

Absent presence

Mourning the Queen on Gibraltar National Day

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'Are you still going to the beach?'

We are standing in Casemates Square, the usual location of Gibraltar's National Day rally. The square had been strewn only the day before with bunting and flags proudly displaying Gibraltar's national colours, red and white. As news broke of the death of Queen Elizabeth II, the decorations were hurriedly taken down. With the stage set in the process of being dismantled, the mood of anticipation was deflated. In its place, a sense of confusion: was it still appropriate to celebrate National Day in a time of mourning? Public events might be cancelled, but should you keep the restaurant reservations for lunch? Would people still go to the beach in the afternoon?

Gibraltar National Day, 10 September, marks the anniversary of the 1967 referendum in which Gibraltarians – by an overwhelming margin of 12,138 votes to 44 – voted to remain under British sovereignty with self-governing institutions rather than pass under Spanish sovereignty (Garcia 1994: 147-149) (Fig. 1). National Day itself is a somewhat more recent creation, having been instituted in 1992 by the newly formed Self Determination for Gibraltar Group against the backdrop of the then Chief Minister, Joe Bossano, directly petitioning the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization, making the case that the desire for free association with Britain was an exercise of Gibraltar's self-determination and an act of decolonization.

This case was not accepted, and Gibraltar remains on the UN list of non-self-governing territories to this day. The commemoration of this particular day – which was formally adopted as a national holiday in 1993 – has therefore always been an explicitly political and campaigning event as well as a day of national celebration (Haller 2000), an annual restatement of the demand that Gibraltar's self-determination be respected and not ignored in negotiations between Britain and Spain.

At first glance, Gibraltar National Day appears to be an anomaly. Many national days around the globe commem-

orate the day of independence from the colonial power; Gibraltar's is distinctive in commemorating the vote to *remain* a British territory. Yet this contrast is not as stark as it appears. Crucially, National Day is an annual return to a point in time when the population of Gibraltar declared their self-determination over the territory where they lived – self-determination which expresses loyalty while simultaneously insisting that the interests and democratic will of those living in Gibraltar are not merely an adjunct to British control of a 'military Rock' (Stanton 1996). The engagement with British national symbols is therefore crucial to this self-presentation of a people British by their own will and on their own terms – and there is no symbol greater than the Crown.

The death of the Queen two days before National Day created ritual uncertainty and a shift of mood. National Day events are occasions for the public demonstration of affection for and loyalty to the Crown. This theme would have been especially central during this Platinum Jubilee year of the Queen's reign. How best should this loyalty and affection be expressed while mourning her death?



Fig. 1. Sculpture by Ambrose Avellano commemorating the 1967 referendum and materializing the votes cast.

Fig. 2. Window display at Luis Photo; a portrait of the Queen, draped with a black ribbon to indicate mourning, takes centre stage in a display of photographs of previous National Day celebrations and depictions of the Rock itself.

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- Decorations in shopfronts and apartment balconies were either taken down altogether or hastily adjusted. Tiny flags of the United Kingdom and of Gibraltar were pulled down along their wooden sticks to appear at half-mast or otherwise adorned with black ribbons to indicate mourning. In the window of a photography studio, a framed portrait of Elizabeth II was draped with a black ribbon, nestled among paintings of the Rock of Gibraltar itself and photographs from previous National Days; a tribute to the late Queen sitting directly above an image of a banner pronouncing that 'The soil of Gibraltar should belong to no-one but the people of Gibraltar' (Fig. 2).
- Along Main Street, which Bryce Peake has described and analysed as a space of colonial façades and informal chat, tracing in the soundscape 'the co-existence of British loyalties and Spanish mannerisms' (Peake 2012: 171), the bustle of town life was unabated. A busker played the accordion; the chatter of people meeting along the way mingled with the sound of radios from shop doorways offering rolling news coverage of the aftermath of the Queen's death. Inevitably, many conversations turned to the 'sad news' and its impact on National Day. Near the Catholic cathedral, a young man and woman could be heard in heated debate, their friends looking on in amusement:
- 'Do you think that they should have cancelled National Day?'
- 'Yes, I think.'
- '¿Por qué?'
- 'It is out of respect to your Queen. People are sad.'
- 'If we asked her, do you think she would have wanted us to cancel it?'
- 'You like history? She is your Queen! She could have handed us over, you should be grateful.'
- 'But why cancel National Day?'
- '¡Ella es tu Reina!'
- Outside the Governor's Residence, flowers had been lain against the wall, and a queue had formed to sign an official book of condolence, slowly shuffling past a soldier of the Gibraltar Regiment mounting a ceremonial guard at the entrance. The queue attracted muted onlookers, while a steady stream of mopeds buzzed between the line and its audience.
- This coexistence of respectful silence and liveliness, expressions of mourning and the keenness to demonstrate and celebrate national identity represented not only the specific question of how (or whether) to celebrate National Day while still showing respect for the dead but also broader shifts in the social understanding of grieving. It had been 70 years since subjects of the British Crown were expected to mourn a monarch, and a lot has changed since then. Was it anachronistic to expect people to be 'morose' after a death?
- In asking what forms of mourning were appropriate, some people looked to the experience of loss in their own families: 'When my grandmother died, my dad told me, don't go around feeling miserable. Celebrate her life.' Such comments reflect a broader social shift in Britain over which the Queen ruled, recasting occasions of grief as celebrations of life and emphasizing joy found in the happy memories of the living rather than focusing on loss (see, e.g., Bailey & Walter 2016; Holloway et al. 2013). However, the extent to which such an approach could be applied to an institution such as the monarchy was clearly subject to debate, as could be heard when I joined a group drinking at the pub that evening.
- 'We were discussing whether the Queen would want us to call off national day. I think she'd say crack on.'
- 'This is older era, old blood. There's protocol. I respect that.'
- 'Fine, but the first thing Charles should do is say, no more of this. When I die, celebrate my life.'
- 'Not much to celebrate, is there? I'll have a shandy and go to bed early.'

