

‘Falklands Calling’: Exploring the Life of the Local Community in Terms of Global Interaction

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the degree of international interaction of the inhabitants of the Falkland Islands. The paper argues that the way the islanders see themselves and interact with the rest of the world has evolved after, and as a result of, the 1982 war. The war was fought between Argentina and the United Kingdom for the sovereignty of the Islands. While the status of the Islands in terms of national belonging did not vary significantly after the conflict, the Falkland Islands have undergone a transformation. In the last 34 years, the territory prospered in the form of economic and population growth. Islanders have experienced a transition from a small and isolated community to a more connected society. Demographic, social and cultural changes will be examined along with some thoughts about the likely future scenarios.

Keywords: Falkland Islands; Falklands War; local community; international interaction; British national identity

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Introduction

The Malvinas/Falklands war was an armed conflict between the United Kingdom and Argentina that lasted for 74 days (2 April - 14 June 1982) leaving approximately one thousand dead behind: 255 British, 649 Argentine and 3 civilian Islanders perished in the battlefield. The reason for war was the claim of sovereignty over the Malvinas/Falkland Islands, which had been part of the British overseas territories since the eighteenth century in spite of the fact that Argentina had always alleged that the archipelago belonged to its own national territory. Although the war was relatively short and did not involve a great number of losses, it represented an important blow to the collective memory of both nations. For the British, it was the last 'colonial' war and one which allowed Margaret Thatcher to stay in power for almost a decade after the British victory. For the Argentine, it was the only war fought and lost in the twentieth century and it brought about the fall of the dictatorship.

Nowadays, even though more than 30 years have passed since the war took place, there is still confrontation between the two nations over the same issues and the basis of the conflict remains substantially unsolved. The claims presented by Argentina are based on the concept of territorial integrity while Britain focuses on the islanders' wishes and vigorously proclaims its commitment to defend them against any aggression. This is shown by the continuous presence of a combined naval, air force and army deployment on the islands. Britain has always insisted that the power to decide should be given to the local inhabitants. To be consistent with this line of thought, a referendum was celebrated on the islands in March 2013 asking the Falklanders if they wished to remain British. As expected, 99.8 per cent voted 'yes' (Milmo, 2013). The government of Argentina gave no credibility to this referendum and assigned no legal value to it.

The central problem of the whole conflict revolves around the notion of sovereignty. The dispute over the Falkland Islands certainly has a long and complicated history that dates back to their discovery: Spaniards, British, Dutch and Portuguese all claim to have discovered the land. From the moment the British colonists settled there in 1833, the Argentine government has made several unsuccessful attempts to regain the archipelago. In the second half of the twentieth century Argentina submitted an official report to the United Nations laying claim to the islands. This led to resolution number 2065 (XX) from 16 December 1965 titled "Question of the Falkland Islands (Malvinas)". It "invites the Governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom to proceed without delay with the negotiations [...] bearing in mind [...] the interests of the population of the Falkland Islands" (UN Resolution 2065, 1965). This is a key point which implies that the UN has always considered the Falklands' case as a colonial situation, which needs to be solved with the participation of the local population. However, this has never been accepted by Argentina which wants government-level discussions with a commission formed by international members. As Calvert (1983) argues, "the claims on both sides are based on historical facts that are by turn vague, confused and disputed, and if there is to be any resolution of the question a great deal of homework will have to be done first by both parties" (p. 405).

The Malvinas/Falkland Islands

The Falkland Islands are located in the South Atlantic, 480 km away from the mainland coast of South America. The archipelago comprises two main islands and about 700 islets, with an overall extension of 12,000 km². Both main islands are mountainous, and most of the land is used for sheep keeping and farming. The climate is heavily influenced by the ocean, with high levels of humidity and strong winds.

