The GIB case

All right, Spain. You’ve asked for this.

You’ve issued one of your five-yearly threats to seize, impound, disrupt, tax or otherwise penalise Gibraltar and its residents on the grounds that this small bit of rock is attached to the bigger bit of rock you call home.

For some, this provides irrefutable proof that Gibraltar is Spanish. Presumably in the same way that China is Russian and Denmark belongs to Germany.

Not letting logic get in his way, your foreign minister has declared ‘the party’s over’ and threatened 100 euro fines for people crossing the border, banning flights from Spanish air space and generally started behaving like Franco in a particularly belligerent mood.

Very well. Let’s look at the facts, shall we?

1. Gibraltar is about as Spanish as pie and chips. The first recorded occupants were Lebanese traders , followed by Germans, Romans, and the Islamic empire. The first castle was built by a Berber sultan and it wasn’t captured by the Spanish until 1462.

2. Twelve years later you sold it.

3. You spent 200 years or so invading much of the world, killing millions of Amerindians with smallpox , and burning and torturing those that survived because they didn’t think eating a thin bit of flour and water was the same thing as eating the body of a man they’d never met .

4. You tried to do the same here, first by marriage and then by invasion . Not the best way to make friends.

5. You did nothing very much with Gib for two centuries and then lost it in a fight with us and the Dutch. The fight was about whether a French prince could succeed to the Spanish crown and thus rule half of Europe. Most of Europe didn’t like the idea, and you were invaded by pretty much everyone up to and including the Holy Roman Empire.

6. Unsurprisingly, you lost. We all signed the Treaty of Utrecht in which the French prince was allowed to have Spain so long as he promised to be nice and sign away a few things. Article X states: “The Catholic King does hereby, for himself, his heirs and successors, yield to the Crown of Great Britain the full and entire propriety of the town and castle of Gibraltar, together with the port, fortifications and forts hereunto belonging; and he gives up the said propriety to be held and enjoyed absolutely with all manner of right for ever, without any exception or impediment whatsoever.”

7. There’s not a lot of wriggle-room in that. Lawyers, eh?

8. What you gave us in 1714 was a 300-year-old Moorish castle, a medieval town and a fishing port. In the years since we have turned it into a naval base, a financial centre, tourist destination and online gaming base which turns over £650million a year and provides employment for 10,000 of your citizens. You’re welcome.

9. The last person who seriously laid claim to it is the fascist dictator you’d rather forget, and there were referendums in 1967 and 2002 which found 99% of the population wanted to remain British.

10. In 500 years of warring you’ve lost far more often than you’ve won and you have, most noticeably, consistently failed to win against us. You tried to seize Gibraltar by force twice in the 18th century and failed miserably on each attempt, since we smashed your Armada in 1588 it’s never been the same since.

Considering all this, it is entirely understandable that with your economy on its arse, suicides endemic following eviction and a government not so much beleaguered as halfway to hell and still digging you might feel the need to hark back to the days of empire and rattle the old sabre a bit.

You are though on rather shaky ground, not just because you signed a contract and the 30,000 Gibraltarians want you in charge of them about as much as they want to contract the ebola virus.