Our Rock in hard times

Following the death of the Queen, public pronouncements placed particular emphasis on the special and reciprocal nature of the Queen's relationship with Gibraltar. As expressed by Chief Minister Fabian Picardo when signing the book of condolence and subsequently shared on social media, 'We were your Rock, and you were ours.'

Significantly, this was a relationship forged under the condition of absence. Elizabeth's only visit to Gibraltar as Queen was in May 1954 as part of the 1953-1954 Royal Tour of the Empire and Commonwealth. The visit is fondly recalled, often through memories passed on by parents or grandparents. As Dodds et al. (2007) note, the Queen's tour – which circumnavigated the planet – offered an opportunity for Britain to stitch together its global territories, strengthening their attachment to Britain and renewing connections to the imperial centre. But this power performance was not unidirectional: it also was an opportunity for loyalty to be demonstrated and performed (Constantine 2006), and in Gibraltar, for the civilian population to express their own British identity as more than merely incidental to the Rock as a military outpost.

The houses festooned with flags and the crowds that turned out to greet the Queen could be seen as a local appropriation of the Crown (Dodds et al. 2007: 383), expressing loyalty to an entity that transcended those institutions of the British state that might run contrary to the Gibraltar population's interests. Yet the visit met with strong objections from Franco and the Spanish government and precipitated angry anti-British protests in cities across Spain (Garcia 1994: 78-81). Having re-stimulated hostility towards the British presence in Gibraltar and tensions around its sovereignty (Dodds et al. 2007: 388), the 1954 Royal Visit rendered any future visits by the Queen diplomatically poisonous.

Quigley observes that 'the fundamental idea underlying kingship is the separation of one human being from others' (2005: 4). The relationship of Gibraltar to the Queen for almost the entirety of her reign was one of separation: the power of an absent presence. Of course, Quigley here refers to separation in a more general sense: to belong to all people is to be estranged from specific social relations and set apart from the everyday. For Graeber and Sahlins (2017), such 'adverse sacralization' can ultimately render royalty an abstraction, sealed off from the world so much that it becomes removed from the exercise of any temporal power. The sense that the Queen should avoid Gibraltar for fear that it would spark geopolitical tensions is precisely a demonstration of this sealing off, avoiding contaminating controversy by keeping her out of trouble and leaving foreign policy to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

But such abstraction also has its own potency as an object of desire. Nairn (1988) argues that royalty's dual nature of being human like everybody else and yet fundamentally super-ordinary in their detachment and significance is itself a source of glamour. Into this space of familiarity and yet ultimate unknowability enters a 'mass illusion of intimacy' (ibid.: 44), a reservoir of dreams and fantasies about 'what they're really like' that can never be exhausted because we can never really know. Nairn notes that such intimacy is sustained by (ritualized but comfortingly familiar) practices of visitation and touch (ibid.: 74). Yet in Gibraltar, it is built on the denial of that touch.

Longed for but kept away, the Queen's absent presence generated a particularly intense expression of loyalty which sought to bridge that gap. This loyalty, it can be argued, had distinct characteristics: first, in bringing into focus that which denied them the Queen's presence, and,



Fig. 3. Window display at Express Repairs, with the celebratory flags set to half-mast.

