

# BORDERLINE BLUES



When the UK's European Union referendum resulted in a narrow vote to leave the European bloc, Gibraltar emerged as comfortably the largest Remain vote in the country, with a whopping 96 per cent majority. Nevertheless, it subsequently found itself caught in the crossfire surrounding the turmoil of the UK's exit from the EU. As the 50th anniversary of Gibraltar's historical 1967 sovereignty referendum approaches, could recognising an emerging Gibraltarian identity be the solution? [Chris Fitch](#) reports

**I**n all the furore surrounding last year's EU referendum, Gibraltar, situated one thousand miles from the mainland British coastline, could understandably feel aggrieved to have received so little attention during the campaign. The fate of the overseas territory was far down the list of talking points, below such priorities as the bendiness of our bananas, or the colour of our passports.

That all changed recently, when the EU negotiating text unveiled in response to the UK's official notification to leave the bloc introduced us to what has now become Clause 24:

*'After the United Kingdom leaves the Union, no agreement between the EU and the United Kingdom may apply to the territory of Gibraltar without the agreement between the Kingdom of Spain and the United Kingdom.'*

Suddenly, the eyes of the world spun onto this tiny patch of land — a mere 6.5k sq km smaller than London's Richmond Park — with melodramatic table-thumping rhetoric demanding Gibraltar remain British, and for opportunistic Spanish hands to be kept away from 'our Rock'.

As the torrent of recent think-pieces reminded us, Gibraltar has had quite a turbulent history. In 1713,

the Treaty of Utrecht (which concluded the war of Spanish Succession) ceded from Spain to Britain:

*'the full and entire propriety of the town and castle of Gibraltar, together with the port, fortifications, and forts thereunto belonging [not, as many Spaniards have pointed out, the actual land or territorial waters specifically] ... to be held and enjoyed absolutely with all manner of right for ever, without any exception or impediment whatsoever.'*

The peninsular – not an island, note, it is attached to the mainland – may not be blessed with many natural resources, but its geographical location, at the strait connecting the Mediterranean with the North Atlantic, made it undeniably strategically important.

#### DAGGER IN THE SPINE

Despite its age, Utrecht remains our leading legal text in this impasse. 'We are left, unfortunately, with a treaty that's 300-years-old,' says Gareth Stockey, lecturer in Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Studies at the University of Nottingham.

He argues it isn't accurate to suggest that Gibraltar has endured three centuries of Anglo-Iberian tensions. 'The Spanish weren't that bothered about Gibraltar,' he says. 'It was always on the back burner, but it wasn't a priority.'

Indeed, prior to 1908 there wasn't even a fence across the isthmus. Gibraltarians and Spaniards alike were free to cross the land at will (it was only the smuggling of tobacco using dogs which prompted the fence to be constructed, a practise which continues – without canines – to this day).

## The fate of Gibraltar was far down the list of Brexit talking points

That amicable relationship all changed with the rise of General Francisco Franco in the 1930s, and the subsequent civil war and rise of fascism. 'What you had before the Spanish Civil War, was a relatively open border and very good relations between Gibraltarians and Spaniards,' continues Stockey, whose book, *Gibraltar: A Dagger in the Spine of Spain?*, is titled after Franco's infamous views on the subject. 'It was only because Franco won the Spanish Civil War and resurrected the Gibraltar claim with a vengeance that you started to see the two communities moving further apart.'

Post-World War II, as many of Britain's colonies were granted independence or ceded to other countries, it was only a matter of time before the Gibraltar question arose. Today, 10 September 1967 is a date fixed in the mindset of every



**ABOVE AND TOP, RIGHT:** Gibraltar retains much of its British aesthetic, from postboxes to red telephone boxes, nonetheless much of the architecture borrows from its Spanish neighbours; **BOTTOM, RIGHT:** The iconic Rock of Gibraltar looms over the territory's airport runway, constructed on so-called 'neutral ground'



Gibraltarian: the day 12,138 out of a total of 12,762 registered voters rejected switching sovereignty to Spain (there were more spoiled ballots, 55, than voters opting in favour of Spanish citizenship).

