

# Political IDEA conference kicks off in Mar del Plata

## Business leaders and politicians gather for annual forum

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Although IDEA (Business Development Institute Conference) is the annual gathering for entrepreneurs and businessmen in Argentina (for the past decade, it has been a three-day summit held in mid-spring in Mar del Plata), this year's issue is, according to most attendees, one of the most political in years. No wonder: 2011's presidential elections are getting closer and while the ruling Peronist party is still split between Kirchnerites and a myriad of anti Kirchnerites, the current IDEA conference is the last one before next year's October elections.

Elections and candidacies were, on the one hand, the reason to build the much-expected kick-off of the 46th IDEA conference on Wednesday night where opposition Peronist leader and former president Eduardo Duhalde sat side by side with Buenos Aires governor Daniel Scioli (who could either run for a second term as governor or for president as a token of Peronist unity blending Ks and anti Ks on one ticket), Salta's Juan Manuel Urtubey (a Kirchnerite governor) and businessmen Cristiano Ratazzi (CEO of FIAT), Héctor Méndez (head of the UIA Argentine Industrial Union) and Hugo Luis Biolcati, head of the SRA Rural Agricultural Society. The latter three have recently been involved in spats with the Kirchner administration on con-



Fiat's Cristiano Ratazzi.

troversial issues such as taxes, State interventionism and the troublesome ruling Party Victory Front bill waiting to be passed by Congress in which businessmen should share 20 percent of profits with workers. That sole photograph of all of them together was quite an anti-Kirchnerite statement.

There were some political satellites too, such as would-be candidates for 2011 elections including former Buenos Aires Mayor Jorge Telerman (in the front line to greet both Scioli and Duhalde and who might run for mayor of Buenos Aires city next year), former deputy and unionist Luis Barrionuevo, who is actually supporting Eduardo Duhalde, and Santiago Montoya, the well-known (and feared) Buenos Aires province tax collector who, after quitting his job, was summoned again by Governor Scioli as head of Banco Provin-



SRA's Hugo Biolcati.

cia Foundation.

Wednesday night had another highlight: Spain's former president José María Aznar's speech, delivered long past press time. Besides being too theoretical on economic freedom and the benefits of rule of law and the drawbacks of protectionism it was, at the same time, an unexpectedly politically correct address as regards the current situation in Spain and the fate of Prime Minister Rodríguez Zapatero, for an Argentine audience which was already set to "political mode".

But yesterday was a different day. The conference's leitmotiv "Businessmen and the Bicentennial" kicked off in the morning with Di Tella University professor Pablo Gerchunoff lecturing on the historical role of entrepreneurship. In a provocative, intelligent and politically incorrect analysis, Gerchunoff

(Radical party member and head of the cabinet office of advisers at the Economy Ministry during Fernando de la Rúa's presidency) blamed much of the recent history (i.e. Peronism and the union's excesses in power) on the businessmen's bigotry and lack of commitment during the past century. There was a kind of hush in the audience (with a turnout of over 800 people) when Gerchunoff said: "If entrepreneurs want to be social leaders who reject archaic populisms they should first turn down archaic capitalism". He then added he was for a 20 percent export tax and could support the 20 percent profit-sharing bill that Deputy Héctor Recalde (Victory Front) is trying to pass in Congress.

Hell had been raised and the reply came from Cristiano Ratazzi and Hugo Biolcati, the speakers who followed. Although Ratazzi had told the *Herald* that Gerchunoff's speech was "mere intellectual rubbish" he was considerate and moderate for the general audience when he stated he was against export taxes and the role "for everybody in Argentina was to build a normal, serious and predictable country".

Biolcati then stressed the political importance of the June 2008 victory (when the ruralists defeated the 125 Law in Congress to increase grain export duties), and said both the country and businessmen had arrived at "another limit", when in early August most of the Argentine busi-

ness community "refused to attend the defenestration of Papel Prensa at a Government House event." It was like a bullet to the head for the third panellist, Daniel Funes de Rioja, head of COPAL (foods and food producers association) who was one of the few to attend the attack on Papel Prensa launched by President Fernández de Kirchner two months ago.

The debate then meandered into the necessity for businessmen of associating with chambers or associations, a topic IAE professor Guillermo D'Andrea had attacked in his lecture earlier that morning. He had scared the audience with the number 826, as there are 826 business chambers registered in Argentina (it is also a number that symbolizes inefficiency and overlapping). But with the issue of this 2010 IDEA a politically-minded one, the crossover between business factions continued, Funes de Rioja defending "as many chambers as are needed to express both freedom of association and commitment". Almost the exact words that former president Aznar had pronounced the night before.

### ANÍBAL: NO IDEA

Cabinet Chief Aníbal Fernández distanced himself from Governor Daniel Scioli yesterday, saying he wouldn't have gone to the IDEA forum. Scioli attended Wednesday's opening dinner while Fernández said his own appearance would "confuse issues."