

The Guardian 26/5/98 p.7

**Helena Smith in Athens**

**A**HISTORIC visit to Greece by the king and queen of Spain got off to a surreal start yesterday when the Socialist government, seeking to distance itself from its anti-monarchist views, dispatched two fighter jets to greet the couple in Greek airspace.

King Juan Carlos and Queen Sophia, a former Greek princess, appeared

bemused as they stepped on to the red carpet at Athens.

Spanish officials attributed Sophia's stilted smile to her "emotion" at being allowed into a country that has stripped her brother, the former King Constantine, of his citizenship and property.

Greeks have been fiercely anti-royalist since abolishing the monarchy in 1974 after the collapse of a hated military dictatorship.

Constantine was allowed

home in 1993 but the government sent jets to trail his yacht after he said he wanted to "resume duties".

Queen Sophia, whose only visit to Greece was for her mother's funeral in 1981, will not have overlooked her brother's fight against the Greek government. Last month the former king, who lives in London, won the first stage of his battle to regain his assets before the European Commission of Human Rights. His family's

property and passports were seized by Greece five years ago.

Constantine, who is the Duke of Edinburgh's cousin, has been told he can regain his property only if he gives up his claim to the throne.

Greek television showed the prime minister, Costas Simitis, who is keen to improve ties with Madrid, nervously awaiting the royals at the presidential palace in Athens — a build-

ing Sophia's uncle had built in the early 19th century. Mr Simitis and his wife Daphne appeared to be giving each other instructions on how best to greet the couple.

"We have been working round the clock for months now to get things right," said a spokeswoman at the foreign ministry. "Sophia may be Greek but she is first and foremost the Queen of Spain. We want everything to be perfect."