

Former UK Conservative Party leader Howard threatens war with Spain over Gibraltar

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Two senior British politicians have threatened that the Conservative government of Theresa May is prepared to go to war with Spain over the British territory of Gibraltar on the Iberian peninsula.

Lord Michael Howard, a former leader of the Conservative Party, made his extraordinary statement in an interview on the BBC's *Andrew Marr Show* yesterday. He was speaking just four days after May triggered Article 50, officially beginning Britain's exit from the European Union (EU), which must be completed by March 29, 2019.

In response to May's hardline demands on the terms of this divorce, the EU published its draft negotiating position, part of which stipulates that any agreement it reached with the UK will not apply to Gibraltar, a British Overseas Territory, without the agreement of Spain.

Denouncing this as an EU "land grab" on behalf of Spain, Howard threatened, "Thirty-five years ago this week another woman Prime Minister sent a taskforce half way across the world to defend the freedom of another small group of British people against another Spanish-speaking country, and I am absolutely certain our current Prime Minister will show the same resolve in standing by the people of Gibraltar."

Howard was provocatively evoking Margaret Thatcher who went to war with Argentina over the Malvinas (Falklands) Islands in April 1982. The 74-day war over the remote South Atlantic islands, seized from Argentina in 1883, left 900 people dead, 649 of them Argentineans—mainly young conscripts.

Earlier on the same programme, Defence Secretary Michael Fallon said that the UK would go "all the way" to protect Gibraltar.

Not a single leading Tory minister rebuked Howard or disassociated themselves from his remarks. Rather, Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson insisted that the UK's support for Gibraltar will remain "implacable and rock-like."

A spokesperson for May said only that the prime minister

is "absolutely dedicated to working with Gibraltar for the best possible outcome on Brexit" and "reiterated our long-standing position that the UK remains steadfastly committed to our support for Gibraltar, its people and its economy."

Johnson had met with Fabian Picardo, Gibraltar's chief minister, on Friday following the release of the EU draft to reiterate the government's backing. Picardo said that the territory, which rejected Spanish sovereignty in a referendum in 2002, was being singled out for "unnecessary, unjustified and unacceptable" discrimination by Spain.

However, the overseas dependency, home to just 30,000 people, voted by 96 percent to remain in the EU in last June's referendum. British exit from the EU reopens the issues of border controls between Spain and Gibraltar, a 6.7 squared kilometre territory on Spain's southern tip, as well as airport landing rights.

The "Rock", as it is called, was ceded to Britain "in perpetuity" under the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht. Besides functioning as an important military base for British forces—it is 12 miles from the north coast of Africa—it is an important tax haven for the international and British ruling elite.

The Panama Papers—11.5 million documents leaked in 2015 from the offshore law firm Mossack Fonseca—exposed Gibraltar's role in a web of offshore entities used by politicians and the super-rich to avoid paying taxes.

Billionaire oligarch Rupert Murdoch's *Sun on Sunday* newspaper was vociferous in defending British control of Gibraltar, writing, "Gibraltar is British and will stay British during EU talks."

Like Murdoch, Howard is a representative of the "hard Brexit" Thatcherite right-wing who regard Britain's exit from the EU as an opportunity to complete Thatcher's social counter-revolution against the working class.

In this regard especially, there are direct parallels between Howard's bellicose statements over Gibraltar and the Malvinas war. Thatcher exploited the Argentinean junta's

decision to invade the island to launch a jingoist campaign, aimed at shoring up her government at a time when it was involved in major industrial confrontations with the working class.

Likewise, May's Conservative government is enforcing austerity under conditions of deep social polarisation and a major political and constitutional crisis created by Brexit. Howard's attack on "another Spanish-speaking country" indicates that the ruling elite are prepared to launch another bloody military venture as a means to this end.

The implication of these developments go far beyond Thatcher's one-sided war in the South Atlantic. Britain and Spain are both NATO members. The prospect of a confrontation between the two would involve not only a divided and fractious EU, but the United States.

It is a measure of the dramatic deterioration in relations between the imperialist powers that it appear that sections of the British bourgeoisie are calculating openly on the possibility of US backing for military action against Spain.

Late Sunday, former Royal Navy commander Rear-Admiral Chris Parry told the *Telegraph*, "We could cripple Spain in the medium term and I think the Americans would probably support us too."

"In terms of military capability we would vastly outnumber them and our capacity to do them harm is far greater."

Parry's statement—and Howard's bellicose posture—flows from their estimation of President Donald Trump's open declarations of support for Brexit and for the break-up of the EU, which he has described as a German-dominated economic competitor to the US. Trump has in the past also thrown a question mark over the US commitment to NATO and the position of his government is still that the European powers must sharply increase military spending in order to ensure that the US continues to honour Article 5 of the NATO treaty—committing member states to mutual defensive action.

Recklessness is not confined to the British ruling elite. Spain's Popular Party heads a minority government, formed after months of electoral deadlock that is enforcing even deeper austerity. Its decision to push the issue of Gibraltar's sovereignty now comes alongside statements by Spain's Foreign Minister, Alfonso Dastis, that it will not block Scotland's membership of the EU—in the event that a second referendum on Scottish independence from the UK is successful.

Moreover, the decision by the EU to include Gibraltar in its negotiating stance with the UK is a sharp warning of the centrifugal national forces tearing apart the European and global economy.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has ruled out May's

demands that talks over the terms of Brexit take place in tandem with negotiations on its future trading relations with the bloc, while EU leaders insist that the UK must pay up to £60 billion in the final "divorce settlement." A senior EU official told the *Guardian* that the EU was standing up for its members' interests and "That means Spain now."

In the UK, Liberal Democrat leader Tim Fallon accused Howard of "sabre-rattling," while Labour's Emily Thornberry criticised his "inflammatory" remarks. But no section of the bourgeoisie can be entrusted with opposing the slide into nationalist reaction and war.

Calling on May to draw up a plan to protect British citizens, Liberal Democrat Foreign Affairs spokesman Tom Brake said, "It is our obligation to support our overseas territories, and any attempt to brush off the importance of Gibraltar would be a dereliction of duty that would leave Margaret Thatcher spinning in her grave."

This applies especially to the Labour Party. Just as in 1983 when its backing for the Falklands/Malvinas War enabled Thatcher to win a second term of office, Labour is lining up behind the nationalist campaign over Gibraltar.

While Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn remained silent, the party's Brexit secretary, Keir Starmer, "emphasised that it is vital that the sovereignty of Gibraltar is protected and that the interests of British citizens in Gibraltar are safeguarded."

In its statement, "For an active boycott of the Brexit referendum!" the Socialist Equality Party explained that to combat the descent into nationalism, militarism and war, the only way forward for workers in Britain and across the continent was the fight for the United Socialist States of Europe, as part of a revolutionary offensive of the working class. Howard's comments, and the response to them, underscore the urgency of such a struggle.



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