution (1792-93), but he had another, secret life.

The Scarlet Pimpernel was, according to Stan Lee, the co-creator of Marvel Comics, the ?world's first superhero'. Baroness Orczy's very successful 1920s book and play gave us the trope of a meek, insignificant character whose family and friends have no idea that his alter ego is a superhero. Dozens of other Spandex-clad superheroes followed.

The fictional Pimpernel went back and forth between London and Paris at the height of The Terror, rescuing French aristocrats from the guillotine in the nick of time. He was a master of disguise, a brilliant swordsman, and a champion of justice. Just like Carles Puigdemont, a legend in his own time ? or at least in his own mind.

What Puigdemont did was a brave and clever stunt, but it will not revive the separatist project in the minds and hearts of most people in Catalonia. The Spanish-speaking half of the region's population has no wish to break away from Spain, and the Catalan-speaking half has lost faith that it can happen in this generation.

The evidence was in last May's regional elections. For the first time in decades, pro-independence parties did not win an outright majority.

The inauguration of the resulting regional government, a coalition between a bigger socialist party and a smaller pro-independence party, determined the timing of Puigdemont's defiant gesture. But it was merely a gesture: the new government was duly installed in power later the same day.

Some places must go on struggling for independence until they win it, because the circumstances they were living in were intolerable. Most of the recent exanples, like South Sudan, are in Africa.

In other, more fortunate places, like Scotland, Quebec and Catalonia, independence is only an option. There is no oppression, the democratic norms are observed, even the language is not in danger ? and prosperity is shared equally by the majority group and the minorities.

Pro-independence movements will still arise from time to time because many people want more ?meaning' in their lives, and a much smaller of number of well-educated members of the minority elite see more power for themselves in an independent state. Since they tend to congregate in the local media, they can persuade a lot of people they need independence.

In former Canadian prime minister Jean Chrétien's deathless phrase (in deliberately mangled franglais), they want ?le flag sur le hood?: a big government job and the limo that goes with it. This comment is an injustice to many sincere individuals, but Chrétien knew what he was talking about.

In prosperous, well-run places these are transient enthusiasms. One lost or botched referendum (Scotland 2014, Catalonia 2017) or two at most (Canada 1980 and 1995), and that generation moves on.

The next generation does not pick up the torch from their parents, because that's not how generational turnover works. The subsequent generation might, because it will seem like a new idea again by then. But it's over in Catalonia for now, and the world will continue to rotate in an easterly direction at the usual speed.