Fig. 4. The steps at Devil's Gap Road were originally painted with the Union Flag and 'ERII' in the run-up to the sovereignty referendum of 1967 and have been repainted from time to time in the years since.



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second, in intensifying a specifically local reappropriation of the Queen.

The sense of intimacy under conditions of absence is conveyed clearly in a statement made by the Chief Minister the day after the Queen's death, on the evening before National Day. (Capitalization is retained from the official press release [Government of Gibraltar 2022]; note in particular the divinizing capitalization of pronouns.)

As She had said of Her own husband, the Duke of Edinburgh, She was our STRENGTH AND STAY. Our Rock in hard times. And in all Her time on the throne, Her Majesty was consistently known to have cared deeply for Her people in Gibraltar. We cherished Her visit in 1954. A visit that left an indelible mark on our small, then emerging, nation and carved between our Sovereign and the Gibraltarians a SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP without equal. In its own way, Her visit cast the die for the years ahead of us in a way that has served to define us and further cement our loyalty to the Crown.

In previous fieldwork in Gibraltar, it was frequently put to me that the population were 'overdue a visit' from the Queen – a visit that now would never come. Yet blame here did not attach to the Crown itself, but to the forces that prevented the Queen from being with her people. In particular, it brought British identity into focus in opposition to an antagonistic Spanish government: they were kept apart 'because of Franco's temper tantrums'; 'because the Spanish insisted upon pressing their ludicrous claims'. The idea that the 1954 visit 'cast the die for the years ahead' gestures to the Royal Visit as a point of origin for Spain's increasingly hostile measures against Gibraltar, which stimulated an identity of resistance. Pointing to that unfolding history and the 'hard times' also tacitly highlights the border closure enacted by Spain from 1969 in retaliation for Gibraltar's referendum, which continued until it was partially lifted for foot traffic in 1982 (and lifted to motor traffic in 1985). Gibraltar's distinctive British identity was intensified under the experience of being cut off from the world on a 2½ square mile peninsula (Martínez del Campo et al. 2019) – the sense of having been severed from the Queen by Spanish hostility was symbolic of a more general enforced isolation.

At the same time, it contributed to a sense of distrust for successive British governments who felt that allowing the Queen to visit Gibraltar would be too great a risk, with some even going so far as to use the word 'cowardice' to describe this stance. Therefore, the Queen's absence also served as a vivid reminder that Gibraltar's interests might well be secondary to wider foreign policy goals. In such a context, we see the local appropriation of the Crown (Dodds et al. 2007) and its recasting as a specific direct relationship: self-governance and a distinctive Gibraltarian identity expressing the territory's place 'as part of the British family of nations' – as distinct from being merely a location of British strategic interest or diplomatic embarrassment – through the population's loyalty to the monarch. These developments are referenced in the Chief Minister's statement:

Each step in our journey to greater self-government to date was established and entrenched in Her time on the throne. We were emancipated to the autonomy we have today in the glorious Second Elizabethan era.

An obvious sign of this recasting was the increasingly ubiquitous reference to the Queen specifically as 'Queen of Gibraltar' (and, upon her death, to Charles as 'King of Gibraltar'). This usage had grown in prominence, particu-

larly since 2010, when it first appeared on coinage. It is itself an oppositional statement and sign of the agonistic basis of contemporary Gibraltarian identity, '*Reino de Gibraltar*' having been one of the historic titles pertaining to the Spanish monarchy. At the same time, it claims a direct and specific relationship with the Crown and, therefore, with Britishness that transcends Gibraltar's relationship with the British government and highlights the population's autonomy to declare loyalty on their own terms.

Articulating loyalty

National Day serves as an occasion to articulate this politics of loyalty. It does so, usually, in the presence of an audience from the British institutions of state – members of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Gibraltar are invited to sit on the stage during the political rally – and with the expectation that some of the speeches will be reported or attract a reaction in Spain. This opportunity had been lost for the previous two years due to the Covid pandemic. What, then, was the correct way to articulate loyalty now?

The statement from the Chief Minister concluded by urging people to enjoy National Day and dedicate it to the memory of the Queen – a slight shift in mood from the rapid cancellation of National Day events announced the previous day.

This year we will be a nation that will still be red and white. But we will be as sad as we are proud. In great measure as a result of our SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP with Queen Elizabeth and the Royal Family, we shall be no less red, white and blue. No less red, white and proud. And no less red, white and free. Because that FREEDOM is what the Elizabethan era has delivered to us.

National Day arrived, and while the streets were less crowded than in usual years, there was nevertheless a flow of people marking the day by wearing Gibraltar's national colours of red and white. Wearers of red t-shirts bearing slogans like 'Not only am I perfect, I'm Gibraltarian too' stood chatting with people who had paired Liverpool, Arsenal or Manchester United shirts with white trousers and shoes. Each person donned whatever they had to hand to embody the national symbols in their own way.

