



Argentina makes new move to woo islanders

4 Nov 1974

By HUGH O'SHAUGNESSY in London

ARGENTINA'S slow and troublesome courtship of the 2,000 inhabitants of the Falkland Islands, Britain's South Atlantic colony, has reached a new stage.

After well over a year of negotiation, Britain, which exercises sovereignty over the islands, and Argentina, which claims the territory, have come to an agreement about who will supply vital fuel to the Falklands.

After some preparatory construction work is completed Yacimientos Petroliferos Fiscales (YPF), the Argentine State oil company, will sell fuel to the colony and another step will have been taken in the policy agreed between Argentina and Britain that the Argentines and the Falklanders should get to know one another better.

For years the Foreign Ministry in Buenos Aires boycotted the islands and allowed no passengers or goods to pass through Argentina for the colony.

All traffic had to make the long and uncomfortable boat trip between Port Stanley, the islands' capital, and the distant Uruguayan port of Montevideo.

There was no way of flying into the Falklands because there was no airport.

Britain discovered the islands in 1591 and set up a colonial administration in 1833, having ejected a few Argentine settlers who claimed — like the present Buenos Aires Government — that Argentina had inherited them from the old Spanish colonial empire.

Under the Falkland Islands Company the two main islands, with a total area of 4,600 square miles, went over to sheep-farming, producing very fine wool.

Under an agreement signed in 1971, however, the

Argentines decided they would stop trying to freeze the islands out but rather draw them in through warmth and hospitality.

Since then contacts have multiplied. LADE, an airline owned by the Argentine Air Force, runs a regular air service to a temporary airstrip at Port Stanley, and a permanent one is being built.

Thus the Falklanders have access to schools, hospitals and all the other services that Argentina can offer and the journey to the outside world is made considerably shorter.

A teacher has come over to Port Stanley from Argentina to teach Spanish. Her salary is rumoured to be considerably larger than the modest £3,000 (HK\$36,000) a year received by Mr Gordon Lewis, the British Governor and Commander-in-Chief.

Both London and Buenos Aires privately agree that everything must be done to show the islands, who are fiercely British, that all Argentines do not grow horns and a tail, a concept which was half believed by many islanders during the time of the Argentine boycott.

At the same time the latest wave of political violence in Argentina cannot do much to reassure feeling in Port Stanley.

From the British point of view it is obvious that the islands have lost the strategic importance they once had as a coaling station near Cape Horn before the Panama Canal opened. Then they were on the only sea route between the Atlantic and the Pacific.

But in changed circumstances Britain cannot simply decolonise in the face of the wishes of the islanders to stay British. There is still some way to go before the islanders decide that they want to throw in their lot with Argentina.

— OFNS.