

SOUTH ATLANTIC COUNCIL OCCASIONAL PAPERS

No. 13

November 2013

British Perspectives on the Falklands Dispute

By Robin Wallis

Hon. Secretary of the South Atlantic Council

The Consejo Argentino para las Relaciones Internacionales, (CARI – the Argentine Council on International Relations) held a seminar on “Changes in Global Affairs and their Impact on the Falklands Dispute” on 22 August 2013. CARI has worked with the South Atlantic Council (SAC) on a number of projects in the past. For this seminar, they invited an SAC representative to speak on British perspectives on the Falklands dispute. The SAC Honorary Secretary Robin Wallis attended and gave his presentation in Spanish. CARI has published this and some of the other presentations, in Spanish, on its website at www.cari.org.ar/recursos/seminario_malvinas22-08-13.html. Details of the seminar programme and the list of participants are also given by CARI on their website and as appendices to this paper.



The Presentation made at the CARI Seminar in Buenos Aires

I address you today as a representative of the South Atlantic Council (SAC). I have drawn on the writings and deliberations of my colleagues in the Council in putting together this presentation, although the views expressed are ultimately my own. My intention is to assess the positions of the parties to the Falklands dispute, with the aim of identifying pointers to the way that the relationships between them may develop.

The British Perspective

I begin with a personal perspective on the British way of viewing the dispute. Much has been written about the character and values of the British. We all know the stereotypes, perfectly summed up by Borges when he wrote about friendship between Englishmen as something that ‘begins by excluding confidences and very soon dispenses with dialogue altogether’ – a perfect starting-point, perhaps, for our analysis of Britain’s relationship with Argentina.¹

In certain conspicuous cases the UK has allowed its foreign policy to be determined by the wishes of the communities who inhabit its overseas territories. In such instances the desires of the few seem to have a disproportionate influence over the policy of a nation of 60 million. What national characteristics does this reflect?

One possible answer might be a tendency to put sentiment above a more dispassionate calculation of national interest. This might partly reflect a strong desire to ‘take the side of the underdog’, particularly when the latter is confronted by a hostile and much larger power in some other part of the world. We recall that the UK justified its entry into the First World War in terms of the need to help ‘poor little Belgium’ – which in the Second World War became the need to stand alongside Poland against the Nazi war machine. One positive interpretation of Britain’s actions would be that they show a strong commitment to the rights of the vulnerable. When such persons are of British extraction, a dash of patriotism is added to the mix – not to mention nostalgia for a past when the world seemed perfectly designed for British exploration, settlement and rule.

The Second World War has become a ‘founding myth’ of modern British culture. It was a time when British people felt directly threatened by a cruel and powerful dictatorship. For a while Great Britain stood alone against this threat, emboldened by an unconventional and daring leader entirely committed to a clear set of values and ready to take risks to back them up. It is perhaps not surprising that this ‘myth’ has become the paradigm by which the British also remember the Falklands War. This explains why, earlier this year, Mrs Thatcher was buried with full military honours, with the popular press according her the same status as Churchill. The British remember that their victory in both wars was due not only to strong leadership but also to a willingness to accept sacrifices and to stand up to bullying and hard-line ideologies. Moderation matters a great deal in British political culture.

British Public Opinion

So it is that, when the Falklands issue reappears on the front pages of the newspapers, British public opinion responds in a predictable manner. At such times the mindset of most Britons reverts to the archetype of the 1982 Falklands War (the only thing that most British people remember about the Islands). A great majority of them would subscribe to the view that some 30 years ago there was a battle for the Islands which Argentina lost, and the rules of fair play require the Argentines to accept that result. Furthermore, British people are quite clear that the Islanders wish to remain ‘British’ – indeed, to many people in the UK, the Islands themselves are British, reflecting the Foreign Office line in recent years that the British government ‘has no doubts about the sovereignty of the Islands’. These points of view are widely expressed in radio phone-ins, newspaper coverage and statements from politicians. Indeed, the latter are virtually unanimous in their disinclination to question a position so deeply rooted in popular culture.

