

Other difficulties have arisen, for example, over non-recognition by the Spanish authorities of Gibraltar driving licences, passports and identity cards - even of Gibraltar's international telephone dialling code. Spain has vetoed sea ferry crossings between Spain and Gibraltar. Air traffic movements have been restricted. And so on.

So why the continuing deadlock? Essentially, because of the underlying dispute over sovereignty. Britain's title to Gibraltar is derived from the Treaty of Utrecht of 1713. But so too is Spain's. For the Treaty provides that, if ever Britain should wish "to alienate the propriety ... of Gibraltar", then "the Preference of having the same shall always be given to Spain". No date for any such transfer has ever been set. On the contrary, Britain has pledged - as an understandable consequence of the Franco-imposed siege of Gibraltar - "never" to agree to transfer of sovereignty against the wishes of the people of Gibraltar.

Against that background, successive Spanish governments have striven to press their case for early transfer of sovereignty by harassment of Gibraltar. Such tactics have proved wholly counter-productive. Spanish coercion has served only to reinforce Gibraltarian resistance. Even the benefits of joint use of the airport - often commended by Gibraltar's own Chamber of Commerce - have been resisted. Necessary arrangements for joint management have been perceived as symbols of incipient transfer of sovereignty.

Now, however, it is gradually being perceived - on both sides of the border - that conflict may actually be fuelled by the very presence of "issues of sovereignty" on the Anglo-Spanish agenda. The reason for that, express, initial agreement has recently, and very fairly, been re-stated by Gibraltar's Chief Minister. "You cannot", Caruana has said, "sensibly expect to engage Madrid in a ... dialogue in which they are not free even to raise the matter ...