

David Watt examines the growing rift between Britain and Argentina

These paltry islands keeping us apart

Britain's row with the Argentine over the Falkland Islands must be one of the most inconspicuous and unnecessary international disputes that has ever broken out between states. The territory in question is impoverished and inhospitable; neither country actually needs it for its own strategic purposes (alleged oil treasures are problematical and both Britain and the Argentine are well endowed with energy resources for the time being). Neither country has the slightest reason otherwise to quarrel with the other, and each has indeed every reason to be on excellent terms.

Britain made the largest contribution of any country to the Argentine's development in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the English visitor to Buenos Aires is constantly reminded by the tenuous connexion — the English and Scottish family names that crop up so unexpectedly linked up to Spanish; the Victorian pillars; the yellow — and admittedly, a villainous yellow that adorn the street corners; Sir Thomas Lawrence's debt, portrait of the Duke of Wellington which still looks down its long nose at the Argentinian upper crust from above the fireplace of the Jockey Club.

Altogether, in fact, Buenos Aires is the most European of South American capitals. Because it was too poor to afford slaves in the eighteenth century, and killed off the Indian population in the nineteenth, there is hardly a black or brown face to be seen.

With its theatres and art galleries and *belle-époque* buildings and tree-lined streets, it exudes an attractive pre-war cosmopolitanism. American culture is nowhere to be seen; and in such a city the British Embassy, a vast Italianate palazzo in magnifi-

cent grounds, still counts for something.

Moreover, the ruling military junta has far more important things on its mind than the Falklands. At home they are slowly emerging from a five-year nightmare of terrorist violence followed by their own campaign of hideous counter-repression in which several thousands of people disappeared in the clutches of semi-autonomous, but also semi-official, killer squads. The promise returned to democratic government is being made at a painfully slow pace, and real elections still look a long way off, but some effort is being made to give a reckoning of the disappearances and to regularise the status of the 600-plus "disappearances" who are still alive and in custody. The government is also struggling with an economy still suffering from the annual inflation rate of 85 per cent which is the economic consequence of their characteristic political arrangements — wage inflation and Peronist populism and absurdly bloated defence expenditure under the military.

Abroad, their first gaze falls not on the Falklands but on the crisis in Central America to which, like most other Latin American countries, they have extremely complicated reactions. The Argentine government does not like the idea of a marxist "belt" cutting the hemisphere in half — less perhaps because of the possibility of a southward collapse of the dominoes (the great mass of the lies between them and the Caribbean) as because, being right-wing military gentlemen, they disapprove of communism in principle.

On the other hand it suits the Argentine to remain a member of the "non-aligned" group in the UN — a position they share with Fidel Castro.



The point at issue: Grytuiken whaling station on the island of South Georgia.

The United States is Argentina's largest trade partner, but the country has cultivated at least a certain distance from the US for many years and has occasionally quarrelled violently with them, as when the Carter administration dropped expressions of desire to deal with the problem by a kind of Latin American consensus.

Moreover, trade with Cuba is considerable, and trade with the Soviet Union very large indeed. Argentinian officials display some slight embarrassment at this last fact, but the Soviet need for grain and meat is insatiable and the fact that Argentina supplies it without any of the difficulties that attend purchases from the US or other Western countries, brings its rewards in the form of Soviet support, or at least neutrality, in the UN, when awkward questions of human rights in Argentina are raised.

The Reagan administration is busily wooing the junta, which it sees as a potentially stabilizing factor on the scene, and seems to have established some links and understanding on the private level. But the interesting fact is that neither Argentinian internal politics nor the Argentinian desire to cut a credible figure on the Latin American scene allows the junta to be seen in public in any way a tool of

American policy. Consequently, if, as has been reported, the Argentinians are selling arms and technical advice to Guatemala and the Duarte government in El Salvador, it is being done very discreetly and is accompanied by loud expressions of desire to deal with the problem by a kind of Latin American consensus.

What such a consensus might mean in practice is almost impossible to say at present, but so far as one can make out from Argentinian sources the best that anyone hopes for is that at least the situation in El Salvador can be stabilised by military means now that the election is over. The Nicaraguan debacle, on the other hand, is regarded as a lost cause which can only be redeemed if Cuba and the United States can be induced to reach some new *modus vivendi* which makes allowance for a left-wing Nicaraguan government. The big questions are whether either Reagan or Castro are ready to do a deal of any kind, and if so what on earth it would consist of. The Argentinian notion seems to be that if Mexico, Brazil, Venezuela and Argentina (the "big boys" of the region) can bring their combined influence to bear on the parties, some pact on the lines of the *status quo* will emerge.

To the outsider it does not

look terribly plausible, but the whole calculation is another indication of the general realization that US power is not what it was, even in what was formerly considered the American sphere of influence. And as for the Europeans, this realization is accompanied in Latin America by a mixture of muted satisfaction and acute anxiety.

It is a time for hedging one's bets, and the Argentinians are hedging theirs. They are looking to the Russians and Americans with cynicism, and a dislike that varies in kind but not much in degree. They are looking to Europe again — with scepticism and anxiety about the future of the European Community. They are cultivating their Third World image and contacts and above all their newly re-ordered relationship with Brazil.

This convoluted back-ground is important for an understanding of the Falklands issue and how it is seen in Argentina. At the official level the Falklands are clearly regarded as a secondary issue, and at most times it is not permitted to interrupt the regime's desire for European — including British — links. What is the point of quarrelling violently with one's best European contact over a matter on

which Argentina can afford to lose?

On the other hand, the sense of remoteness and alienation, the domestic unease, the widespread desire to restore Argentina's pre-war status in Latin America — all these have created a strong popular sense of national pride whose external outlets (apart from football) are minimal. A right-wing military regime is not likely to be proof against the tug of these emotions, and a regime under political and economic pressure is not averse to a little naval diversion.

All this does not make Britain's task in dealing with the Falklands problem any easier in the short run. The Argentine claim is not going to disappear in the long run either. None the less, Argentina gives the impression of a country that has been very short of friendship and of international attention for some time. Certainly British governments have not given a great deal of either for a good many years. If further progress can be made on liberalizing the regime, broad strategic considerations suggest that a serious attempt to improve relations with this most interesting and dynamic country would be well worth the investment.

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