

# NORTHERN IRELAND: A PRECEDENT FOR DIALOGUE

These are edited highlights of a conversation between the Rt. Hon. Michael Ancram, Conservative M.P. for Devizes and Mike Brufal.

The Rt. Hon. MICHAEL ANCRAM Q.C., M.P. Deputy Leader of the Opposition and Shadow Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs

"It was my first visit to Gibraltar and I was well briefed by the Governor, the Chief Minister and the leaders of the Opposition. At a dinner I was able to listen to the views of a representative cross section of organisations and interest groups. Furthermore my visit down Main Street demonstrated that the whole of Gibraltar was united in its determination to remain British.

## BRUSSELS PROCESS

The Chief Minister explained to me in some detail why he was unable to attend the Barcelona talks under the Brussels Process. However he stated that he would be prepared to attend the next round if it was under the Douglas Hurd formula of 'two flags, three voices.'

In Gibraltar I discussed at length the theory behind the variable geometry of talks which has been undertaken with great success in Northern Ireland. I stress that there can be no comparison between Gibraltar and Northern Ireland as on the Rock the population is united in its wish to remain under the British Crown and in Northern Ireland there is a divided community. But Northern Ireland shows that discussions can be held between two sovereign states and interested parties who are not members of one



delegation or the other but who have a voice which needs to be heard separately. This sets a good precedence and demonstrates what can be done. Let me stress that I am not anti Brussels Process talks, as dialogue is essential where there is a conflict of this sort. But the key lies in the format of the talks. A situation must not be allowed to arise where the talks are either pre-empted by decisions taken privately by two governments before the parties sit round the table.

I have aired my suspicions that there is an element of hidden agenda in the present Brussels Process talks between the two governments. Before the talks began at Barcelona the majority of the details had already been agreed and so the talks were nothing more than a cosmetic device for publishing what had been agreed and then presenting them publicly. This suspicion was confirmed when I saw that the communique was almost word for word what had been

published in that morning's Financial Times. Such a course of action is dangerous and is the wrong way to proceed as it undermines confidence and trust. Any talks process must be based on a reasonable degree of confidence between all the participants.

In Northern Ireland the Conservative Government started the process of multi-sided talks without diminishing the sovereignty of the two states. At the same time all parties respected and recognised the legitimacy of the party that was not a sovereign state in its own right to participate and put its point of view to those attending the talks. This process was continued by the Labour Government. This way forward takes a little imagination and time in order to build confidence.

The Brussels process talks at Barcelona seemed to be the very opposite. During my walk down Main Street I received the impression from Gibraltarians that it was having the opposite effect by reducing confidence and creating suspicion. It was also salutary to see that the talks lasted a mere 90 minutes which allowing for introductions and translation means some 30 minutes of real dialogue and furthermore resulted in the issuing of a communique that had already been written.

## BARCELONA TALKS

"I returned from my visit to Gibraltar determined to persuade the Labour

Government to accept publicly that the sovereignty of the citizens of Gibraltar cannot be talked about on its own in so far that the principle of sovereignty must be attached to a jurisdiction. I cannot envisage the existence of a sovereign people without a sovereign land. To talk, as the Labour Government does, of a sovereign people without a sovereign land is a contradiction in terms.

Furthermore I wish to find out whether the question of joint

sovereignty was either discussed or negotiated during the Brussels Process talks at Barcelona: I can assure the Gibraltarians that the history of joint sovereignty is littered with disaster. Joint sovereignty is nothing more than sovereignty abdicated and surrendered. I just do not believe that it works as there is always a conflict of interests which makes it inoperable. I would oppose that route as a way forward to resolving the Gibraltar

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