

Majorca Daily Bulletin

Sunday-Monday, October 15-16 2017

1.10€ · Founded 1962 · N.16409 · Passeig de Mallorca 9 A,
Palma 07011



SPAIN POISED TO TAKE CONTROL OF CATALONIA



**“I was only
joking about
English
being in
decline...”**

London.—European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker was only joking when he said the English language was on the way out in Europe due to Brexit, he said.

“Slowly but surely English is losing importance in Europe,” Juncker told a conference in Florence in May, speaking in English before then switching to French and drawing applause from his audience.

Asked on Friday if French would indeed be the future language of Europe, Juncker said in English: “It’s always dangerous to make jokes about that.”

“I gave a speech in Florence in May and I was saying as English is slowly disappearing from Europe I will express myself in French. The French were happy. The British - I had a shitstorm coming from the other side of the Channel,” he told students in his native Luxembourg.

Juncker has had something of a love-hate relationship with Britain since becoming head of the EU executive almost three years ago in the face of objections from then prime minister David Cameron.

Madrid.—The Spanish government will take control of Catalonia if regional leader Carles Puigdemont replies ambiguously to Madrid’s question about whether he has declared independence from Spain, the interior minister said yesterday.

Puigdemont made a symbolic declaration of independence on Tuesday night, only to suspend it seconds later and call for negotiations with Madrid on the region’s future.

Spain’s prime minister Mariano Rajoy has given him until Monday to clarify his position

- and then until Thursday to change his mind if he insists on a split - threatening to suspend Catalonia’s autonomy if he chooses independence.

“The answer must be without any ambiguity. He must say ‘yes’ or ‘no’,” Spanish interior minister Juan Ignacio Zoido told Cope radio.

“If he answers ambiguously, it means he doesn’t want dialogue and thus the Spanish government will have to take action,” he also said.

Puigdemont, who is holding consultations with local parties to prepare his answer, faces a

tough dilemma. If he says he did proclaim independence, the central government will step in. If he says he did not declare it, then the far-left Catalan party CUP would probably withdraw its support for his minority government.

CUP on Friday called on Puigdemont to make an unequivocal declaration of independence in defiance of the Madrid government’s deadlines.

Such a hardline position has also been backed by influential pro-independence civic group Asamblea Nacional Catalana (Catalan National Assembly).

They were joined yesterday by another key member of Puigdemont’s coalition, Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, whose leader Oriol Junqueras said they should press ahead with splitting from Spain following an independence vote.

The Catalan government said 90 percent of Catalans had voted for a breakaway in the 1 October referendum that central authorities in Madrid had declared illegal and most opponents of independence boycotted, reducing turnout to around 43 percent.

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