

The Rock now political molehill.

Gibraltar is once again attracting the attention of the Spanish press after nearly three years in which the issue of Spain's claim to sovereignty over the peninsula has been at the bottom of the Foreign Ministry file.

Gibraltar's Chief Minister, Major Peliza, has called a snap election for June 23, shortly before the Spanish Foreign Minister's visit to London for discussions with Sir Alec Douglas-Home. Officially-inspired Spanish press comment varies from restrained indignation to dry optimism about a possible Anglo-Spanish solution.

No doubt Spanish comment and Spanish reaction to the election in the last colony in Europe — as the Rock is described here — will increase in length and emotional intensity during the coming weeks. But there are indications that an increasing number of Spaniards are becoming almost as apathetic towards Gibraltar as the British.

The Spanish democratic Opposition, outlawed and penalised though it is, but still representative of a growing number of Spanish citizens, from Left-wing Socialists to Right-wing conservative Christian democrats, are fully agreed on their attitude towards the Rock.

They consider it totally insignificant.

Virtually all Spaniards agree that the Rock is or should be, geographically, historically, and according to international law,

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an integral part of the Spanish peninsula. But Spanish democrats give priority to more vital problems, such as the ending of the authoritarian regime and the creation of a liberal Constitution.

In a free and democratic Spain, they believe, the Gibraltar problem would solve itself. Indeed they fear that if any agreement between the United Kingdom and General Franco's Government over Gibraltar is reached, it will only help to bolster the regime.

However, there are signs of optimism in official quarters that some face-saving solution to the Gibraltar problem may be worked out. When Sir Alec paid a two-day official visit to Madrid last February, there was a great deal of wishful thinking about what most neutral observers dismissed as virtually a non-event.

The British Foreign Secretary expressed some polite views such as, "No problem is insoluble," and "It is better to sit round a table and discuss. . . ." And the return trip of Spain's Foreign Minister, Señor Lopez Bravo to London was also arranged. But no concrete suggestions as to how the Gibraltar problem might be solved were ever advanced by Britain.

Rather the impression was that Britain hoped the status of the Rock would be shelved for an indefinite period, and not allowed to interfere with an improvement in Anglo-Spanish

relations — particularly where trade is concerned.

Spaniards hope, and the Gibraltarians fear, that a compromise acceptable to Spain may be in sight. The basis of the compromise would be that Britain would recognise Spanish sovereignty over the Rock in exchange for a "lease" from Spain for the 2½ square mile territory.

Major Bob Peliza, who has described such a proposition as turning Britain into a tenant instead of the landlord, angrily protests against any such "sell-out."

Major Bob's ideas about the future of the Rock are more embarrassing to Westminster than irritating to Madrid. He ousted Sir Joshua Hassan as Chief Minister in the last Gibraltar elections on his policy of integration. He would like to see Gibraltar become an integral part of the UK virtually another English county, with its own MPs.

With a majority of one in the Gibraltar House of Assembly, he decided to call an election for June 23, one year early, ostensibly because of the defection of one of his more wobbly supporters, Major Alfred Gache, Minister of Commerce and Economic Development.

Spaniards are convinced, however, that the election is designed to show the anti-Spanish, "British we are, British we stay" attitude of the Gibraltarians and thus sabotage the Lopez Bravo-Home talks in

July. The Spaniards are probably correct.

But there is, no doubt, a lot of fighting within the tiny, claustrophobic world of Gibraltar parish pump politics. Sir Joshua Hassan used to have the support of most of the dockyard workers, but now, under the active and efficient leadership of Mr John Cousins (Frank's son), their vote seems to be swinging over to Major Bob.

The Major, with the help of British subsidies, is apparently quite content to grant wage increases to Gibraltar's labour force. And Gibraltar's labour force seems quite happy with the situation as it is.

Not all Gibraltar's businessmen are so happy. There is also a small group of doves, by no means admirers of General Franco, who believe that the Rock cannot continue indefinitely to be cut off from the rest of Spain. In fact there is an important section of the 20,000 "Rock Scorpions" who want to end the siege and come to a working agreement with Spain.

Spain, even under Franco, would doubtless be prepared to guarantee the existing state of autonomy which Gibraltar enjoys, and an opening of the frontier would benefit the Gibraltarians in the long term.

But those who advocate any type of deal with Spain are frightened to open their mouths. "Democracy" on the Rock is as peculiar as many other drolleries of that ana-chronistic little enclave.