Franco's reaction was ruthless - movement between Spain and Gibraltar started to be restricted, then, one Sunday night in June 1969, the border was slammed shut. It was not to be fully opened again until the 1980s, when Spain joined the EU, by which time Gibraltar was on the brink of a transformation, from an economy dependent on external intervention - especially the British military - to one with its own booming financial industries. Combined with a tourist industry that welcomes more than ten million visitors each year, and the invention of online gaming and telecommunications, Gibraltar's economy is today a thriving hub of prosperity, one of the wealthiest territories in Europe.

Although he is keen to point out that the EU negotiating text for the UK refers only to trade agreements needing to be struck with Spain, Stockey believes Gibraltarians had an awareness that a leave majority would automatically re-open the question of sovereignty. 'My own take on the way the Gibraltarians voted in June last year was that they understood - perhaps a lot more acutely than a lot of people in Britain - what was at stake for them,' he explains. 'There was a recognition in Gibraltar - which London seems to have been slightly slow to realise - that outside of the EU, it's much harder to defend Gibraltar's case. On occasion, when Spain has caused trouble over Gibraltar, Britain has been able to use its influence within Europe to apply pressure on the Spanish to behave more reasonably. This is an early sign of what Gibraltar can expect outside of the EU.'

#### BORDERING ON BRITISHNESS

Gibraltar certainly possesses a distinctly stereotypical British flavour. Much of the urban landscape feels unmistakably British, with high street brands, litter bins, traffic lights, and, of course, the oft-quoted token red phone boxes, appearing as though plucked straight from a London street - even if the bright apartment blocks, narrow streets, and ambient temperatures feel far more Southern European. For logistical reasons, the time zone may be central European, cars may drive on the right, and speed limits might be measured in km/h, yet prices are in sterling, plug sockets are three pin, and words such as 'Piccadilly', 'Trafalgar', and 'Nelson' are splattered liberally across local signage. Crucially, English is the official *lingua franca*, even if conversations among Gibraltarians tend to rapidly flit between English and Spanish without breaking stride.

'Gibraltar's all about social geography,' insists Andrew Canessa, Professor of Sociology at the University of Essex, and principal investigator of *Bordering on Britishness*, an oral history project undertaken by the UK Economic and Social Research Council, the Garrison Library of Gibraltar,

and the University of Essex, recording the memories and loyalties of hundreds of Gibraltarians, from across the generations and the ethnic spectrum. Participants were free to discuss their experiences in English, Spanish, or Moroccan Arabic (or a combination of all three, which also allowed for comparisons between how language affected their thoughts and memories).

'Initially, the project was a frustration at the lack of nuance and depth to how Gibraltar and Gibraltarians are portrayed in the British media, and the Spanish media even more so,' he outlines. 'I had a hypothesis that Gibraltarians were much less anti-Spanish in the past than they are today. By and large the project has demonstrated this to be the case. But it's complicated.'

The project uncovered a broad view within modern Gibraltar that citizens of Spain are significantly different from them, even to a genetic level, despite the obvious centuries of marriages, migrations, and cultural exchanges across the border. 'You get people saying, "We are biologically different",' recalls Canessa. 'I didn't imagine the amnesia would be so strong.' The interviews revealed tendencies such as bilingual Gibraltarians persisting with English while visiting Spain, or deliberately using poor Spanish, so as to emphasise their Gibraltarian roots.

A visually strong relationship with Britain helps draw this distinction, including arch-monarchist leanings dating back to the Queen's historic visit in May 1954, as well as the fact that Gibraltar airport only flies to UK airports. 'England is closer to Gibraltar in many ways,' continues Canessa. 'Think of the mental geography of Gibraltar; it's easier for me to get the plane from Gibraltar to London than either by flying or by train from Madrid to Gibraltar.'

