

GIBRALTAR AFTER THE ELECTIONS: WHERE NEXT FOR THE ROCK?

by Geoffrey Howe*

One product missing from last week's prolific Lisbon Summit was the expected deal between Tony Blair and the Spanish Prime Minister, Jose Maria Aznar, on the long-running Gibraltar dispute. But the omens remain positive. For both prime ministers have thrown their weight into the search for breakthrough.

Fifteen years have passed since my Spanish opposite number, Fernando Moran, and I (with Gibraltar's then Chief Minister as one of the British Delegation) believed we had achieved just that. For we had agreed on behalf of all three communities, upon a negotiating process "aimed at overcoming all the differences between Spain and the UK over Gibraltar and promoting co-operation on a mutually beneficial basis".

For Gibraltar, the key prospect was the normalisation of relations with Spain, starting with the opening of the La Linea frontier - closed, as it had been under the Franco blockade, for twenty years. Just as important - not least from the wider, European point of view - was the clearance of the way for full Spanish accession to the EC and full participation in NATO.

Yet for Gibraltar the process has been largely unfulfilled. The wider opportunities that were expected to follow have been frustrated, most damagingly by repeated Spanish frontier restrictions.

And a later agreement, concluded in December 1987, for the joint use of Gibraltar airport (as, for example, at Basle or Geneva) has never been implemented. Public opinion in Gibraltar has declined to sanction this.