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**PRESS RELEASE**

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**CM MEETS ALL SPANISH POLITICAL FORCES EXCEPT PP & UPD**

The Chief Minister has returned to Gibraltar today after a successful visit to Seville and Madrid.

During the visit Mr Picardo met with almost all political forces in Spain and, in particular, held a lengthy meeting and dinner with senior members of the leadership of the PSOE to further the already established links between that party and the GSLP which Mr Picardo leads.

The Chief Minister's visit to Spain was followed by the national press in that country, in particular the right wing newspaper ABC which disclosed many of the meetings (which HMGOG did not do until the end of the visit) in an attempt, apparently co-ordinated with the ruling Partido Popular, to pressure parties not to see Mr Picardo. In the end, the tactic did not work and Mr Picardo was able to hold lengthy and detailed meetings with all Spanish political parties with parliamentary representation in Madrid except for the PP and minority opposition party Union, Progreso y Democracia, ("UPyD").

During his visit, Mr Picardo also accepted an invitation to appear on "Espejo Publico" a daily current affairs programme on Antena 3.

The Chief Minister, Hon Fabian Picardo MP, said: "It is important for Gibraltar to get across its message to all shades of political opinion in Spain. I sought meetings with all political parties in Spain whilst the Deputy Chief Minister worked on meeting with newly elected Members of the European Parliament and developing the Gibraltar presence in Brussels. In Madrid the Partido Popular have once again shown in their public statements that they are not interested in any dialogue with us by entirely rejecting our request for a meeting, without even the courtesy of replying to our request. UPyD originally agreed to meet, but appear to have felt unable to stand up to the pressure applied by PP and its media satellites.

Despite reports to the contrary in some sectors of the Spanish media, however, all other political parties were very willing to meet, although some were concerned to throw the media "off their trail" in doing so. I would therefore describe the visit to Seville and Madrid as extraordinarily successful in allowing me to put Gibraltar's point of view across to parliamentary representatives and decision makers.

I was delighted to meet with Izquierda Unida's representatives both in Seville and in Madrid. In Madrid, this was the first of the meetings I held in the Congress of People's Deputies, which I believe is the first time a Chief Minister has been invited to the heart of Spain's Parliament. The representatives of Izquierda Unida made the point that the party believes in the human rights of individuals to decide their own future and considers that the only way in which Gibraltar could ever be Spanish would be by the Gibraltarians being persuaded to choose that option freely and democratically. We enjoyed a lengthy discussion about the importance of frontier fluidity for workers and for all individuals who wished to access Gibraltar and Spain across the frontier. I also spent time explaining the transparency of the Gibraltar financial services sector and how exchange of information rules apply between Gibraltar and Spain.

The time I spent with representatives of Esquerra Republicana included a discussion on current issues in Catalunya. This was also the theme of the meetings with representatives of Convergencia y Union. In respect of both these encounters, however, the main purpose of the meeting was the opportunity to explain in detail Gibraltar's concerns about the absence of any meaningful dialogue with the Spanish Government as a result of the PP's decision to abandon the Trilateral Forum for Dialogue and the failure to date to agree the formula for any "ad hoc" talks to take place. I insisted on not being drawn at all on the subject of the situation in Catalunya.

The meeting with PNV's Snr Aitor Esteban was very useful in allowing me to explain Gibraltar's concerns in respect of the absence of dialogue and to put right many of the other frequent misconceptions about our economy. Mr Esteban left the Congress Chamber whilst the debate on the EU Commission appointments was on-going in order to hold our meeting in his parliamentary office. This led to the Spanish Prime Minister, Snr Rajoy, replying to the points Mr Esteban had made in his absence and joking that he was better company than me, highlighting and raising further as he did so the fact my visit was taking place and the prominence of it. PP parliamentary spokesman, Snr Alfonso Alonso, has similarly earlier made a reference to my visit in chiding an Izquierda Unida member of Parliament.

I also held a meeting with representatives from the mixed group (or "Grupo Mixto") of minority parties which included the remaining political forces in the parliament. Again this meeting was described by them as very informative and helped to provide them with information beyond the many distortions or outright lies they are often told about Gibraltar. They have sought to remain briefed and have asked to receive further and current information about the average length of queues and other data of the type we now regularly share with UK parliamentarians, the EU Commission and the relevant committees of the United Nations. We shall be providing that information across the board to all Spanish Parliamentarians who might wish to receive it.

The main meetings held were with the principal party of opposition in Spain, PSOE, with which I enjoy a deep relationship of fluid and constant communication at the very highest levels in La Linea, Seville and Madrid. Yesterday's meeting was held over dinner given the lengthy debate ensuing in the Parliament during the course of the day and the senior level of the representatives I met with. The dinner meeting was attended by the immediate ex-Vice President and ex-President of the Junta de Andalucia, Snr Manuel Chaves and Juan Moscoso member of the current Federal Executive Committee with responsibility for European Union matters, both of whom I know well and have met on a number of occasions before. We have of course agreed to continue the close and detailed communication established with the top levels of the party.

Importantly, in addition to the meetings with Parliamentarians, I gave a lengthy interview to Espejo Publico on Antena 3, where questioning was very aggressive and allowed me to

challenge all of the many lies repeatedly told about Gibraltar, as well as meeting the editorial boards of two newspaper groups. In Seville I met with the proprietors and regional editorial panel of the established "Grupo Jolly". In Madrid I had a rare opportunity to meet with the Editor and part of the editorial team of the prestigious El Pais newspaper who hosted me to lunch at their offices. This was a real privilege and a chance to talk openly about politics in and between Gibraltar and Spain with some of the top opinion formers in Madrid.

Although the past 48 hours have been packed with meetings and hard work, I do think Gibraltar has once again taken major steps forward in demonstrating that our position of seeking dialogue is reasonable, modern and mature and is slowly being appreciated by an ever larger part of the Spanish people.

I nonetheless sincerely regret the statements made today by the Mayor of Algeciras, Snr Ignacio Landaluce, referring to all who met with me as "traitors". I believe that Snr Landaluce should reflect on these remarks and consider how his attitude does nothing to assist in the establishment of better relations between Gibraltar and Spain.

There is still much to do, and many plans are being developed to do more, but we are making progress."