The Foreign Office keeps a low profile in all this. From the 1960s through to 1980, it took the lead in exploring a possible change in the Islands’ constitutional status. Since the 1982 conflict, it has adopted a more reactive role. The main priority of those responsible for policy on the Falklands is to avoid controversy, take no initiatives and ensure that the junior minister responsible for the area faces

¹ J. L. Borges, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, 1940.

no difficult questions in Parliament. The Foreign Office mantra is ‘manage the dispute’.² In the SAC we prefer to think in terms of identifying a lasting settlement to the South Atlantic dispute acceptable to all the parties, though we may be the only group in the UK committed to such an outcome.

The 1982 War Changed Everything

My final point about the British perspective is that the 1982 War transformed UK perceptions of the Falkland Islands.³ Before the War, these little-known islands were home to a community of rugged individuals living on modest means. The British governments of the 1960s and 1970s did not doubt the appropriateness of engaging with their Argentine counterparts about how to dispense with their impractical responsibility for this far-flung territory. However, as a result of the Falklands War, much stronger bonds have been forged between Great Britain and the Islander community, based in part on the loss of life of British servicemen during the conflict. Another contributory factor, in some people’s judgement, might be the British political class’ desire to ensure the Islanders’ well-being as a way of atoning for leaving them vulnerable in 1982.

An even bigger change has taken place since 1982 in the Islands themselves. The sheep-rearing community of the past has become a more diverse, confident, ambitious and prosperous society, with a professionalised administration. Today it would be very difficult for any British government to consider options for the future of the Islands without the Islanders’ representatives participating in that discussion. The Argentine Ambassador’s call on the United Kingdom to ‘enter into negotiations with us about the future of the Islands’ (The Independent, 14 June 2013) misses this point. The Islanders’ higher profile role is not part of some British strategy, as some in Argentina might wish to believe. Rather, it seems to be a natural evolution of Falkland Islands society, similar perhaps to the process undergone by the Spanish colonies in the Americas two hundred years ago. In summary, the Falklands of today are not what they were in 1982.

Promoting the Argentine Position

What then are the implications of this analysis for those who support the Argentine claim to the Islands? We know that Argentine diplomats have compiled worthy arguments in support of their claim. We also know that, in an interview with The Guardian during his visit to London in February 2013, the Argentine Foreign Minister predicted that the sovereignty dispute would be resolved in Argentina’s favour ‘within 20 years’. Such confidence adds a stabilising factor to the dispute. It is reminiscent of the Marxists who governed parts of Europe during the twentieth century in the certainty that, in keeping with Marx’s writings, history was working inexorably in their favour. They needed to do nothing intemperate or rash: history was on their side.

If the Argentine Foreign Minister sleeps peacefully in his bed, sure in the knowledge that the dispute will be happily resolved in his lifetime, it must be because he believes that certain things are going to happen. Chief among these is that the House of Commons and the House of Lords are going to vote in favour of a change in the status of the Falkland Islands. Falkland Islanders sleep very peacefully in their beds secure in the knowledge that the British Parliament will change nothing about the Islands’ status unless they approve it.

² This concept seems intellectually flawed, given that most incidents that destabilise the equilibrium of the issue arise from ‘unmanageable’ factors outside the control of the UK, eg the Argentine invasion of the Islands in 1982, Argentina’s withdrawal from certain bilateral agreements under Nestor Kirchner’s government, and the diplomatic offensive launched by Cristina Kirchner’s administration. The FCO position is tantamount to allowing or, some might argue, encouraging such destabilising events to take place. The SAC view is that it is better to seek a lasting settlement acceptable to all parties, thereby precluding the occurrence of destabilising events.

³ In the absence of a formal declaration of war in 1982, in international legal terms, what occurred was a conflict between the armed forces of the United Kingdom and Argentina rather than a war.

Two questions arise from this: what new constitutional status favourable to Argentina would be acceptable to the Islanders and thus to the British Parliament? And how can Argentina promote this new status to British politicians and the Island community?