But is the pro-Britain sentiment genuine? 'It is both practical and heartfelt,' Canessa says. 'We are as British as someone from Wales; we have a flag, we have an accent, we have different traditions, yet we're still part of the United Kingdom. But it's partly the need to visibly demonstrate that we are not Spanish.'

Indeed, the interviews also revealed a tendency for Gibraltarians equally to distance themselves from Britain when it feels appropriate, by emphasising their European-ness when overseas, especially when in the UK. 'It's riddled with contradictions,' he observes. 'The Gibraltarian sense of identity is that we're not English, and we're not Spanish. We're something in the middle.'

Ultimately, the project concludes that the past few decades have seen the emergence of a new, uniquely Gibraltarian identity, where the experiences of the older generation - with memories of wartime evacuations and long-term isolation from Spain - are being replaced with a less nationalistic, more European view of themselves. 'Older people in their seventies or eighties will talk about "Britishness", but an imperial Britishness,' he explains. 'Many young people under 30 talk about being "Mediterranean".'

#### A NEW IDENTITY

Therefore, is the binary choice between being 'British' or 'Spanish' an anachronism? Is it time for both London and Madrid to start recognising a flourishing, uniquely Gibraltarian identity, significantly distinct from both Spain and the UK? One that overwhelmingly opted to remain part of Europe, but has repeatedly rejected any suggestion of becoming Spanish?

'I'm Gibraltarian, because I was born here and that's it,' asserts Gary Viales, a local pensions administrator I meet in a Gibraltar high street café, who could perhaps be considered the voice of youth. 'We're just British because it's on a piece of paper,' he argues, leaning forward over his coffee. 'Not that I have anything against Britain, I just don't think you can say your nationality is what someone's put on a passport for you.'

Viales followed the path trod by many of his peers. He recently attending university in the UK - the Government of Gibraltar provides residents with universal scholarships covering higher education tuition fees - before returning home to Gibraltar (or the snappier 'Gib', as he calls it) to start work.

## 'Everyone is scared that Spain will close the border'

As he repeatedly outlines, the status quo, especially in terms of economics, is very much ideal for him and his generation, whatever nationality that requires. 'Everyone wants things to stay the way they are because it's comfortable,' he explains, a little bashful. 'We don't want to be Spanish, I think, because it's not convenient for us. If England was in the same economic position as Spain, that we wouldn't want to be British, we'd want to be Spanish. I think it's just because we want the best of what we can get.' Viales admits it's a very cynical view.

'But I cannot speak for the older generations,' he adds, hastily, 'because they lived through a closed border, I didn't. For them it's more a matter of principle, they'll never want to be Spanish because of that experience. I can't imagine a closed border. Tomorrow I might be going over to Spain, if the border was closed, I'm stuck here. I'm literally stuck here. What do you do? I can't imagine, how would I leave?' The bewilderment that descends on his face illustrates the anxiety experienced by much of the population, as the EU exit commences.

#### EMERGENCY BREXIT

'We get on with the people over the border, we have no animosity with them. But it's not those people who cause the trouble; it's the people in

Madrid.' Jackie Scriven, sitting behind the till in the central Gibraltar Bookshop, has called Gibraltar home her entire life. She does remember the closed border. 'They wouldn't let us have water, or food, or blood,' she recalls, gesticulating enthusiastically. 'There were families living on both sides who were separated. It was terrible.'

She also remembers vividly the events of 2013, when inflamed tensions led to long queues at the border, with people stuck in their cars in the hot sun for hours, while passports were meticulously checked. 'I refused to cross the border for two years after that!' she declares, raising her voice to be heard over the chirping of the budgie in the corner of the shop. 'And now we have Brexit, when we all voted to remain!'

Certainly, there is seemingly nothing which unites Gibraltar more than the fear of Spain closing the border again. And, regardless of the European sympathies of the Gibraltarians, Brexit is coming which can only heighten those fears.

