



What do we do with the Falkland Islands?

by John Hutchinson

That now rather remote historical conflict of the Falkland Islands has raised its ugly head in the press very recently. There will be many who remember the absurdity and intensity of the 1982 conflict. It was one of those wars which appeared out of nothing and dominated the British public for a couple of months to defend a territory few could locate on a map or associate with. Described in Samuel Johnson's words as a place that "not even noble savages have dignified with habitation" (1771), it then assumed an iconic significance in the mind of the British public's imagination as the victory was a major factor in Margaret Thatcher's overwhelming electoral success in 1983.

Stanley, Fox Bay and Goose Green still resonate in the memories of many people. The late Brian Hanrahan as one the early "embedded" war journalists made his reputation out of the conflict which claimed about 900 lives overall. My experience of 24 hour wall-to wall media coverage of wars and conflicts dates from that period even though that only fully occurred in practice much later with the globalisation of news channels and the pervasiveness of the internet.

Some of the statistics relating to the Falklands still don't make much sense in the context of debt ridden austerity Britain. It has less than 3000 inhabitants supported by a permanent deployment of some 1300 military personnel according to the Guardian which cost an estimated £75 million in 2010-11 out of the defence budget. The islands have almost nothing to offer in terms of natural resources although, of course, there is a lot of optimistic speculation about the supposed 200 billion barrels of oil to be found on the sea beds around the islands. The recent government papers disclosed under the 30 year rule reveal that Mrs. Thatcher never expected the Argentinian government to undertake such a "stupid" act. However, history owes at least as much to folly as it does to caution.

So taking stock after more than 30 years, yet more Argentinian sabre-rattling has revived. Argentinian President Cristina de Kirchner has attacked the British government in an advertisement published in the Independent and the Guardian to reiterate the claim that Argentina "was forcibly stripped of the Malvinas... in a blatant exercise of 19th-century colonialism". Cameron has retaliated with a robust confirmation of Britain's commitment to the defence of the islands on the BBC's Andrew Marr show. The background to the resurgence of Argentinian hostility which is only expressed in these rhetorical skirmishes as yet is a deteriorating domestic background as it was in 1982 under Galtieri. Kirchner has accumulated a record of growing unpopularity, a refusal to pay the interest on massive external debt, corruption and a thriving black market in a climate of economic despair which has seen the nationalising of Repsol's majority stake in YPF, the national oil company and rampant inflation, estimated to be running at around 25%.

In the game of political football being played out in the press of the two nations, Britain may be said to be several goals ahead, as it in contrast can only lay claim to massive external debt and a climate of economic despair at the moment, although many would dispute the dismissal of corruption in the UK's case.

What the flare-up between does surface is the lack of long-term solutions on either side. What is to be the eventual fate of the Falklands? The islanders will have a referendum this year as to whether they remain under British sovereignty, although this is no more than a formality. This encourages hypocrisy on both sides. Britain has a record of invoking self-determination when it is expedient and ignoring it when it is not. There is the notorious eviction of the Chagos people over 40 years ago allowing the US military to set up a base on Diego Garcia. One could, of course, analyse numerous trouble spots of the world and find the British implicated due to the colonial past.

Will there be some outrageous action by the Argentinian government to attempt to reclaim Las Malvinas? This is unlikely but not impossible, given Argentina's current political instability and the way that colonialism is a very convenient scapegoat on which internal unrest and failures can be pinned. Witness the enduring spat between Japan and China over their disputed islands and how Chinese protests have been incited to deflect serious civil strife.

For both countries, reliance on the past can only compromise the future. What happens if substantial oil resources are found and what of the UK's moral obligation to share any spoils with Argentina which still has much of the profile of a third world country? What happens if we imagine the future with a number of tectonic shifts of global economic and political power in which South American as a continental bloc becomes much more important and flexes its muscles from new found prosperity and a growing influence of the Hispanic population in the United States? What price the defence of the Falklands then?

What counts as a nation state in today's world in which countries splinter into many parts on the grounds of self-determination? Is there indeed a compelling need as Paul Vallely has argued in *The Independent* (see article) for the independence of this tiny population?

Some Background Reading

[The president and the potbangers](#) , *The Economist* 29 September 2012

[The case for an independent Falklands](#) , by Paul Vallely, *Independent* 6 January 2013

[Falklands row: Sun takes out advert in Argentinian newspaper](#) , by Haroon Siddique, *Guardian* 4 January 2013

[Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's letter to David Cameron](#) , *Guardian* 2 January 2013

[¡Viva! La Mirada Invisible](#) , Reviewed by John Hutchinson March 2012