



SOUTH ATLANTIC COUNCIL OCCASIONAL PAPERS

No. 3

March, 1987

THE ALAND ISLAND SOLUTION

*Donald J. Bullock and Christopher Mitchell,
The City University, London*

Although it has many unique aspects, the problem over the political future of the Falkland-Malvinas Islands is not entirely unusual. There have been other examples of political conflicts over small, island communities, where ownership is disputed, where strategic issues mix with questions of self-determination and historical claims to territory, and even where military forces have been involved as governments have sought to "settle" the dispute through arms.

In such cases, the central problem involves the difficulty of discovering some political arrangements that satisfy the parties to the conflict — governments, local communities and (sometimes) the international community itself. Some cases have been settled in a more satisfactory and lasting fashion than others, but all might provide some useful guides to ways in which the present problem over the Falklands-Malvinas could be solved.

Model solutions are never completely applicable to other cases, but at least some examination of how governments have handled similar difficulties can provide ideas for discussion that might be helpful in generating alternatives. This present Paper, therefore, is one of a series that will consider particular cases that are sufficiently parallel to the dispute over the Falkland Islands to offer applicable insights and ideas. It deals with the problem of the Aland Islands, lying between Finland and Sweden in the Gulf of Bothnia, and the manner in which a solution was found to this dispute which, in the 1920's, seemed at least as intractable as the present conflict between Britain and Argentina over the Falklands-Malvinas.

We are grateful to Dr. Peter Gold and Dr. Clive Archer for helpful material on the Aland case. We are also indebted to Mr. Olavi Moizio of the Finnish Embassy and Dr. Alaine Low for information on the economy and financial arrangements in the Alands.

1. THE ALAND DISPUTE

Geographically, the Alands constitute an archipelago in excess of 6,000 islands, rocks and outcroppings which forms a natural continuation of the Finnish mainland. Situated at the entrance to the Gulf of Bothnia from the Baltic Sea, the Alands have been of strategic interest for centuries.

Although a clear channel separates the islands from Sweden, the Swedish capital of Stockholm lies only 45 miles from the Alands. This fact became of increased concern to Swedish governments as the evolution of military technology resulted in a situation whereby a militarized Alands would pose a threat to the Swedish capital. The issue of militarizing the Alands became a concern of major powers during the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries because of the Alands' close proximity to Germany and Russia.

The Alanders themselves are mainly of Swedish stock. Accounts dating back to the Twelfth Century indicate the first settlement of the Alands by Swedish-speaking peoples. Even today, over 90% of the 23,000 Aland inhabitants are Swedish-speaking and predominantly Swedish in culture.

The Aland Islands were ruled by the Swedish crown until 1809, but, after a series of debilitating wars, Sweden was forced by Czarist Russia to renounce all claims to Finland and the Alands for ever. From 1809 to 1917 the Czar administered both Finland and the Alands as the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland.

During this Czarist administration, the Russian defeat in the Crimean War led to the 1856 Treaty of Paris. One of the provisions of this Treaty called for a Russian commitment to neutralize and demilitarize the Alands. (This agreement would later be found violated by a German incursion in 1915, when Russian troops and fortifications were discovered on the islands.)

The year 1917 brought chaos and turmoil to Finland and the Alands. The political upheavals in Russia allowed an opportunity for the Finns to seek complete independence. During that time the Alanders themselves became politically active and began to consider the possibility of political union with Sweden. Consideration soon became a full-fledged, organized political movement as the influence of the Bolshevik revolution affected Finland, resulting in a bloody civil war between Finnish "Reds" and "Whites".

The Alands were swept up in this conflict as the Russian garrison still stationed on the Islands joined the Bolsheviks. The situation was inflamed by the retreat of Finnish "Whites" across the winter ice to the Alands. Fighting eventually erupted in which Finnish "Reds" from the mainland joined in the conflict. The situation was temporarily defused by a Swedish response to Alander appeals for assistance, and temporary Swedish occupation of the Islands in 1919 until the triumph of Finnish "Whites" in the civil war.