'Everyone is scared they'll close the border,' says bookmaker Sebastian Fischer, wincing. 'It's pretty much the number one fear.' Originally from Germany, Fischer is one of the over 12,000 so-called 'frontier workers' who cross into Gibraltar from Spain every day for work, passing customs with a cursory flash of their passports (while many non-EU nationals get the full immigration interrogation) before heading down Winston Churchill Avenue, crossing over the airport runway, towards the busy town centre.

Together with his Greek wife, Fischer symbolises the idea of a European Union citizen, pan-nationalists living and working as the most visionary Europhiles imagined. If the Gibraltarian economy suffers, if jobs are lost, he thinks there will be plenty of people who will opt to move to other outlying European enclaves, such as Malta or the Isle of Man, even if they don't have the quality of life and connectivity that Gibraltar currently enjoys. 'I wish Gibraltar had made a better case for EU membership before the vote,' he adds, 'perhaps pumping a few million into lobbying for Remain.'

In the corridors of power, there is more optimism - officially anyway - in the face of a decision with which most Gibraltarians disagree. 'The people of Gibraltar have always been pro-European in outlook, they see themselves as part of the wider European project,' says Joseph Garcia MP, Deputy Chief Minister for Gibraltar, assigned with the task of representing Gibraltar in future UK-EU negotiations, and author of *Gibraltar: The Making of a People*.

He also points to statements made during the campaign by then-Spanish Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Garcia-Margallo, whose comments about Spain taking control of Gibraltar in the event of a leave majority gained considerable prominence in local press.

'The day after the referendum was a huge shock,' he admits. 'But we now accept that the UK >

# NEED TO KNOW: GIBRALTAR

## TOURISM

In **2015**, **10.1 million** tourists visited Gibraltar. **9.6 million** of these visitors arrived by the border, while only **219,000** arrived via the airport. Therefore approximately **93%** of total tourist arrivals entered Gibraltar by the Spanish border.

Tourist expenditure in **2015** was calculated to be **£199 million**. Tourists who came to Gibraltar via the border spent **£139 million**, approximately **70%** of total tourist expenditure.



## ECONOMY

The financial sector, tourism, and the shipping sector contribute **30%**, **30%**, and **25%**, respectively, of Gibraltar's GDP.

In **1984** the British military contributed **60%** to the local economy, compared with **7%** today.

As of **April 2017** there were **12,859** jobs in Gibraltar held by frontier workers from Spain, **7,583** of whom are Spanish.

## TIMELINE

- 1704** - Gibraltar captured by English and Dutch forces
- 1713** - Treaty of Utrecht confirms British sovereignty
- 1908** - Border fence built between Spain and Gibraltar
- 1967** - Gibraltar rejects Spanish sovereignty in referendum
- 1969** - Spain closes border with Gibraltar
- 1973** - Gibraltar joins the EEC
- 1975** - Death of General Franco
- 1985** - Border is reopened as Spain joins the European Union
- 2002** - Gibraltar rejects joint British-Spanish sovereignty
- 2016** - Gibraltar votes to remain part of the European Union

< is leaving and we are leaving too, even though we don't want to. We don't have a choice.'

Sat at the end of a long, plush table scattered with official-looking documents in his office, Garcia outlines the government's position going forwards. 'I think Brexit will bring opportunities,' he insists. 'One thing we've asked of the UK is to include Gibraltar in these lists of countries lining up to do trade deals with the UK once they've left the European Union. Not for goods, because we don't manufacture anything. But for services.'

As he explains, as much as 90 per cent of Gibraltar's financial transactions are currently with the UK, a market to which they would still have access once outside the EU. However, given that the primary industries in Gibraltar involve mainly digital communications, with little need for geographic proximity, the Gibraltarians are well placed to benefit in a scenario where the UK is able to strike up deals globally.

