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## Royal connections: the Spanish state visit to the United Kingdom

It has long been noted that monarchies can make a very positive contribution to their nations' foreign policies. This is partly because royal families (particularly European ones) form a long-standing, tightly-knit network of relatives and acquaintances who can bridge the gap between national governments in times of need. This has proved particularly useful in countries such as Spain and the United Kingdom, whose official bilateral relations have so often been strained.

Traditionally, dynastic marriages were the most powerful diplomatic instrument available to monarchs. This explains Catherine of Aragon's marriage to Arthur (in 1501) and later to his younger brother Henry VIII (in 1509), and Philip II's betrothal to their daughter Mary (in 1554), which made him king of England until her death in 1558. Four centuries later, the same logic inspired King Alfonso XIII's state visit to London in 1905, which led to his marriage to Princess Ena of Battenberg, one of Queen Victoria's forty-two grandchildren, who thereby became Queen Victoria Eugenia of Spain in 1906.

Spain's English queen was extremely unhappy in her adopted country, not least because of her difficult relations with her mother-in-law, María Cristina, who flaunted her enthusiasm for the Central Powers during World War I; although Ena's political influence on the king was limited, she did her utmost to ensure Spain's neutrality in the conflict. Sadly, her warnings about General Primo de Rivera, who came to power in 1923 with the king's tacit support, fell on deaf ears.

The queen's influence also explains her youngest son's decision to join Dartmouth naval college as a cadet following the royal family's departure from Spain in 1931. Don Juan remained in the Royal Navy for several years, and it was while serving on HMS Enterprise, anchored in Bombay, that he received a telegramme from his father informing him that, in the wake of the renunciations of his brothers Alfonso and Jaime, he was the new Prince of Asturias.

Don Juan remained a keen anglophile all his life, but his son Juan Carlos, who was sent to live in Spain under General Franco's tutelage in 1948 at the age of ten, was brought up in a very different environment. The future king would later explain that 'for patriotic reasons I was predisposed against England and I refused to learn the language', much to the irritation of his grandmother and father, who sat him next to the Queen of England at lunch one day so that he would feel ashamed at only being able to converse with her in French. In spite of this, his English was still quite poor when he first met the future Queen Sofía at the Duke of York's wedding in 1961.

Though exiled in Lausanne, Ena continued to follow events in Spain with keen interest. In 1968 she returned to Madrid for the christening of the future Felipe VI, during which she famously urged Franco to make up his mind: 'Name a King of Spain. There are three of them. Choose. Do it while you are still alive; if not, there will be no King. This is the last and only request of your Queen'. A year later, Juan Carlos was duly proclaimed Franco's successor.

Due to the dictatorial nature of Franco's regime and the conflict over Gibraltar, Britain's relations with Spain remained uneasy. The British royal family tried to make up for this by inviting their Spanish relatives to events such as the Queen Mother's seventieth birthday in 1970, the Duke of Edinburgh's fiftieth birthday a year later, and Princess Anne's wedding in 1973. Over the years, the Queen ('Lilibet') became increasingly fond of Juan Carlos ('Juanito'), and did her best to improve his standing at home and abroad. One of his staunchest supporters in Britain was Earl Mountbatten, his second cousin twice removed, who succeeded in convincing Harold Wilson to meet him privately in 1972, despite the prime minister's long-standing hostility to the Franco regime. The future king also enjoyed the enthusiastic support of the British ambassador in Spain, Sir John Russell, who penned this excellent portrait of him in 1974: "Prince Juan Carlos is essentially a straightforward character, uncomplicated, honest to a fault, sincere, open and straight dealing –if anything perhaps a little innocent, although this is now starting to wear off. He is immensely conscientious and his duties take automatic precedence over everything else. By no means brilliant, the Prince is yet quite shrewd and endowed with a good measure of earthly common-sense which, I suspect, he got from his splendid, robust Battenberg grandmother. Add to this a naturally cheerful, outgoing disposition, an easily tickled sense of humour, unselfconscious tall good looks, considerable charm, a total lack of conceit or pomposity –and you have a very agreeable human being. A plodder, perhaps, rather than a flier, but a man by no means unfitted to the task ahead, a task before which a livelier imagination might with good reason quail".

The dictator's passing in 1975 removed a major obstacle to closer relations with Britain, and the Duke of Edinburgh made a point of attending Juan Carlos's proclamation ceremony, in the company of the presidents of France and Germany. The new king was initially anxious not to create the impression that his family ties with Britain would jeopardise the Spanish claim to Gibraltar, and was careful to reassert his support for this by-now traditional foreign policy goal in his proclamation speech. Meanwhile, the Spanish royals continued to visit

their British relatives in a private capacity, and greatly regretted not being able to attend Prince Charles and Lady Diana's wedding in 1981, on account of their choice of Gibraltar as the starting-point of their honeymoon, a decision that was apparently imposed on them by the Thatcher government.