In my judgement, Argentina has certain things in its favour. Its 1994 Constitution is helpful: firstly, it states a solemn claim to the Islands which one day could be a vital bargaining chip (as occurred in the Northern Ireland peace process, when the Republic of Ireland renounced its claim to the North in exchange for a significant increase in its influence in that territory). Secondly, the Argentine Constitution guarantees the Islanders' way of life – a wise position which reflects the democratic values of all three parties to the dispute and thus highlights common ground between them. Thirdly, the Argentine position in favour of negotiations implies the possibility that such negotiations may lead to compromise.

In this context, however, the Foreign Office has serious doubts about Argentina's good faith when it speaks of dialogue or negotiations. The Foreign Office assumes that the only thing Argentina has in mind is negotiating a transfer of sovereignty over the Islands to Argentina – in other words, a negotiation towards a predetermined end goal. The Argentine Foreign Minister stated at the 2013 meeting of the UN Committee on Decolonisation that he wanted a dialogue with the UK without either preconditions or demands, but the Foreign Office would need a much clearer picture of the terms of the proposed negotiation before it would agree to it. British diplomats are not willing to embark on a process of dialogue that might be doomed to fail even before it gets underway. (To the Foreign Office, the ideal scenario is a strong Anglo-Argentine relationship under the same sovereignty umbrella first unfurled in 1990.)

In the meantime the Argentine Embassy in London goes about its business of trying to exert influence over British thinking on the Falklands issue. It has even launched some modest initiatives, although so far to no great effect. Such was the case with the European 'pro-dialogue' meeting in February 2013, which may have warmed the hearts of those sympathetic to the Argentine position, but which will only be worth repeating if the Embassy can gather higher-profile participants with more influence in the political circles of their respective countries. A more convincing PR initiative was the video put out by the Argentine government two or three years ago about what life would be like in the Falkland Islands under an Argentine administration, with its constructive portrayal of British and Argentine traditions coexisting harmoniously: some Islanders sipped tea while others drank mate as they listened to radio stations in both languages and flights jetted in from London and Buenos Aires. Perhaps a feature length production along similar lines, maybe directed by Carlos Sorín, would reach a wider audience.

At the intergovernmental level, it tends to be the less conciliatory statements from both sides that lodge in the memory and therefore define those who utter them. However, it could be argued that political leaders have on several occasions been conspicuously restrained, for example in the statements made around the thirtieth anniversary of the War. I will however mention two cases which I think illustrate how the 'public diplomacy' could have been managed better. The first was in 2010, when the coalition government took office in London, bringing with it the novelty of Liberal Democrat participation in government at a national level. The Lib-Dems have the benefit of being relatively free of fixed ideological positions, and one could dare to think of the remote possibility that they, together with the new 'compassionate conservatism' of David Cameron, might be able to empathise better with the approach of all parties to the dispute. Such hope lasted only long enough for a message of congratulations to arrive for the new government from Buenos Aires, the wording of which could not resist calling on the new administration to review British policy on the Falklands issue. Under the critical gaze of the Islanders and their allies in London, the coalition found itself instantly forced to respond and, of course, to bind itself to the traditional formula that the Islanders' right to self-determination was the *sine qua non* of British policy.

My second recent example, from February 2013, was when the British Foreign Secretary apparently tried to ‘ambush’ his Argentine counterpart by inviting two Members of the Falkland Islands’ Legislative Assembly to the putative meeting between the two ministers. The Argentine Foreign Minister declined to attend, and an opportunity for contact between the two governments was lost. However, from a different perspective, the incident highlighted the self-defeating phobia of Argentine officialdom towards contact with the Islanders. This is counter-productive for the Argentine cause because it seems contradictory on the one hand to guarantee the Islanders’ interests while on the other hand refusing to speak to them. In addition, the Argentine call for dialogue without preconditions would look more genuine if it included the Islanders. To dismiss them as unworthy of a hearing looks – in the eyes of the British public – uncomfortably reminiscent of the Argentine attitudes of 1982.

