

most of interest to them, and that is sovereignty". And there have been signs of growing wisdom on the other side. Spain's shadow foreign minister, Rafael Estrella, last year acknowledged that the "sovereignty factor" was indeed preventing communities on either side of the border from developing a normal relationship. And he proposed "an understanding to put aside the sovereignty factor for a given period", alongside a renewed commitment to co-operation over the rest of the agenda. And Caruana has described this approach as "entirely compatible" with that of the Gibraltar government. (A similar path is being followed by Britain and Argentina, in respect of the Falkland Islands.)

So there may now be a real window of opportunity, if the three chief ministers, encouraged by electoral success in Spain and Gibraltar, can take advantage of it. One factor is essential - and that is a clear understanding of the need for consent at each stage. Each of the two agreements that I negotiated expressly recognised Britain's commitment "to honour the wishes of the people of Gibraltar".

This fundamental feature has sometimes been perceived in Spain as no more than a "subterfuge" for British obstinacy. In today's world, nothing could be further from the truth. For we all now live in a democratic Europe, where frontiers may only be changed with popular consent. This principle is at the heart, for example, of the delicately poised Anglo-Irish peace process.

So too in other cases. Even sovereignty is not an eternally indivisible absolute. Feelings can indeed change, with the passage of time. But only in a climate of growing mutual trust. And with sovereignty itself set aside from the present agenda.

This appears now to be understood by all three heads of government. They have identified the full - and uninterrupted - opening of the frontier as the key