

# A Rock honeycombed with confusion

As the Royal Yacht sails into Gibraltar, ALAN RUSBRIDGER reports on the inhabitants' concern about their future

August 81

SEVEN months ago, when the Queen was in North Africa, the royal yacht was advised by the Government not to sail past Gibraltar for fear of upsetting the Spaniards. Yesterday, as the Britannia cruised into the Rock's Royal Naval dockyard, you could forgive the Gibraltarians for feeling a little confused.

Just as last year's Foreign Office decision hurt them, so today's royal visit has delighted them. Just as the Government's threat last month that the economically-

vital dockyard might be closed terrified them, so the Lords' vote to give them full nationality a few days later reassured them. In the last fortnight the 25 000 Gibraltarians do not know quite what has hit them.

The immediate popular reaction will be evident today in the tumultuous response they have planned for the royal couple, just as it has been evident all the week in the red-white-and-blue displays that have covered the streets, shops, and offices of the Rock.

The elation at what is seen

as an affirmation of Britain's loyalty towards Gibraltarians after months, or even years, of caution and apparent indifference, is expressed and almost symbolised by the colony's Chief Minister, Sir Joshua Hassan.

"I am fully satisfied with British pledges over Gibraltar's future," he assured journalists yesterday. "The British Government has always been as good as its pledges. There could be no more sincere way to express Britain's commitment to the people here than to send the

yacht for the start of the honeymoon."

But underlying the euphoria over the visit is a marked anxiety. Few in Gibraltar believe the Foreign Office "blunder" theory over the decision to start the honeymoon in the colony. The more cynical believe that it was a calculated risk and that it may have been a sweetener presaging less good news in the near future.

There are, for example, worries about the Foreign Affairs Select Committee's

report on the future of Gibraltar, due to be published soon in London. The committee took evidence in the colony and their attitude, some local politicians say, means that it is likely that their minority report, at least, will be unfavourable to the maintenance of British links with the colony at their present level.

Then there are the continued worries about the dockyard closure — a move that would almost certainly destroy the Gibraltarian economy unless adequate alternative industry had been

planned and implemented.

The uncertainty is aggravated by the apparent hardening of Spanish attitudes to the Rock. There was not the faintest whiff of protest, Sir Joshua said, when Princess Alexandra visited Gibraltar 18 months ago. Since then, there has been the Lisbon agreement to lift the frontier blockade, and the failure of Spain to implement it, and now the boycotting by King Juan Carlos of the Royal Wedding. Spanish sources in Gibraltar yesterday suggested that positions could polarise now and that

Spain might even try to regain Gibraltar's airport, which they say is on land not covered by the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht, which gave the Rock to Britain.

Gibraltarians traditionally take the view that they only become an issue when Spanish politicians feel a need to divert attention from internal difficulties. But a combination of factors — not least of them the possible closure of the dockyard — has made them take the recent behaviour of their neighbours more seriously.

The flurry and flag-waving

of the last two weeks has boosted the morale of the people, but below their display of patriotic jubilation they know they cannot survive without the dockyard and with a closed frontier unless they are given the time and the capital with which to establish alternative industries.

"That," says Peter Isola, Leader of the Opposition, "is a very difficult task. And the longer Spain delays over making the Lisbon Agreement work, the more it looks as though its days are numbered."

Gibraltar

Sir,—Your insistence in articles and editorials on regarding as a "blunder" the Foreign Office's decision over the visit to Gibraltar of the Prince and Princess of Wales, although motivated by admiration for the King of Spain's courageous defence of democracy in his country, nevertheless implies that the stumbling block to a solution of the Gibraltar problem is the Gibraltarians' "embarrassing" loyalty to Britain.

Such an implication comes very close to brushing aside the crucial democratic principle of self-determination upon which British policy has so far rested, for the sake, ironically, of showing

good will towards Spain's vulnerable new democracy.

In fact what we have in the Anglo-Spanish dispute is not a stumbling block but a deadlock: the principle of self-determination being in conflict with Spain's desire to satisfy an abstract principle of territorial integrity (a satisfaction, incidentally, which hawkish elements in the Spanish armed forces would vigorously deny to King Hassan of Morocco in the case of Ceuta and Melilla on the dubious grounds that, unlike Gibraltar, these enclaves are situated in Africa and not in Europe).

It is clearly not going to be easy to find a way out of the situation, but it should

be more generally appreciated that in this, as in so many other cases, King Juan Carlos has to contend with the bitter legacy of the recent past. The present intractability of the Gibraltar problem is in large part due to General Franco's high-handed policy towards the Gibraltarians.

No wonder the people of Gibraltar are still suspicious of anything that smacks of Spanish chauvinism. A just solution could no doubt be found eventually in the context of the EEC, but until the democratic forces in Spain are securely established, the prospect of a decent compromise must appear remote.

Given the enduring deadlock, the Foreign Office was surely right not to shrink from allowing the Gibraltarians to participate, briefly enough as it is, in what has turned out, even here in Britain, to be an extraordinary outburst of popular rejoicing over the royal wedding.

Far from being an embarrassment to a solution, the enthusiasm on the Rock may well jolt the Spanish Government out of old, coercive policies that have patently failed, and make them think constructively along the lines of conciliation and respect for democratic choice.

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