As a result of the Swedish intervention, the Aland leaders were determined to press on with their case for full political union with Sweden, while the Swedish government undertook to champion the Alander cause and to reclaim the Alands. The ensuing bitter dispute between Sweden and the newly-sovereign Finland over the sovereignty of the Alands was finally settled in favour of the Finns by a 1921 decision of the Council of the League of Nations, following reports by a Commission of Jurists and a subsequent Commission of Enquiry.

In the League's final settlement, the Wilsonian conception of the self-determination of peoples and the frequently expressed wishes of the Alanders themselves (in several plebiscites the Alanders voted overwhelmingly in favour of

political union with Sweden) were of little influence. The Commission of Enquiry had reported that geographical factors indicated the natural affinity of the archipelago with Finland rather than Sweden and that, in their view, Finland had, on independence, inherited existing Russian sovereignty over the Islands. This, together with the obvious difficulties of enforcing any decision against Finland and the perceived need for some *cordon sanitaire* against the spread of Bolshevism, appears to have been the main criterion for the League deciding in favour of the Finnish position — that Finland should retain political sovereignty over the Islands — while recommending some special provisions for the autonomy of the Islanders themselves.

Before outlining the nature of such special provisions, two aspects of the historical background to the settlement need emphasizing. The first is the degree of bitterness attending the dispute. This is easily forgotten after sixty years of relative tranquility and good relations, both between Sweden and Finland and between the Islanders and the government in Helsinki from which they had sought to escape. Passions on all sides ran high. All parties regarded one another as untrustworthy and unreasonably inflexible. Few believed in the possibility of a compromise solution.

Secondly, this level of hostility and insecurity was obviously directly linked to the fact that the Islands had all too recently been fought over, if not by Swedish and Finnish forces, then certainly in that worst of all major conflicts — a civil war. The Islanders had direct experience of military occupation and destruction, and that experience was clearly very real in their memories. With hindsight, it is possible to believe that a workable compromise was a reasonable possibility. It did not seem so in 1920.

2. PARALLELS WITH THE FALKLANDS CASE?

Even though the Aland Islanders of 1918-21 shared with the Falkland Islanders the bitter experience of occupation and war, a quite reasonable initial reaction from anyone reviewing the two cases is likely to be of the essential differences rather than any similarities. In the Aland case, sovereignty over the disputed Islands lay clearly with the Finns (notwithstanding Swedish arguments to the contrary), while the local population desired political unity with a non-sovereign neighbour. In the Falklands dispute, current sovereignty (for practical purposes, at least) is exercised by the United Kingdom. The Islanders desire this to continue and not to see their Islands united with Argentina, while the Argentine government wishes political sovereignty to be transferred (or restored) to Buenos Aires.

Again, while it is the case that Sweden occupied the Aland Islands during the civil war in Finland, this is hardly a parallel to the Argentine occupation of 1982, even ignoring the contrasting manner in which the two military occupations were ended. Finally, while it is true that part of the Swedish case was that Finnish sovereignty over the Aland Islands had lapsed following the Finnish separation from Bolshevik Russia, the Swedes based their own case largely upon principles of self-determination for the Swedish minority living on the Alands and not upon the historical fact of previous Swedish sovereignty to 1809. In contrast, the Argentine claims to the Islands are firmly based upon an argument of inherited Argentine sovereignty, while part of the British case for their retention of the Islands rests on that very Wilsonian principle of self-determination for the Islanders.

On the other hand, if one forgets legal approaches for the moment, concentrating

on the two disputes as problems for the governments and islanders involved, some similarities appear quite striking. Both cases deal with disputed island territories in which issues of formal sovereignty are mixed with the desires of the island population to retain their own culture, identity and way of life. In both cases the Islanders clearly wished to be politically integrated with one rival government rather than the other, mainly to preserve that way of life. In both cases there are strategic considerations, including the perceived threat posed by bases and military activities on and around the islands.

