

## The UK Needs to Clean up Its Toxic Rhetoric on Brexit

Published on 18. April 2017 by [Jean Lambert](#)

Last month Prime Minister Theresa May triggered Article 50, signalling the start of the UK's exit from the European Union. Within just a matter of days, former Conservative Party leader Michael Howard managed to spark a diplomatic row with Spain by threatening the use of military force to protect British sovereignty over Gibraltar. Fortunately Donald Tusk, president of the European Council, arrived at Downing Street shortly afterwards to ease the simmering tensions.

We knew that Brexit negotiations were going to be painfully difficult. However, for a senior Conservative to roam onto such provocative diplomatic ground at this early stage of the discussion process is both irresponsible and damaging. It's easy for the Prime Minister to laugh off her colleague's remarks as "jaw jaw". But as we witnessed two weeks ago when the Royal Navy ordered a Spanish warship out of Gibraltar's disputed territorial waters, it doesn't take much for such throwaway comments to escalate into something more serious.

EU membership has been of vital importance in lessening tensions in the long-standing struggle between Spain and the UK over Gibraltar – thousands of frontier-workers now cross the border on a daily basis. 96% of Gibraltarians voted REMAIN.

Theresa May's nonchalant response to Howard's comments, combined with her unrelenting hard-line approach to Brexit, merely stokes the flames of such aggressive, toxic rhetoric. The Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, has also failed to denounce the remarks, suggesting either incompetence or collusion. Earlier this week, I have co-signed a letter calling on him to condemn Howard's comments in the strongest terms and with urgency.

So where do we go from here? It's critical that the government learns from these early mistakes and treads a more careful, diplomatic path throughout the complex negotiations.. This is particularly resonant now that Theresa May has called for a snap general election in a bid to strengthen her mandate. The Prime Minister would be wise to take guidance from the European Parliament's Brexit resolution, approved by MEPs this month. The document sets out a much more measured approach – prioritising the rights of all EU citizens, and highlighting that any future agreement with the EU will require the UK to adhere to the standards set out by existing international obligations on vital issues such as the environment, tax evasion and human rights.

Throughout this disentangling process, the UK needs to remember the value of having strong, positive relationships with our European neighbours – threatening to send the gunboats is a crass response.