The SAC Position

In recent years members of the SAC have put forward ideas to encourage flexibility in the relationship between the three parties to the dispute. We have looked at conflict resolution mechanisms and discussed papers on the possible incorporation or independence of the Islands. We have examined critiques of the way in which the essentially nineteenth century concept of sovereignty has been applied in a twenty-first century context, an era when every country’s ‘sovereign authority’ is subject to rules emanating from transnational bodies such as the European Union or Mercosur. From these deliberations my colleague Professor Peter Willetts in 2012 formulated the concept of ‘distributed sovereignty’ – a new theoretical framework which offers a way of reconciling the interests of the different parties to the dispute.⁴

Another new study published on the SAC website this year analyses the diverse demographics of the Islands, the origins of the March 2013 referendum and the way in which the debate stirred up by the referendum has affected the self-image of the Island community.⁵ It is clear that the overwhelming ‘Yes’ vote conceals a growing interest in other constitutional possibilities, specifically independence or free association with another state. For many years the Islanders’ elected representatives have denied that there is any ‘problem’ about the status of the Islands: the people there simply want to carry on living in the manner that they have chosen. If Argentina does not want good relations with them, that is its business (though the Islanders consider it quite another matter for Argentina to take hostile measures to disrupt the Falklands economy). None of this is new. What is new, however, is the view increasingly expressed by the inhabitants of the Falklands that the Islands are their ‘country’, and that they feel themselves to be firstly Islanders and only secondarily British. Any future change in the status of the territory is likely to involve an increasing degree of autonomy if it is to reflect this demographic and political trend.

I recognise that this message is discouraging for supporters of the traditional Argentine claim to the Islands. However, they should not entirely despair. New circumstances create new opportunities. My SAC colleague Alan Tabbush has sketched for us a scenario whereby Argentina and the UK could reach an agreement that would give the Islanders sovereignty over the territory, in free association with an Argentine-British protectorate which would oversee the defence and the international relations of the Islands.⁶ Islanders would be able to opt for Argentine or British citizenship, or both. This scenario – compatible with the ‘distributed sovereignty’ concept – may

⁴ “Distributed Sovereignty and the Falkland Islands (Malvinas) Dispute”, Professor Peter Willetts, SAC Occasional Paper, No. 11, June 2012, www.staff.city.ac.uk/p.willetts/SAC/OP/OCCPAP11.HTM

⁵ “A Report on the Referendum on the Political Status of the Falkland Islands”, Professor Peter Willetts, SAC Occasional Paper, No. 12, June 2013, www.staff.city.ac.uk/p.willetts/SAC/OP/OCCPAP12.HTM

⁶ “The South Atlantic Conflict – A Way Round”, A Tabbush, 8 February 2012, available on the SAC Comments web pages, at www.staff.city.ac.uk/p.willetts/SAC/COMMENTS/AT080212.HTM

represent an attainable compromise: better perhaps for the Argentines to share something than to claim everything and get nothing.

A Personal Perspective

I spoke earlier about the challenge of making the Argentine position on the Islands amenable to a British audience. Winning the trust of the Islander community would obviously be an even harder task. In March 2013 Ambassador Fernando Petrella reminded us in an article, published in www.infobae.com, that in the 1960s the recruitment of young schoolteachers from Argentine Patagonia to work in the Falkland Island schools, among other forms of co-operation, brought about a degree of convergence between the Islands and the mainland.⁷ That kind of interaction has a better chance of bringing about constructive progress than any number of communiqués issued at regional summit meetings, especially if such citizen-to-citizen integration is sustained for several generations (which is admittedly rather longer than the Argentine Foreign Minister's 20-year time frame).