Nevertheless, those fears over the frontier remain the pivotal cause for concern, especially given the controversial appearance of Clause 24 in the EU text. 'The border has been used as a political weapon by Spain in the past,' recalls Garcia. 'More than 60 per cent of our workers in financial services and online gaming live in Spain. Some are Spanish, but there will be UK, Germans, Dutch, all sorts of nationalities - exactly what Europe should be. The risk is that might be lost.'

## 'Gibraltar cannot be decolonised without giving it back to Spain'

He offers potential solutions to how the border could be kept free-flowing with Gibraltar outside the EU - everything from replicating the border arrangements of mini-states such as Monaco, Andorra and San Marino, or the special deal which enables Russians to access the enclave of Kaliningrad, to joining the Schengen Agreement, as other non-EU states such as Switzerland and Norway have done. 'The beauty of it,' he adds, 'is that a fluid border has zero impact on the United Kingdom, because although we are British, we have immigration controls with the UK.'

### NATION STATE

One further potential complication is the continued presence of Gibraltar on the UN's 'Non-self-governing territories' list of places awaiting 'decolonisation'. So, could full independence solve Gibraltar's quandary? The reality is, to all intents and purposes, such an ambition has already been achieved. 'Gibraltar is independent now in the way it wasn't 30 years ago,' says Canessa. 'Gibraltar has become economically independent.' Indeed, the territory

has complete self-determination when it comes to everything from the raising and spending of taxes to decisions over immigration - everything except foreign affairs and defence. 'Other than that, we run everything,' acknowledges Garcia.

Furthermore, were Britain to ever officially cede the territory, the Treaty of Utrecht leaves little doubt over who gets first refusal:

*'And in case it shall hereafter seem meet to the Crown of Great Britain to grant, sell or by any means to alienate therefrom the propriety of the said town of Gibraltar, it is hereby agreed and concluded that the preference of having the same shall always be given to the Crown of Spain before any others.'*

'Effectively Gibraltar cannot be decolonised without giving it back to Spain,' says Stockey. 'The Treaty of Utrecht is fairly clear: if it's not British, Spain gets first refusal. And Spain will not refuse. The only way that you could move beyond Utrecht is if Britain and Spain signed a new treaty which overruled the terms of Utrecht and formed some kind of new agreement.'

This, he explains, is what Tony Blair's government was trying to do by opening discussions about joint sovereignty in 2002, a process the government of Gibraltar halted with an impromptu referendum that firmly rejected joint sovereignty with a crushing 99 per cent majority. Therefore, while the amount of credence which should be paid to a treaty which contains the thankfully flaunted requirement that 'no leave shall be given under any pretence whatsoever, either to Jews or Moors, to reside or have their dwellings in the said town of Gibraltar' could certainly be debated at length, for now, Utrecht holds firm.

Regardless of the legal wrangling, Gibraltarians are proceeding with all the confidence and pomp of an officially independent, sovereign country, such as the Gibraltar football team being officially adopted into FIFA last year. 'In the 1990s,' recalls Canessa, 'there was a conscious effort for Gibraltar to become a "nation" and imagine itself as a nation-state, which is why the football team is really important. We've also got a flag, a national anthem, subconsciously creating the idea of a nation-state.'

This international recognition, coupled with the inevitable jubilant red-and-white themed parties which will fill the streets this September on Gibraltar National Day to celebrate the milestone half-century anniversary of the 1967 referendum, makes it a giddy time for Gibraltarian 'nationalists'.

Nevertheless, the EU exit looms over the horizon. Gibraltarians are patiently awaiting their fate. Stockey has words of caution for those now tasked with negotiating the future relationship between the UK, the EU, and Gibraltar. 'The people who suffer when Madrid and London begin to talk up the dispute, are the people on the ground,' he warns. 'They would much prefer Gibraltar and Spain to just get along.'

**TOP RIGHT: Jewellery shops on the central high street indicate the wealth of modern Gibraltar; BOTTOM RIGHT: The famous cable car transports visitors 412m to the top of the Rock, and is a central part of the tourist experience**