The problem in both cases, therefore, involves devising some solution that satisfies and safeguards the interests and desires of a (relatively small) population of islanders, while also fulfilling the aims of the governments involved in such a way as to avoid the danger of costly future military conflict over the islands in question (which neither government desires). That is the essential problem facing British, Argentine and Falkland governments in 1987, as it faced Finnish and Swedish governments, Alanders and the League of Nations in 1920.

3. THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS' SOLUTION

In the case of the dispute over the Aland Islands⁽¹⁾, the solution proposed by the League of Nations was to allow the Finns to maintain their sovereignty over the Islands, but to insist that Alanders' wishes to maintain their separateness, language, cultural identity and way of life should be safeguarded and guaranteed. This should be done by formally regarding them as "a minority" within the Finnish state and awarding them a high level of autonomy to govern themselves and manage their own affairs. The original proposals of the League's own Commission of Enquiry went much further in this than the Finnish Government's Autonomy Act, already passed (7th May, 1920) before the League's Commission made its recommendations about the problem. That Commission recommended that, in addition to existing provisions for autonomy:

- (1) The Alanders should be permitted to present to Helsinki a list of three candidates for governor of a separate Province of Aland, and the governor was to be appointed from this list.
- (2) In the Province of Aland, instruction in primary and technical schools should only be in Swedish to the "obligatory exclusion of Finnish, confirmed by law".
- (3) Alanders should be awarded the right of pre-emption every time outsiders offered to purchase land on the Islands.
- (4) Any newly-arrived settlers should only be awarded the franchise after five years' residence.

In addition, the Commission recommended that such guarantees be given the force of law and that Alanders themselves should have direct recourse (possibly through the Swedish government) to the Council of the League of Nations. Alternatively, it was envisaged that Alanders might be given recourse to the Permanent Court of International Justice if differences over any guarantees arose.

In the event, the League's solution closely resembled that recommended by its Commission, although the idea of direct Alander access to the League Council or the PCIJ was dropped.

The eventual agreement involved the enlargement of the existing Finnish law on Alander autonomy by adding provisions dealing with Islander pre-emption of land purchase; a five-year restriction on settler voting rights; nomination of the governor

by the Finnish President in agreement with the President of the Alander Provincial Assembly or "Diet" (in the event of no agreement, the Finnish President would have to choose from a list of five people submitted by the Diet); and the language of education in all state schools on the Islands being Swedish. The agreement was to be "watched over" by the League of Nations and the Finns agreed to forward to the League Council any petitions and claims from the Aland Diet in connection with these guarantees. Finally, the Finnish Government agreed that the Islands would be kept neutralized and de-militarized, as had been initially arranged in 1856.

Although these provisions were incorporated into the first Autonomy Act for Aland by the Finnish Government, they were neither popular nor expected to work. The Finns were exercised about what they perceived as restrictions of their sovereignty, the Alanders angry over the rejection of their claim to self-determination and the ignoring of their wishes and perceived interests. The Swedish government representatives expressed the hope that, at some future date, the claims inspired by "... national feeling as deep as that of the population of the Aland Isles will be triumphantly vindicated. . .". However, in spite of such forebodings, the arrangements established in 1921 appear to have worked satisfactorily and to have produced stability and acceptance on the Islands. In 1951 a second Autonomy Act was passed by the Finnish Parliament, confirming most of the arrangements contained in the amended first Act and adding further advantages for the Islanders. Among these were exemption from conscription for military service (although Islanders are expected to serve in the pilotage and lighthouse service or another section of the civil administration with the approval of the Provincial Parliament); a requirement for all those employed in the state service in Aland to have full spoken and written command of Swedish; and the right of the local Provincial Parliament to levy additional income tax for local purposes. Under the 1920 and 1951 Autonomy Acts the Alands are guaranteed the same level of services as similar areas in other parts of Finland, regardless of actual costs. This means special governmental subsidies for transport, education and telecommunications, and that Aland is, to some extent, treated as a development area. In 1954 the Province was granted its own flag. From March, 1984, the Aland Islands began to issue their own postage stamps. Proposed new legislation will grant the Alands greater control over the allocation of finance while guaranteeing special grants from the Finnish government.⁽²⁾