When brought together in Casemates Square, the effect of all of these individuals is to create a thousands-strong living flag, but this year there was no sense of convergence. Instead, the lack of ritual focus sustained a glaring absence at the heart of proceedings. Some wore a black ribbon on their t-shirt to mark their mourning for the Queen. There were also occasional additions of blue to the red and white, pivoting Gibraltar's colours towards British colours, and, more generally, a preponderance of British flags, particularly Platinum Jubilee flags bearing the Queen's image.

The loss of structure to the day was clear. Ordinarily, clusters of families and friends build into a larger and larger mass of people in Casemates Square by midday, coming together as a national body in shared attention to the articulation of identity in the political rally. After this, people make their way to restaurants with family and friends and to gatherings on the beach. Without the usual collective focus, there was a break in this flow of gathering people as a national body, the unity of which is then carried into separate groups of family and friends. Nevertheless, the shared symbolism remained. As people sat outside restaurants enjoying lunches in the sun, they took up the Chief Minister's request to raise a glass in memory of the Queen and to toast the new King. Over on Gibraltar's Eastside, the flags of Britain and Gibraltar flew over the gazebos and barbecues people had set up on the beach, and people relaxed in red and white shorts and bikinis.

Not everybody felt in a celebratory mood, however. Some made it clear that they would be staying at home.

Others did not feel it was appropriate to dress up. One example of this refusal was particularly striking: a ex-serviceman, asked by friends why he wasn't wearing red and white, responded 'I'm not Polish, I'm not an Arsenal supporter.' Pressed further, he explained, 'I've just lost my boss, she's the only boss I've ever had.' Turning to me afterwards, he raised his eyebrows and shrugged. Not only did he feel it was inappropriate to be in a party mood, the day also raised questions about the sincerity of Gibraltar's nationalistic displays: 'As someone who served, I've got to ask myself, are they royalists always, or just royalists when it suits them?'

God save the King

The following day, after Mass at the Catholic Cathedral – concluding with prayers for the repose of the Queen's soul and the announcement of a solemn Requiem Mass for her – many of the congregation make their way along Main Street to the Governor's Residence. A crowd has gathered for the Proclamation of King Charles III. The pavement is jammed, and children climb up onto the street furniture and onto the Supreme Court wall to get a slightly elevated view. Talk is of a 'new era', but also of the continuity that the Crown brings, projected into the future. 'Now Charles is King, then we will have William, and then we will have George. We know how it's going to be.'

A military parade of the Royal Gibraltar Regiment makes its way along the road, followed by Royal Navy personnel and the Royal Gibraltar Police. The band and the marching feet offer a public display of Gibraltar's identity and significance as a fortress, but in ways that have shifted somewhat from the smothering presence described by Stanton (1996). For one thing, it is a significantly diminished military presence.

But it is also noteworthy that Gibraltar's own home defence unit leads the military pageantry – the symbolism of the military, too, has been appropriated by the population. They stand to attention opposite the Governor's Residence. The Governor emerges onto the balcony, accompanied by the Chief Minister and representatives of Gibraltar's civil society and different religious communities. He is greeted by fanfare, followed by a segment of the national anthem from the regimental band. (Each time the national anthem is played, some in the crowd sing along softly, the shift to 'God save the King' still unfamiliar in their mouths.)

The Governor reads out the proclamation that 'The Prince Charles Philip Arthur George is now, by the Death of our late Sovereign of Happy Memory, become our only lawful and rightful Liege Lord Charles the Third.' A 21-gun salute resounds from a battery in the Rock above. The crowd stands hushed except for the voices of some of the children ('It's scaring the birds. It's scaring the dogs and the birds'). After another rendition of the national anthem, the Governor leads a 'three cheers for His Majesty the King', each cheer a loud roar.

Loyalty is reaffirmed, but loyalty is neither passive nor static. Hocart asks, 'when at the conclusion of every public function we pray to God to save the King ... are we quite as free agents as we imagine ourselves to be?' The meaning of such a phrase is, after all, 'buried under the ruins of the past' (Hocart 1927: 28-29). Yet in Gibraltar, as we have seen, the Crown does not simply hold people in thrall to an ancient meaning; there is an intentionality to this politics of loyalty and its articulation. New challenges are emerging for Gibraltar, not least in navigating a Brexit that 96 per cent of its population voted against (Haller 2021). We will see in the future to what extent and to what end Gibraltarians seek a champion in the absent presence of the Crown. ●