

## ***Basques keen to have dialogue***

The Times, (United Kingdom), March 17, 2004

Basque nationalists have offered talks "without conditions" to Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, Spain's new leader. The offer was made yesterday by Juan Jose Ibarretxe, the Lehendakari, or First Minister, of the Basque autonomous region. Senor Zapatero rang him on Sunday evening shortly after declaring victory in the general election.

The move is seen as a sign that the Socialist victory may break the impasse between Madrid and its regions. Senor Ibarretxe said that it represented an "historic opportunity" to end a "phase of non-communication".

Senor Zapatero will have to tread warily, however, if he does not want to create internal problems with important Socialist "barons" such as Jose Rodriguez Ibarra, the Socialist First Minister of Extremadura, and Jose Bono, the First Minister of Castilla-La Mancha, who oppose any further dilution of the Spanish Constitution. The various nationalist parties' goals range from looser ties with Madrid to total independence. Finding a balance between them and supporters of the status quo has eluded previous prime ministers.

Relations between central government and the northern region have been especially poor since Senor Ibarretxe launched his plan to solve the Basque conflict in 2002. The so-called Plan Ibarretxe -independence in all but name -would give the region a "freely associated" status with Spain. Jose Maria Aznar, the outgoing Prime Minister, has not spoken to Senor Ibarretxe since 2001 and questioned his Basque National Party's commitment to fighting Eta, the Basque separatist group.

Senor Zapatero is set on returning to a model of government that straddles the political centre ground and encompasses nationalist parties without formal pacts.

Source: Times, The (United Kingdom), Mar 17, 2004