The successful working of the solution developed sixty years ago by the League of Nations has obviously depended on a number of factors. Not least has been the nature of the settlement itself, but also and undoubtedly the manner in which both Finns and Alanders have implemented the agreement, reinforced, particularly in recent decades, by the relative prosperity of the Islands themselves deriving from a successful shipping and, more recently, the tourist industry. Concentrating on the nature of the settlement itself, three major elements are worthy of note and perhaps of consideration for the Falklands problem of the 1980's. The first of these is the way in which the solution safeguarded the culture and way of life of the Islanders, firstly by guaranteeing their preservation in the Act itself and then, more practically, by leaving the day-to-day running of local politics, economics, education and social affairs in the hands of the Islanders. While it remained true that the running of "high political" matters like foreign relations, defence, administration of justice and of state finance remained in the hands of the national

government in Helsinki, the degree of autonomy and local freedom from interference given to the Islanders (and quite deliberately preserved and reinforced over the years) enabled the latter to feel that they were genuinely running their own affairs and that they were (and would be) secure in so doing.

Secondly, it is undoubtedly the case that, compared with people in other parts of Finland, the Alanders actually enjoyed a highly privileged position within the Finnish state. Almost inadvertently, the Alanders had achieved a solution which provided social, educational, political, fiscal and economic benefits not enjoyed elsewhere in the country. The Aland regional budget is subsidised by about one third from Finnish central government⁽⁴⁾; and the islands have virtually no unemployment⁽⁵⁾: Their position in this respect and in their standard of living compares favourably with the average for Finland as a whole⁽⁶⁾. These advantages went some way beyond the minimum envisaged by the League as being necessary to safeguard Swedish culture and the Islanders' way of life. That culture and way of life have obviously changed over the intervening sixty years, but they seem to have changed at the Islanders' own pace and under the Islanders' own control. Informal links with Sweden remain strong. Many Alanders attend Swedish universities and some migrate there, attracted by high salaries. Recently some Swedish firms have shown interest in investment in the islands.

Finally, the solution appears to have worked over several generations because of the practicality of its provisions. Once the issue of "sovereignty" had been decided in favour of the Finns, the solution was constructed upon the practical principle of the Finns agreeing to limit that sovereignty across a wide spectrum of issues. This was effected by the pragmatic process of asking not what decisions might usefully be devolved to local decision-makers, but what decisions had to be retained by the central government itself. In other words, the solution concentrated less upon large issues of principle — self-determination, sovereignty, rights of minorities — and more upon questions of what was necessary to maintain what the Islanders wanted in terms of running their own lives, remaining "Swedish" (even if not actually living on "Swedish" territory), retaining their culture, language and identity, and feeling secure that these would be preserved for the future. Again, it should be emphasized that, at the time of the solution being proposed, none of the parties was hopeful about its survival. This was particularly true of the Islanders and their Swedish patrons. A Swedish diplomat warned at the time that the Commission's recommendations did not contain the basis of a ". . . solution or even a tolerable compromise. . ." and that opposing the Islanders' desires would lead to "perpetual unrest and be a continuing source of fresh disputes. . .".

4. THE ALAND SOLUTION: MODEL OR POINT DEPARTURE?

Given its apparent success as one solution to the problem of disputed sovereignty and the preservation of a culture and way of life, it might be tempting to try to use the Aland Island solution as some kind of blueprint or "model" for the dilemma over the Falkland Islands, in spite of the obvious differences between the two cases. However, a simplistic transfer of the details of the solution worked out sixty years ago for the Aland Islands probably presents more dangers and difficulties than useful answers to contemporary problems. This is true whether one considers the *process* by which the Aland solution was developed, or the actual *structure* of the solution itself.

