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Opposition should remember that they created the fishing problem in the first place

The Leader of the Opposition Mr Feetham may very well believe that he is doing a service to Gibraltar by undermining the position of its Government in the Spanish press on an issue of national importance. This is up to him. The Government reiterate its regret that Mr Feetham chose to pursue this course of action as opposed to continue the debate inside Gibraltar itself.

It is important to bear in mind that the present situation has come about because of the way in which the then GSD Government mishandled the fishing dispute in 1999 and pretended to have solved it by striking a deal which allowed Spanish fishermen to fish in breach of the Nature Protection Act. It is all very well for Mr Feetham to argue at this late juncture that all that needs to be done now is to change the law. He has not explained why GSD failed to do it themselves between 1999 and 2011 and why they chose instead to effectively suspend the application of the law to Spanish fishermen by allowing them to use fishing equipment which remained illegal in Gibraltar.

The GSD Government laid the foundations for the existing problem in the first place and they have no right to point the finger at anyone else.

There is moreover, no evidence that there is any more fishing now than there used to be before. This was simply not measured by the previous administration in a coherent and organized manner. What is clear is that the situation degenerated after the designation by Spain of a Site of Community Importance inside Gibraltar waters and that this happened under the watch of the GSD Government and at the same time as they were entertaining the then Foreign Secretary Miguel Angel Moratinos in the Trilateral Forum.

This designation, which both the UK and Gibraltar continue to reject, is the most serious challenge to British sovereignty over the waters around the Rock in 300 years.

It is against this backdrop that the present PP Government has sought to exert jurisdiction in British Gibraltar Territorial Waters. This is not new either. It will be recalled that the matter became so serious that the previous Chief Minister asked boat owners to shoot a flare gun if they were approached by the Guardia Civil. There were also a number of tense stand-offs in the Bay between the law enforcement agencies of Gibraltar and those of

Spain. These incidents culminated in the well known Civil Guard incursion inside the Port of Gibraltar and onto the land of Gibraltar itself.

The present Government have therefore inherited this situation because the previous Government preferred to patch things up in 1999 through an understanding with Spanish fishermen which purported to allow them to operate outside the law. It will be recalled that, ten years later, in 2009 the GSD Government identified the need to improve the maritime assets of the Royal Gibraltar Police and then did nothing about it for the next two years. This Government has already provided two new interceptor launches, a new larger patrol vessel and a second large vessel that is also on the way. Assets for other maritime agencies are also in the pipeline. The GSLP/Liberal Government was also keen to facilitate greater cooperation and coordination at sea between the RGP and the Gibraltar Defence Police, something that had proved a bone of contention in the days of the GSD administration. The reality is that this Government has done more in less time with regard to the provision of assets than the GSD ever did when they were in Government, which means that the RGP are now in a better position than ever to enforce the law.

In the meantime, Mr Feetham and the GSD are free to criticise the policies of the Government in Gibraltar, in Spain or wherever they like. However, they do so at the risk of giving encouragement to those who want to use any excuse to undermine Gibraltar and at the peril of exposing their political hypocrisy of arguing the opposite in opposition to their position when they were in government.