

# **The UK must embrace Gibraltar more closely and not allow it to be a dispensable pawn in the Brexit talks**

By Andrew Rosindell MP

Every year, on 10th September, you will always find me in Casemates Square, Gibraltar, where I am proud to join the people of Gibraltar in celebration of their National Day.

Gibraltar is one of the 16 British Overseas Territories that have chosen to remain under the sovereignty of the United Kingdom, which continue to demonstrate their abiding loyalty to The Crown and where the Union Flag is always flown with great pride. The people of “The Rock” never stop celebrating their Britishness, whilst at the same time upholding their right to self-determination, and their National Day is an amazing show of their national colours: red and white.

On the day, a great crowd of Gibraltarians gather in a square that was built in the 12th Century, celebrating with music, confetti, fireworks, balloons, speeches and more. To me, this dynamism is quintessentially British and is indicative of our eternal ability to decide and make our future.

The British people have for a thousand years decided their own destiny and the loyal British people of Gibraltar must have that same right. On 23rd June 2016, Gibraltarians voted, along with the English, Scots, Northern Irish and Welsh to determine Britain’s status with European Union, but unlike the rest of the UK, which was deeply divided on the issue, the Gibraltarians had no doubts and voted 96% to remain in the European Union.

Being attached geographically to Spain, one understands their belief that the EU was very much part of their future. Most Gibraltarians speak Spanish and many have Spanish heritage; some even have homes in Spain, but make no mistake about it, the people of Gibraltar are not Spanish and their being in the EU was seen by many as a protection against Spanish ambitions to one day take control of the Rock.

There is no doubt in the minds of people in Gibraltar that they are British and will only ever be British. Indeed, in some ways they exert a sense of Britishness that is hard to find in the UK itself. Their European identity is important to them, but their British identity is more important than anything else. The power of this is not to be underestimated.

Gibraltar has been unflinching in her three centuries of allegiance to the Britain. This was confirmed in the 1967 referendum and again in the 2002 referendum, with 99% and 98% respectively supporting British sovereignty. Furthermore, despite Spain's foreign minister's previous statement that the EU referendum result "opens up new possibilities" for Spain to regain control of Gibraltar, on 8th January he conceded that they have little chance of achieving this without the willingness of Britain to negotiate.

Therefore, when we talk about British withdrawal from the European Union, with regard to Gibraltar it isn't the question of sovereignty that we should be discussing, is it the welfare and security of its people.

Spain has a history of maliciousness about its dealings with Gibraltar. Spanish dictator Francisco Franco closed the Spanish frontier with Gibraltar in 1969, which cut Gibraltar off from supplies and deprived it of workers. Since the border fully re-opened in 1985, Gibraltar has flourished into a rich and diverse embryonic Monaco. The rock is home to a Royal Air Force base, a Royal Navy base, a significant digital economy that is vital to much of Europe, the most southern mosque on

the continent, a world heritage site and more. This sort of established success cannot be completely taken away, but it can be damaged.

This is what Prime Minister, Theresa May, and Brexit Secretary, David Davis, must prevent in the upcoming negotiations. It would be totally unforgivable for the United Kingdom to consider Gibraltar as a dispensable pawn in the discussions over Brexit and it would send very questionable signals to the rest of the world about the UK's commitment to the right of self-determination.

Moreover, the people of Gibraltar rely on the broad shoulders of the UK to ensure their welfare. Gibraltar could be damaged by reckless Spanish policy and so it is our duty as a nation to fight for Gibraltar to have continued and uninterrupted access through the border with Spain and for Spain to stop committing unlawful, and often very dangerous, maritime incursions into Gibraltarian waters. Any other bullying tactics by Spain to undermine the self-determination and prosperity of Gibraltar must be pointed out and shamed by the UK and the international community.

Furthermore, the United Kingdom must investigate all other options to protect Gibraltar. For instance, there have been several studies on creating a single market between the United Kingdom and Gibraltar post-Brexit, to ensure that Gibraltar – which has the third highest GDP per capita in the world – has continued access to the financial services sector in the United Kingdom.

Additionally, I believe if we are to treat Gibraltar as fully part of the British family, there is no argument now for them being denied the right to have their own elected representation in the Westminster Parliament and, if they so wished, to offer the people of Gibraltar the opportunity to become an equal component part of the United Kingdom, as opposed to an external territory. Both of these decisions

would strengthen British-Gibraltarian ties and send strong signals to Spain and the rest of the world that the UK is asserting herself to defend our interests abroad and uphold our historic principles.

The UK must slam the door firmly shut in the face of Madrid and make it clear, without room for doubt, that Gibraltar will always be British, as determined by the Gibraltarian people. The Chief Minister of Gibraltar, Fabian Picardo, said on National Day last year that British means British and I wholly support his drive to deliver Brexit successfully for Gibraltar. It is the inhabitants of The Rock who must decide the destiny of their homeland and nobody else!

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