

Report on the meeting between Lehendakari and BCA'37UK-Euskadi

26 October 2021

by Derek Doyle OBE, Ex British Consul in Bilbao & committee member of BCA'37UK-Euskadi



The meeting began with a family photo by the Press in the atrium of the Lehendakaritza (Presidential Executive Building) after which the group withdrew to an adjoining meeting room. The Basque Delegation was headed by the Lehendakari, Iñigo Urkullu, who was accompanied by Beatriz Artolazabal (Basque Government Regional Minister for Equality, Justice and Social Policies), José Antonio Rodríguez (Basque Government Regional Vice-Minister for Human Rights, Memory and Cooperation) and Marian Elorza (Basque Government Secretary General for External Affairs).

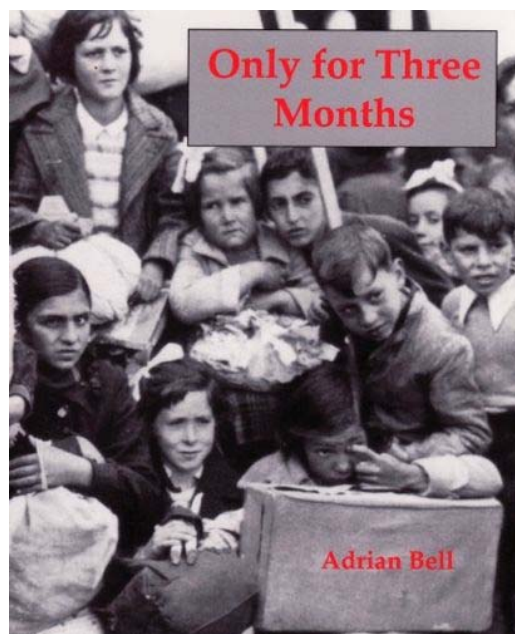


Once seated, and after the Lehendakari introduced his team, Carmen Kilner (CK) presented hers, namely Adrian Bell (author *Solo Seran Tres Meses*), José Luis Duo, Gaizka Garamendi, John Kilner and Rosa & Derek Doyle(DD). CK also excused the absences of BCA'37UK-Euskadi members Pauli Dávila and Jesús Goiri as well as that of Natalia Benjamin (for health reasons) who was one of the co-founders of the UK association in the early years of this century.

CK went on to outline the objectives of the Associations and particularly, the aim of preserving the memory of the events leading up to the evacuation of the 4,000 children to the UK after the bombing of Gernika in April 1937. She also recalled that the Basque government had at that time organised the evacuation of more than 20,000 children from the Basque Country towards different destinations.

CK also explained how the BCA'37UK-Euskadi Association had come into being after her meeting with Aintzane Ezanarro (Director of Gogora - Institute for Memory) at an event at Cambridge University in 2018 to commemorate the role that Leah Manning had played in the evacuation of the children to the UK. Aintzane as CK explained had strongly recommended her to consider setting up an association similar to the UK one in the Basque Country. The result was that in 2019 the Basque Country association had been established with the emotional support and advice of Gogora. Continuing with their help as well as their financial support the association was able to re-edit and print two books, namely *Memorias* edited by Natalia Benjamin and *Sola seran tres meses* by Adrian Bell (AB).

The purpose of this meeting, at the invitation of the Lehendakari, was to present him with copies of these two books. Copies were also presented to those members of the Basque government who were present.



AB took the opportunity to explain what had prompted him to write his book. In his seminal book *The Spanish Civil War*, Hugh Thomas had skipped over the evacuation of the 4,000 children from Bilbao in a couple of sentences. This intriguing footnote on the part of Thomas had lead AB to research the matter further and interview many of the *niños* who had remained in the UK thereby giving him the material to write the first edition of his book in English.

Derek Doyle (DD) explained that due to the Non-Intervention Pact in 1937 the British Government had not wished to be involved in the evacuation. The evacuation had been thanks to the pressures

brought to bear by the people at that time and their solidarity with the children and their plight. CK took the opportunity to reflect that despite the British Government position and thanks to the then British Consul in Bilbao and his efforts, the Royal Navy had escorted the Habana once it left Spanish territorial waters. DD insisted that the role of the people in Britain had been essential in the form of donations and taking children into their homes but furthermore that the children themselves had also found ways of raising money by playing football matches, giving concerts and so on. There was much to learn from the experience of the children and images of that time were still being repeated today. The recent evacuations of people from Afghanistan and parents handing over their children to soldiers and volunteers were indicative and heartbreaking.

The Lehendakari spoke about his Government's involvement with refugees and desire to take them in. He said his Government wished to be one that did not simply look on as events occurred but rather assist the refugees in finding families to take them in. They had worked with UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) and the charity Caritas. The Basque people were expressing their solidarity in political and economic terms. Other recent examples of Basque government aid had been with the Balkan states, Syria and Libya.

There was a need to remember and not forget what happened in the past. The day after the meeting Beatriz Artolazabal would be attending a commission in Parliament on the "*Ley de Memoria Histórica*" and discussing the fitting place of the victims.

The Lehendakari said that the events of 1937 had not been forgotten and recalled that whilst on a visit to Wales (a Memorandum Of Understanding exists between Wales and Euskadi) to see the CAF (*Construcciones y Auxiliar de Ferrocarriles*) rail rolling stock manufacturers' factory in Newport he had been walking down a street when he had come across a plaque commemorating the children of 1937. He then recalled the Basque Government Delegation in London in 1936 and their work and how his Government was an heir to that one. And more recently he recalled on the role of the rescue vessel Aita Mari in the Mediterranean saving migrants in the face of difficulties.

The 85th anniversary next year of the evacuation was also mentioned as well as the need to introduce the story of the children of 1937 into schools. The Lehendakari was clear with respect to both points. In the first that they would be doing something next year about the anniversary and that with respect to Education, Gogora that hung off Beatriz Artolazabal's Department could be an ally. DD mentioned that we had had initial contact with the *Departamento de Educación* which was open to a meeting at some point. CK mentioned the work that the Association in the UK did in schools and that there was still remaining work to do on developing ideas on the subject of introducing the history of the *Niños* to schools here but that we would remain in touch.

In conclusion, a very positive reception and meeting with Lehendakari Urkullu and his team.