It was the British government's agreement in 1984 to include the question of sovereignty in future talks on Gibraltar and the complete opening of the border crossing a year later that finally made possible the state visit to Britain by Juan Carlos and Sofia in April 1986, in the course of which he became the first European monarch ever to have addressed the assembled Houses of Parliament. In spite of referring to Gibraltar as a 'colonial relic' in his speech, the king was greeted with enthusiasm, to the extent that the speaker concluded his salutation with a resounding 'Viva el Rey! Viva España!' At the University of Oxford, where he received an honorary degree in Law, Juan Carlos was greatly amused to hear a description of his role in aborting the 1981 coup attempt read out in Latin by the public orator. I was sitting quite close to him in the Sheldonian Theatre at the time, and will never forget the mischievous look on his face.

In the wake of this royal visit, the Prince of Wales and his family stayed with the Spanish royals at Marivent Palace in Majorca over the summer, a visit they would repeat on three consecutive occasions. Given the media attention they attracted, these holidays probably did more for the improvement of Anglo-Spanish relations than years of diplomacy could ever have achieved. All of this encouraged Queen Elizabeth to carry out her own long-awaited state visit to Spain in October 1988, which proved a great success with the Spanish public. Like Juan Carlos, the Queen addressed Parliament, where she paid tribute to the king's role in the nation's remarkable transition to democracy. In October 1988, Juan Carlos was back at Windsor to receive the Order of the Garter; in return, the Queen of England was soon made a member of the Spanish Order of the Golden Fleece.

King Juan Carlos' abdication in June 2014 greatly saddened Queen Elizabeth, who had always regarded his reign as living proof of the highly positive contribution the monarchy could make to a nation's political development and international standing. Her concern about the future of the Spanish monarchy largely explains why she was so anxious to invite King Felipe VI and Queen Letizia to Britain, as well as her determination not to allow invitations made to other, more recent heads of state, stand in her way. Much to Buckingham's chagrin, however, political instability in both Spain and Britain led to the postponement of this eagerly-awaited state visit on two occasions.

A great deal has changed in the bilateral relationship since the previous state visit. In 1986, Spain had just joined the European Community, and had only very recently confirmed its membership of NATO in a highly controversial referendum. Both of these decisions have helped to strengthen the Anglo-Spanish connection almost beyond recognition during the past three decades, allowing for a far more balanced, mutually beneficial relationship. Spain continues to attract more British tourists than any other destination (an extraordinary 18 million in 2016), but Britain currently attracts over two million Spanish tourists every year

as well. Similarly, although there are at least 240,000 permanent UK residents in Spain (a figure that could be two or three times larger), of whom approximately half are of working age, Britain has attracted some 200,000 Spanish residents in recent years, most of whom are employed in the banking, health, education and service sectors, while some 10,000 of them are studying at British universities. What is more, today Britain is the main European destination of Spain's outward foreign direct investment, and Spanish companies such as Banco Santander, Telefonica (which owns O2), Ferrovial (which has a major stake in Heathrow, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Southampton airports) and Zara, the world's largest fashion retailer, employ some 150,000 Britons. Additionally, bilateral trade is worth more than €45 billion today, and Spain has enjoyed a large trade surplus with the UK since 2002.

Sadly, the Gibraltar dispute continues to stand in the way of a more satisfactory Anglo-Spanish relationship, and may well escalate in the course of Brexit negotiations. Like his British counterpart, the King of Spain is a constitutional monarch, and must therefore act in accordance with the foreign policy preferences of his democratically elected government. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that King Felipe will do his best to help Spanish authorities 'encapsulate' the dispute in such a way as to prevent it from undermining a bilateral relationship which has considerable untapped potential.

Given the uncertainties raised by the spectre of a 'hard Brexit', some observers wish the July 2017 state visit could have taken place in a more predictable environment. It could be argued, however, that it is precisely at times such as these that a state visit can prove particularly useful in highlighting the underlying strengths of the remarkable relationship that has emerged over the years between two very different -but curiously complementary- societies and their political institutions. As has occurred so often in the past, the royal families of both countries will once again demonstrate the monarchy's remarkable ability to act as a bridge between nations and peoples, and to communicate meaningful messages to their respective public opinions in times of uncertainty and growing unease about the future.

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