

The political cost to any British government of giving way on the Falklands would be prohibitively high and there is no strong need to pay it

George Philip argues that the war between the UK and Argentina changed the politics surrounding the Falkland Islands. Prior to 1982, the government was looking for a way to transfer authority. Now, since the memory of the war is still very much in the public mind, the British position is verging on intransigence.



A well-attended meeting at LSE in May to discuss ways forward for [UK-Argentina relations](#) vis-a-vis the Falklands included the participation of Argentine Ambassador Alicia de Castro and John Hughes, former British ambassador to Argentina. The general quality of the discussion was high, though I very much doubt that anybody's mind was changed as a result. That is because the issue is fundamentally political. Scholarly re-interpretations of the –in any case disputed– history of the Islands no longer cut much ice.

Ambassador de Castro spoke well and made some good points. Argentina has been a democracy since 1982 and I personally don't think that the Falkland Islanders would have much to fear if a future British government were to cut a deal with Argentina. There is a large 'Anglo' community in Argentina which shows no sign of being treated worse than any other Argentine citizens. There was also a horrible kind of equality under the military. The Junta killed more Argentine civilians than British soldiers. The Junta has in any case been completely discredited and many human rights abusers are now either dead or in gaol.

Moreover, the numbers of people involved are small even if the Falklanders decided not to stay on after a deal. In such an eventuality there would hardly be more human disruption than is caused routinely by such infrastructural developments as a new road or airline terminal.

The same of course can be said of Argentina. Argentina can live perfectly well without the Falklands, indeed it has done so since 1982, and they have enough economic problems to occupy policymakers fully –problems that potentially have an effect on 40 million or so people and not just a very few thousand.

No. The real issue is political. Britain went to war with Argentina in 1982 and blood was shed on both sides. The fact of the invasion is still on the public record and will not soon be forgotten. Moreover this was a war that Britain might easily have lost. It was no formality. I was at an earlier conference in Kent at which John Nott spoke. Nott was the British Minister of Defence at the time of the invasion and, in answer to a question, replied that he would personally not have sent the Naval Task Force to the South Atlantic. It seemed to him too risky. The historical documents that are starting to be released on the US side also show that most senior members of the Reagan administration thought like Nott rather than like Thatcher. This is one case in which the role of the individual did matter decisively. If the Task Force had not been sent, of course, Argentina would have won and the Islands would be Malvinas.

This recent history seems to me to indicate two serious weaknesses in the Argentina position. One is British public opinion. The British are a tradition minded people who are slow to change their ways of thinking. Anybody who doubts this should consider the popularity of the royal Diamond Jubilee earlier this month. I am often irritated by silly jokes about Hitler and World War Two, and then remember that many people in Britain still celebrate Guy Fawkes day (Guy Fawkes was executed in 1605). British public opinion is also rather romantic about the Navy ('Britannia rules the waves') especially as we now barely seem to have one, and the South Atlantic conflict was largely a naval operation, at least on the British side. Memories of the South Atlantic conflict are now part of British political culture and that will not change in my lifetime. This is also something of which the Falkland Islanders themselves are very much aware, and they have themselves used the symbolism of traditional Britain in their quest for popular support. The

political cost to any British government of giving way on the Falklands would be prohibitively high and there is no strong need to pay it.

The other constraining factor has to do with the scale of the British relationship with Latin America. This is quite limited. If we exclude Mexico and Colombia, which really don't care about the Falklands, then Britain has few significant interests in the region and therefore few potential sources of vulnerability for Argentina to exploit. This was brought out, ironically, by a speech given last year by Foreign Secretary William Hague, at Canning House in which he admitted that successive British governments had neglected Latin America and promised that this would change. Since then there has been turmoil in the Middle East, greater fiscal austerity in Britain and crisis in Europe. Given the scale of some of these problems, Latin American issues have once more vanished from the British parliament and press. The only real headline issue involving Latin America- with the possible exception of the Jeremy Clarkson affair- has been the renewed Cold War with Argentina over the Falklands and that is surely not what Hague had in mind when he talked of higher profile relationships. As an academic Latin Americanist, all that I have noticed from the present government have been cuts in scholarship money and a tightening of visa regulations.

This leads to an ironic conclusion. The invasion of the Falklands in 1982 was surely unethical but it was not stupid. It might easily have succeeded. I do not subscribe to the 'mad act of a Fascist junta' explanation for what happened. The better explanation is that the invasion was an extreme example of realist amorality – where there is indeed a clear link to the mentality of the 'dirty war'. Today Argentina is a democracy and can credibly claim that its domestic circumstances have changed. I certainly believe that they have. But the current Argentine establishment, many of whose members suffered under the military, have had to pay a political bill run up by the Junta.

Meanwhile the British 'take' on the issue has moved in the direction of intransigence. In 1981 the Foreign Office was trying to find a means of giving the Falklands away. Now it knows much better than to try. "It's the politics, stupid' –and the war changed the politics decisively.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the author

George Philip did his BA at Oriel College, Oxford where he graduated in PPE in 1972. He then did his doctorate at Nuffield College where he studied from 1972-75. After a year as a research fellow at the Institute of Latin American Studies in London, he joined the LSE in 1976. He has been here ever since, and is now Professor of Comparative and Latin American Politics.

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