In the former case, it is highly unlikely that the United Nations can become involved in negotiations for a settlement in anything like the way that the League

of Nations was central to the creation of a solution for the Aland Islands in 1920/21. The U.N. just has not been directly involved in the same way, and — given the British Government's present antipathy to involving the United Nations in any problems which it defines as "British" — it is unlikely that any major role for the U.N. will emerge in the short or even medium term. More likely, a process of bilateral negotiation, perhaps assisted by the good offices of friendly governments, may lead to some eventual solution, even if this merely emerges from a stalemate of exhaustion or the decreasing salience of the issue to the governments involved.

Similarly, a slavish copying of the precise details (or even the basic outline) of the solution which has served Finland, Sweden and the Aland Islanders well for over sixty years is unlikely to lead to a settlement of the Falklands problem satisfactory to Britain, Argentina or the Falkland Islanders. For one thing, there is the fact that effective sovereignty over the Islands is currently in the hands of the United Kingdom, a situation eminently satisfactory to the Islanders if not to the Argentine Government (and even, one suspects, to some members of the British Government). The Aland Island problem was, of course, plagued by the demand for a transfer of sovereignty as is the Falklands problem, but in quite the opposite "direction".

However, while a slavish copying of the Aland Island solution seems less than useful, employing the case study as a point of departure for a debate about possibilities for the Falklands case does seem a useful exercise, if carried out with due caution.

After all, the Aland solution is one example of a set of arrangements that have enabled a group of islanders to preserve their culture and their way of life while, at the same time, satisfying the demands of a national government for the retention of the formal and legal trappings of "sovereignty" over the territory on which the culturally different islanders live their lives. If such a solution can be devised in one case, why not in others? Might it not be the case that Falklanders could arrange circumstances whereby they enjoy the best of British and Argentine worlds as the Alanders enjoy the best of both Swedish and Finnish?

Apart from the principle that a compromise is possible, the details of the Aland solution can raise interesting possibilities — which might be extended even further — for the details of a Falkland solution, giving rise to a whole host of questions and possibilities — especially those concerning preservation of the Islander way of life — to be debated. For example:

- (1) Could Islanders retain their British citizenship (along with their British culture) or obtain dual citizenship in any future settlement?
- (2) Might the British system of law *and* of law enforcement be preserved on the Islands in some future settlement?
- (3) If British culture, education and language are to be preserved on the Falkland Islands (should formal sovereignty be transferred at some stage) does this mean, perhaps, the retention of British teachers, syllabuses and examinations in Island schools?
- (4) Do the arrangements for Aland Islander first refusal in land sales and restrictions upon Provincial citizenship and the franchise offer any solution to the Islanders' fear of their being swamped by Argentine immigration (either forced or "natural")?

- (5) Do the provisions of the Aland Autonomy Acts regarding provincial self-government and autonomy offer a starting point for debate about satisfactory autonomy and control of their own local affairs to Islanders?
- (6) To what degree might the economic advantages enjoyed by the Alanders within the Finnish economy offer some ideas to the Falkland Islanders for the preservation of their traditional *economic* way of life? (Given the Argentine economic policy arrangements for Tierra del Fuego, what might be the chances of a Falkland-Malvinas Autonomous Province remaining, for example, part of the sterling area?)
- (7) What arrangements for appeals and guarantees (in which circumstances, through whom, to whom, and with what potential result) might be built into a Falkland Solution, such as would (a) reassure the Islanders that their way of life would be preserved in future, and (b) be acceptable to Buenos Aires?