From my perspective, the traditional way of formulating the sovereignty dispute over the Falkland Islands has been counter-productive. If the dispute is framed as a 'winner-takes-all' contest it will fester on, because there will always be one party that feels that its legitimate interests have not been recognised. My ideal would be to see the 'Islands are ours' slogans replaced by a dialogue about 'how can the resources of the South Atlantic best be shared between the communities who live there and have a genuine interest in the region's prosperity and well-being?'. Many British, Argentine and Falklands citizens share a common Judeo-Christian faith which gives primacy to mutual respect and love for one's neighbour. Those who insist on claiming exclusive rights over the land and sea resources of the South Atlantic, or who do not take the trouble to understand others' points of view, are acting against those foundational values.

The South Atlantic Council wants to encourage the process of mutual understanding, and welcomes CARI's initiative in promoting discussion of the issue.

⁷ "Otro 2 de abril", Fernando Petrella, 2 de abril de 2013, <http://opinion.infobae.com/fernando-petrella/2013/04/02/otro-2-de-abril/#more-38>

Appendix I The Seminar Programme

Changes in Global Affairs and their Impact on the Falklands Dispute

- 8.45 am Opening of the Seminar by Felipe de la Balze and Carlos Escudé
- 9.00-11.00 am The South Atlantic Dispute: The Current Situation
Chair: Fernando Petrella
Vicente Berasategui, “British policy Towards the Falklands”
Julio Hang, “Defence of the South Atlantic”
Daniel Montamat, “The Potential for Oil”
Otto Wöhler, “The Future of Fishing”
Discussion and the Chair’s conclusions
- 11.00-11.10am Coffee Break
- 11.10 am 1.00pm Changes in the Global Arena: British Perspectives on the Falklands Dispute
Chair: Juan Archibaldo Lanús
Jorge Castro, Director of the Institute of Strategic Planning
Robin Wallis, Representative of the South Atlantic Council
Discussion and the Chair’s conclusions
- 1.00-2.30 pm Buffet and informal dialogue among the participants
- 2.30-4.00 pm Specific Proposals for Possible Settlements to the Falklands Dispute
Chair: Felipe de la Balze
Eduardo Airaldi, “A Diplomatic Vision of Acceptable Outcomes for Argentina”
Fernando Petrella, “Convergence or Confrontation: Advantages and Disadvantages”
Fernando Iglesias, “The Position of the Group of 17”
Carlos Escudé, “A Negotiated Exchange of Land for Marine Resources”
Andrés Cisneros, “Antarctica and the Falklands: The Same Conflict”
Chair’s conclusions
- 4.00-4.15 pm Coffee Break
- 4.15-6.00 pm Discussion of the Presentations
- 6.00-6.30 pm Closing Remarks, Felipe de la Balze and Carlos Escudé

Appendix II List of Participants in the CARI Seminar

Amb Eduardo Airaldi	Former Director-General Malvinas and the South Atlantic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Culture (MRECIC); member of CARI's Malvinas Committee
Amb Lilian Alurralde	Member of the High Council of Ambassadors; Chair of the National Commission for the Commemoration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the OAS; CARI Advisory Council
Dr Enrique Aramburu	Treasurer, Institute for the Malvinas and Argentine Southern Territories; Member of CARI's Malvinas Committee
Dr Felipe de la Balze	Businessman, academic; CARI Secretary-General
Prof Juan Battaleme	Foreign Policy and International Relations Analyst, teaching at several institutions of higher education and the Argentine Diplomatic Academy (ISEN)
Amb Vicente Berasategui	Former Ambassador of Argentina to the UK; member of CARI's Malvinas Committee
Dr José Octavio Bordón	Former Governor Mendoza Province; former presidential candidate; former Ambassador of Argentina to the United States; member of CARI's Executive Committee
Prof Anabella Busso	Director of the Diplomacy School, Rosario
Min María Fernanda Cañas	Deputy Director-General Malvinas and the South Atlantic, MRECIC
Dr Lilian del Castillo	Professor of Public International Law at the Faculty of Law, University of Buenos Aires; Chair of CARI's Malvinas Committee
Dr Jorge Castro	Director, Institute of Strategic Planning; former Secretary of State for National Planning
Ministro Luis Castillo	Directorate-General for Environmental Affairs, MRECIC
Dr Andrés Cisneros	Former Secretary-General for Co-ordination and former Secretary of State for External Relations and Latin American Affairs, MRECIC
Dr Noberto Consani	Director of the Institute of International Relations, National University of La Plata
Dr Alejandro Corbacho	Director of the Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of CEMA (Centre for the Study of Macro-Economics in Argentina)
Dr Carlos Escudé	Principal Researcher, National Council for Scientific and Technological Research (CONICET); Professor of Political Science and International Relations and Director of the Centre for the Study of Religion, the State and Society (CERES), at the Latin American Rabbinical Seminary 'Marshall T. Meyer'
Adm Alejandro Fernández Lobbe	Admiral (Retired); Malvinas War Veteran; member of CARI's Malvinas Committee
Professor Federico Martín Gómez	Researcher in the Malvinas, Antarctica and South Atlantic Department of the Institute for International Relations, National University of La Plata; member of CARI's Malvinas Committee
Dr Javier González Fraga	Former Chairman of the Argentine Central Bank; former vice-presidential candidate

