

Your Excellency, Mr. Speaker, it is a great honour to lead the response from the floor of the House on the occasion of its ceremonial opening, for the fourth consecutive time. And it gives me particular pleasure to do so on this, the first occasion on which we do so as Gibraltar's constitutional Parliament, as opposed to legislative assembly.

We have already seen some of the changes today: the way the speaker is appointed; the fact that we now have a Minister for Justice who has to swear a special oath, that has been sworn here today for the first time; and the fact that all 17 members of the House here today have been elected by the people of Gibraltar. These are just some of the many results of our new Constitution, which have placed Gibraltar and the UK in a constitutional relationship with each other that is modern and non colonial in nature, and 'fit for purpose' given the desire of the overwhelming majority of Gibraltarians to retain our Constitutional and sovereignty links with Britain.

Indeed, Your Excellency, one of the new Constitution's virtues is precisely that it achieves maximum possible self government of Gibraltar by its people, government and parliament, while at

the same time preserving unaltered the Sovereignty of Her Majesty the Queen, as Queen of Gibraltar.

Beyond the issue of Sovereignty, the new Constitution entrusts to the UK the responsibility of the conduct of our external affairs and defence.

These new Constitutional arrangements provide a proper and efficient basis for the continuing social and economic development of a self governing Gibraltar, consistently with our right to self determination and other political rights and aspirations as a people in modern Europe.

Under this new Constitution Gibraltar has 'moved on' to a relationship with the UK that is not colonial in nature. This is a fact and a reality. We must be careful, in seeking recognition of this fact by others, not to remain, by our own political discourse and actions, in an eternal political trap, from which we can only be released by or with the consent of those who deny our political rights and aspirations as a people, or by those who have consistently over many decades refused to help us exercise those rights, and possibly never will.

We have to be bold and enlightened enough to distinguish between the factual reality of the nature of our political relationship with the UK, and our consequent international status, on the one hand

(which are matters of fact) and, on the other hand, the willingness of others to recognise and acknowledge those realities by reference to their own political views, positions, aspirations or antiquated criteria. But we must not ourselves elevate these latter things to the status of gospel. That would condemn us and our future generations to stagnation in the political evolution of our people and homeland out of colonial status.

Your Excellency, the Government will continue to seek the greatest possible degree of normalisation in our relations, friendship and mutual co operation with Spain. Thus we will remain boldly, imaginatively and constructively committed to the trilateral Forum of Dialogue.

There is much, mainly political, that divides us from Spain. But there is also much, mainly cultural that we share and have always shared, not least regional culture. In this context, the Government warmly welcomes, and will facilitate the desire of the Spanish Instituto Cervantes to establish a centre in Gibraltar.

One of the things that we share with Spain is the desire to enhance the economic, and thus social prosperity of the whole region. In this endeavour, the existence of differences in our economic

models, whether they be fiscal in nature, or that our economies are based on different economic activities or the fact that we do them in different ways, does not render one or the other of our different economic models illegitimate, simply by virtue of that difference. This is especially so, when many of those differences are evident in many other parts of the world, Europe and indeed the Iberian peninsular.

Your Excellency, Mr Speaker, I foresee that, in addition to the usual political 'cut and thrust' and routine business of this House, we shall during these four years be engaged, as a parliament in important work to modernise and reform important aspects of the ways democracy functions in Gibraltar.

We must review all aspects of our voting system, including eligibility rules, our postal and absentee voting system, our electoral registration system whereby a new register has to be created each time. We have to consider whether we should now have an Electoral Commission. We need to consider the case for some sort of acceptable regulation of the conduct and use of public opinion polls, as happens in some other democratic countries. We need to reform and modernise the

way this House conducts its business. And, following the possibility to do so included in the new Constitution, we must consider whether we wish to increase the size of this House, in terms of the number of Members, to create a back bench on both sides of the House, as a means of establishing a more gradual and conventional way into politics in Gibraltar, and perhaps even enhance the quality of Parliamentary debate and accountability.

For all of these purposes, I intend to seek the early creation of Select Committees of this House in order to reflect upon, consider and consult widely on these important issues, with a view to seeking the greatest possible degree of consensus before bringing legislation to this House during the first half of this term of office.

Your Excellency, I am grateful and glad that you have noticed and recognised the very high standards to which we practice democracy in Gibraltar, both in political and electoral terms. This has always been a feature of our lives in Gibraltar, despite the fact that it is so often the contrary in very small countries. This is just one of the many reasons that exist to render unrealistic and unsustainable the view expressed by some that we

are not a people worthy of the right to self determination.

Finally, I welcome back to the House those members, including you, Mr. Speaker, who were members of it before the recent general elections. I give a special welcome to those members who are new to the House. We shall no doubt engage politically in the best of our gladiatorial Parliamentary tradition, which in my view, and contrary to the view expressed by some, is good for democracy. But this should not, and does not prevent us from having cordial and courteous relations, and at a personal level, even friendships.

And I express warm personal and parliamentary farewell, good wishes for the future and thanks to those members, on both sides of the previous House, who are not in it now, for their contribution to our political process, and for their parliamentary comradeship over the years.