This last question, of course, is central to any settlement in the Falklands case which resembles the Aland solution. With justice, the Islanders might ask: "What guarantees do we have that our culture, way of life, identity and separateness will, indeed, be preserved and respected in future?". Individual leaders who make agreements at one point of time pass from the political scene and are replaced by others with no commitment to any past settlement. Such a question, and the profound insecurity it represents, are particularly relevant after a sudden invasion, a war, and the fear, hostility and suspicion that follow such events. Hence, guarantees of security for way of life, "Britishness" and Islander identity will be central to any solution for the Falklands problem, irrespective of whether it resembles the present situation, the Aland solution or any other set of arrangements⁽⁷⁾. Similar benefits to the Alanders might well be available to the Falklanders, but they would need safeguarding.

There are obviously no easy answers to this central issue. However, it is worth commenting finally that the Aland Islanders in 1921 also confronted the same problem of trust and guarantees and, if one reads the historical accounts of the events of those days, in much the same justifiably suspicious and mistrustful frame of mind as the Falklanders in the 1980's. They, too, were suspicious of the Finnish Government's good faith and willingness to operate the autonomy solution in a generous spirit, while maintaining a genuine degree of autonomy and a genuine commitment to the preservation of the Alander way of life and culture, and increasing rather than decreasing the degree of separateness and local freedom enjoyed by the Islanders. That successive Finnish Governments have, indeed, preserved and made workable the solution agreed (however reluctantly) in 1921 is no guarantee that a similar degree of genuine commitment will occur in other cases. However, it is an indication that such a solution can be made to work to the advantage and the satisfaction of a vulnerable minority, living their own separate and distinct life, but running their own affairs on previously disputed islands.

NOTES

- (1) For an account of the Aland problem and its settlement, see J. Barros, *The Aland Island Question*. (Yale University Press, 1968).
- (2) *Alander Shipping Gazette*. Nov.-Dec. 1985. p. 285.
- (3) Shipping now accounts for approximately one third of GDP and tourism 20%. Over one million tourists have visited annually since 1972. Ekonomiska Radet *Ekonomisk — Politisk Program for Landskapet Aland. 1982-86*". (Mariehamn, 1982) pp. 55-6, 60.
Statistisk Arsbok for Aland 1984 (Mariehamn, 1982), p. 133, Table 10.1
- (4) *Statistisk Arsbok for Aland*. op. cit. p. 189, Table 14.8.
- (5) Ibid. p. 75, Table 5.8.
- (6) Ibid. p. 81, Table 6.2.
- (7) We hope, in the near future, to produce another Occasional Paper which discusses the issue of guarantees and security of settlements.

Donald Bullock is a graduate of Brigham Young University, Utah, and was a Research Assistant to the South Atlantic Council from January to May, 1985.

Christopher Mitchell lectures in International Relations at The City University, London, and was the first Hon. Secretary to the South Atlantic Council.

THE VIEWS EXPRESSED IN SOUTH ATLANTIC COUNCIL OCCASIONAL PAPERS ARE THOSE OF THE AUTHORS AND ARE NOT NECESSARILY SHARED BY ALL MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL.

SOUTH ATLANTIC COUNCIL OCCASIONAL PAPERS

1. Options in the Falklands/Malvinas Dispute
Bruce George, M.P. and Walter Little
2. British Defence Policy and the South Atlantic
General Sir Hugh Beach
3. The Aland Island Solution
Donald J. Bullock and Christopher Mitchell
4. Preserving a Way of Life: The Welsh Community in Patagonia
(In Preparation)
Alaine Low

Can be obtained from Dr. P. Willetts, Hon. Secretary, S.A.C. c/o Dept. of Systems Science, The City University, Northampton Square London EC1V 0HP.
Price £1.

About the authors

Donald Bullock is a political science graduate from Brigham Young University, Utah and was a Research Assistant to the South Atlantic Council during 1984/5.

Christopher Mitchell is Professor of International Relations at The City University, London. He has published widely on issues concerning international conflict and its resolution, most particularly in *The Structure of International Conflict* (Macmillan, 1981). Professor Mitchell was a founder member of the South Atlantic Council, and its first Hon. Secretary.