

These are edited highlights from a conversation between Greg Pope and Mike Brufal.

"I view the Gibraltar problem with an open mind. I was appointed to the Foreign Affairs Committee in June 2001 after being a Government whip in the Foreign Office during 1997/98.

I come to the problem from the starting point that Spain is a partner in the EU and NATO, the close relationship between the two governments and the personal friendship of Tony Blair and Jose Maria Aznar. And then there is Gibraltar. The two Governments should be able to resolve the differences in an amicable and grown up way. The re-launch of the Brussels Process talks last summer seemed a sensible one.

On the other hand I can understand why the Chief Minister does not wish to participate in the talks as they are currently framed. What all the parties seem to ignore is that at this stage no one can predict what the outcome will be at the end of the summer. Forget the spin, the twists, even untruths that are dripped into the public domain. If the rumours are to be believed then there will be a 'done deal' that will be rejected by the Gibraltarians. Such a course of action will suit no one and so I just do not believe that this will be the outcome. Imagine all the work that has gone into this initiative just to end in deadlock.

CARUANA

I am aware of Peter Caruana's high approval rating on the Rock and was impressed by the incredible turn out at the demonstration on the 18 March.

THE CONCLUSION

Despite the empty chair presumably the talks will conclude in the early summer. There may well be a proposal. What we need to do then is to ensure that the Government of Gibraltar is included in the next stage of the process. This is the time when the work will be put into deciding what will be put to the Gibraltarians in a referendum. It is very important that at this stage the Government of Gibraltar works with the British and Spanish Governments even if they are not prepared to talk in the current rounds of Brussels Process talks.

GIBALTARIAN OFFICIALS

As soon as the Gibraltar Government decides to talk part in talks then Gibraltarian officials should be involved in all the preparatory and co-ordinator meetings. I know that Jack Straw indicated that such involvement would have to be agreed by all three parties. I do not agree with him but I am not a spokesman for the United Kingdom Government. My view is that the Government of Gibraltar, as soon as they decide to take part, should be involved in every aspect of the talks. The idea that they can only be partially involved suggest that the Foreign Office is acting as a grown up would with a recalcitrant child. I also wish that the Gibraltar Government will find a formula to enable them to take part in the next round of Brussels Process talks as apart from all else their officials should be allowed access to all the papers and meetings.

CAROLINE FLINT, PPS TO THE MINISTER FOR EUROPE

'I think you are being unfair to expect a Minister to have to stand by any reference made by the PPS. You must remember that the PPS does not have the benefit of the advice and services that are provided for a Minister. I am well aware that the Spanish Government on a regular basis makes allegations about Gibraltarian involvement in smuggling. I have never seen any facts to support these allegations so I am not agreeing with Caroline's remarks that Gibraltarians are inveterate smugglers. One must not lose sight of all the smuggling that exists between France and the United Kingdom. I can assure you that she was not speaking on behalf of Peter Hain. This just illustrates why a PPS must be cautious when speaking to the media. A sentence out of place will draw the PPS into the situation that happened on the interview on Sky Television. I also quite accept the Gibraltarian view that Caroline should either provide the proof of her remarks or accept that she made a mistake and apologise.

SMUGGLING

It is a fact that a decade ago there was a smuggling problem involving fast boats. Since then Joe Bossano and then Peter Caruana have eliminated this trade. Furthermore Peter Caruana has robustly refuted these recent allegations in his evidence before the Foreign Affairs Committee. Subsequently Joe Bossano gave evidence in a private meeting of the FAC and equally robustly refuted the allegations. I see absolutely no reason to believe that these two politicians are not telling the truth. The Spanish Government has yet to provide any evidence to support their repeated generalisations about Gibraltarian smuggling.