General (Retired) Julio Hang	Director of the Institute for International Security and Strategic Affairs, CARI; former head of the Military Household of the Argentine President
Dr Carlos Conrado Helbling	Former President of the National Bank of Argentina and the National Development Bank; member of CARI's Advisory Board
Dr Fernando Iglesias	Former member of the House of Deputies; founding member and Vice-President of Global Democracy
Amb Ricardo Lagorio	Ambassador Ministry for Foreign Affairs; former Under-Secretary of Policy and Strategy at the Ministry of Defence; member of CARI's Council
Amb Juan Archibaldo Lanús	Former Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs; former Ambassador to France; member of CARI's Council
Dr José María Llados	Academic Secretary for CARI.
Prof Elsa Llenderozas	Associate Professor, Theory of International Relations, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Buenos Aires
Amb Luis Domingo Mendiola	Director of the African and Middle Eastern Affairs Committee and member of CARI's Malvinas Committee
Dr Federico Merke	Professor of Comparative American Foreign Policy, International Relations Theory and Fundamentals of the International System, University of San Andrés
Amb Atilio Molteni	Former Ambassador of Argentina to Israel and to Turkey
Dr Daniel Montamat	Former Director of YPF; former Secretary of State of State for Energy; former Director of Gas del Estado SE; member of CARI's Committee on Energy Questions
Dr Juan Moravek	President of Unión Industrial Patagónica; member of the Executive Committee of Unión Industrial Argentina
Amb Alfredo Morelli	Head of the Special Group on Technological Questions, MRECIC
Prof Flor Ocampo	Research Analyst on International Policy, Naval General Staff
Amb Fernando Petrella	Former Secretary of State for Foreign Relations; member of CARI's Executive Committee
Dr Sybil Rhodes	Professor and Academic Secretary, Department of Political Science, University of CEMA
Dr Adalberto Rodríguez Giavarini	Former Foreign Minister of Argentina; President of CARI
Licenciado Agustín Romero	Executive Secretary of the Congressional Malvinas Observatory
Dr Isidoro Ruiz Moreno	Professor of History of Argentine Law, University of Buenos Aires; Director of the Masters in History of War, Army University Institute; member CARI's Malvinas Committee
Dr Marcelo Saguier	Principal Researcher, FLACSO; Assistant Researcher, CONICET
Dr José Siaba Serrate	Student of economics and finance; Teaching Assistant Postgraduate Programme, University of Buenos Aires
Capt Héctor Julio Valsecchi	Retired Navy Captain; Editor of the Naval Centre Bulletin; member of CARI's Malvinas Committee
Prof Sebastián Vigliero	Research Analyst on International Policy, Naval General Staff
Dr Otto Wöhler	Research Director, National Institute for Fisheries Research and Development
Colonel Vilgré La Madrid	Malvinas War Veteran; Director-General of the Malvinas Veterans' Centre of the Ministry of Defence

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