

*British Survey*

## Anglo-Argentine Relations and the Falkland Islands *Feb 1976*

In a statement to the House of Commons on 14 January (*Hansard*, cols 391-7) the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, Mr James Callaghan, announced that the British Government had decided to recall its ambassador to Argentina for consultations. This followed a statement issued by the Argentine Government on the previous day which

65

said that 'it would be advisable for Britain to withdraw its ambassador' in view of 'the present state of affairs over the Malvinas [Falkland Islands] question'. At the same time, it announced that its ambassador to Britain, who had returned to Argentina in October 1975, would remain in Buenos Aires until further notice.

The immediate cause of the friction between the British and Argentine Governments is the Falkland Islands Economic Survey which was announced in October 1975. The survey team, under the leadership of Lord Shackleton, visited the islands in January 1976. Requested by the Falkland Islanders, the survey is non-political and, though commissioned by the British Government, independent in its nature. Its aim is to determine the prospects for, and the best means to achieve, the development and diversification of the territory's economy which at present depends entirely on wool. The survey team included experts on fisheries, oil and wool, these being regarded as the main areas of potential development.

### Mr Callaghan's Statement

Mr Callaghan told the House of Commons that Britain's traditional friendship with Argentina was marred only by issues arising from the Argentine claim to sovereignty over the Falkland Islands, whose inhabitants wished to remain British. Successive British Governments, he added, had undertaken to respect these wishes. At the same time they had recognised that the long-term interests of the islanders must lie in practical forms of association with the Argentine mainland. It was to this end that, between 1971 and 1974, the British and Argentine Governments had negotiated a series of arrangements designed to improve communications between the Falkland Islands and the Argentine mainland (see p 66). During 1975 a further significant development took place, namely recognition by all concerned, including the islanders, that the future development and diversification of the islands' economy could take place only in a spirit of co-operation with Argentina.

It was against this background, Mr Callaghan explained, that he had had, in recent months, a series of discussions with successive Argentine Foreign Ministers. In a meeting with the then Argentine Foreign Minister, Senor Robledo, in New York in September 1975, he had proposed that the two Governments should consider discussing the possibilities of economic co-operation in the South-West Atlantic region, and, in this context, had reminded him of a recent British report on the hydrocarbon prospects of the region (a copy of this report, by Professor D. H. Griffiths of Birmingham University, had previously been made available to the Argentine Government). He had also informed Senor Robledo of the setting up of the economic survey. In October, however, after the nomination of Lord Shackleton as the survey's leader, the Argentine Government had stated that the survey would not be welcome to them. (Later, in December, it refused the team transit through Argentina.) On 17 December, Mr Callaghan continued, in talks with the new Argentine Foreign Minister, Senor Aranz Castex, in Paris he had fully explained to

him the essentially independent nature of the survey. Unfortunately, it had not so far been possible to find the means of bridging the gap between Britain's proposals for talks on economic co-operation and Argentine insistence on simultaneous negotiations about the transfer of sovereignty. However, Mr Callaghan concluded, it remained his conviction 'that given good will on both sides, Britain and Argentina should be able to transform the area of dispute concerning sovereignty over the islands into a factor making for co-operation between the two countries which would be consonant with the wishes and interests of the Falkland Islanders'.

#### Background Information<sup>1</sup>

The Falkland Islands lie in the South Atlantic, some 480 miles (772.5 km) north-east of Cape Horn, and have a total land area of about 4,700 square miles (12,173 km<sup>2</sup>). At the end of 1973 the estimated population was 1,874, nearly all of British descent. About 80 per cent were born in the islands; most can trace their origins in the territory back to the nineteenth century and more than a thousand to 1850 or earlier.

The islands were probably sighted by the English captain John Davis in 1592 but the first authenticated sighting was that of the Dutch sailor Sebald de Weert in 1600. The first known landing was in 1690 by Captain John Strong, who gave the islands their English name after Viscount Falkland, Treasurer of the Navy. In 1764 a small French colony was established in East Falkland, but three years later the settlement was handed over to Spain. Meanwhile, in 1766, a British settlement of about a hundred people had been established at Port Egmont in West Falkland. When in 1770 a Spanish force compelled the British settlers to leave, this brought Spain and Britain to the verge of war, but in 1771, after protracted negotiations, the Spaniards handed back Port Egmont to Britain, which re-established the settlement but withdrew it again in 1774 on grounds of economy. The British claim to sovereignty was, however, maintained. The Spanish settlement on East Falkland was withdrawn in 1811.

In 1820 the Buenos Aires Government, which had formally declared its independence of Spain in 1816, sent a ship to the Falkland Islands to proclaim its sovereignty. A settlement was established at Puerto de la Soledad, the old Spanish settlement, in 1826 under the leadership of Luis Vernet, whom the Buenos Aires Government appointed Governor, despite British protests. Five years later, however, a United States warship, the *Lexington*, destroyed the fort at Soledad as a reprisal for the arrest of three American vessels by Vernet, who was attempting to establish control over sealing in the islands. Captain Silas Duncan, the commander of the *Lexington*, declared the Falklands free of all government and they remained once again without visible authority. In December 1833 a British warship

visited the settlement; the Argentine garrison left under protest and the British occupation of the islands was resumed. It has continued, without interruption, up to the present day.

Under the present constitution, introduced in 1964, the Falkland Islands Government is administered by a Governor aided by an Executive Council (two *ex officio*, two appointed unofficial and two elected members) and a Legislative Council (two *ex officio*, two nominated independent and four elected members). Elections for the Legislative Council are by universal adult suffrage which was introduced in 1949. During 1975 a Select Committee of the Legislative Council recommended certain changes in the constitution, and these are currently being considered by the British Government.

#### Argentine Territorial Claims

Argentina has put forward a claim to sovereignty over the Falkland Islands over a long period of years, mainly on the grounds that she has succeeded to rights claimed by Spain in the eighteenth century. The British Government has stated that it has no doubt of its sovereignty over the islands, which have been continuously, peacefully and effectively occupied by Britain since 1833.

The Falkland Islands' position as a non-self-governing territory has been debated regularly in the Fourth Committee of the United Nations and in its special committee of 24 (on colonialism). The elected representatives of the Falkland Islands have explained the population's wish to retain its association with Britain, and not to become independent or associated with any other country. Britain has pointed out that in these circumstances the Argentine claim is contrary to the principle of self-determination.

In 1965 the General Assembly approved a resolution inviting Britain and Argentina to hold discussions with a view to finding a peaceful solution to the problem, bearing in mind the interests of the islanders. Subsequently, discussions between the two Governments were conducted through diplomatic channels. In 1969 Argentina made known its readiness to discuss lifting the ban on direct communications between the mainland and the islands and special talks on promoting communications began in London, in 1970, between Argentine and British delegations, the latter including participants from the Falkland Islands. As a result of these and further discussions held in Buenos Aires in 1971, agreement was reached over a wide field covering air and sea communications, postal services, educational and medical facilities for Falkland Islanders in Buenos Aires, and customs measures. During the winter of 1972 the Argentine Air Force built a temporary airfield at Stanley; construction of a permanent airfield at Cape Pembroke, financed by a grant from the British Government, is expected to be completed in 1976. In 1974 Britain and Argentina signed two further agreements relating to the Falklands: one to facilitate trade and the carriage of goods between the Falkland Islands and the Argentine mainland, and the other to allow the Argentine state petroleum company (YPF) to supply the islands with petroleum products.

<sup>1</sup> For further information on the Falkland Islands see *The Falkland Islands and Dependencies*, CO1, FSD/13.