According to the latest Falkland Islands Census from 2012, the population consists of 2,562 permanent residents (excluding military personnel). 74.7 % of the total population lives in Stanley, the capital city. The main religion is Christianity and the official language is English. 61 % of the population is under the age of 45. As for their place of birth, 47% of the overall population was born in the Falkland Islands, 28% born in the UK, 10% in St. Helena, 6% in Chile and 8% born elsewhere. The Argentine living on the Islands constitute a small group of 1.3% (Falkland Islands Census, 2012).

The population of the Islands at the time of the war was over 1,800 inhabitants, as recorded in the 1980 census. As indicated in the State of Falkland Islands Economy Report, an official report launched in 2015, there was an increase of the Islands' population after the war:

Population increased throughout the 1980s and 1990s but has since remained fairly stable since the early 2000s. During the first half of the 20th century the population was higher than in the 1980s but started to decline in the 1960s, 1970s. After the 1982 conflict the Islands' population started to grow again (p. 14).

The Islands still hold a military base of around 1,700 men, both military and civilian, for self-defence. This large number of military personnel is justified by the authorities:

The Falkland Islands Governor hopes for peaceful co-existence between Argentina and the Falkland Islands, without diluting or adapting the position on sovereignty. For as long as there is a perceived threat from Argentina, a military presence on the Islands will be maintained on a scale sufficient to deter aggression and provide a holding capability pending reinforcement (Falkland Islands Government's website).

For the first time, the 2012 Census asked people to state their National Identity. As the official report states, "this was included to ascertain the cultural group that people most closely identify with (and need not be related to the person's place of birth or citizenship)". The results show that 57% of residents consider their national identity to be 'Falkland Islander'; 24.6% consider themselves British; 9.8% St. Helenian and 5.3% Chilean. There were 89 respondents who described their national identity as "Other".

The Falkland Islands form part of the United Kingdom overseas territory. The supreme authority is the Queen and a Governor exercises power on the territory on her behalf. The Islanders are autonomous for internal affairs, but defence and foreign affairs are the responsibility of the British Government. The Falklands Constitution

(from 2009) established an Executive Council that advises the Governor and a Legislative Assembly with ten members. The Islanders sustain they are a United Kingdom Overseas Territory *by choice*, according to the official Government website. Before the war, the British Nationality Act had been reformed in 1981, reducing considerably British citizenship rights to the inhabitants of the Falklands. After the war, however, the Falklanders were granted full citizenship rights in 1983.

During the war, the idealisation of the Islanders and their way of life was used as yet another strategy to create a favourable public opinion for the retaking of the Falklands. According to Melchionne (1986), the social construction of the images of the Islanders reveals deep fantasies about the British and their national self-image. He argues that “the British press has popularized the notion that the ‘Kelpers’ are ‘more British than the British’, which has led to certain misconceptions. Often, British people from the UK who visit the Falklands expect that Kelper life will mirror contemporary rural English society, and this is not always the case” (p. 33). The residents of the Falkland Islands are nicknamed ‘Kelpers’, a name that comes from kelp, which is a large brown type of seaweed that grows around the islands.

Femenia (1996) identifies the following two complementary categories for the manner in which the residents of the Islands were viewed by the British throughout the war:

- (1) Being tremendously loyal and trusting, British in stock and tradition, remarkably independent, brave people, also quiet and suffering people who have lost their freedom.
- (2) Victims of naked aggression, carried out in shameful and disreputable way, incarcerated in an Argentine jail [...] (p. 140).

Another argument that is frequently used in favour of the justification of having engaged in warfare is that of the prosperity to the territory. In other words, the war provided the islanders freedom from the enemy, which, in turn, brought peace and prosperity. In his commemoration speech for the thirtieth anniversary of the war in 2012, David Cameron stated that Britain would not waver in its support for the Islands and their people, who, according to him, should be proud for the prosperous and secure future they have been able to build since the end of the armed conflict (Strange, 2012, p. 15).

This official line of thought was enlarged by William Hague (2012), who was Cameron’s Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth affairs from 2010 to 2014. He enumerates the different ways in which the archipelago has prospered:

Over the past 30 years, much has changed. Despite the challenges of relative geographic isolation, the Falklands have grown and prospered. The population has grown and doubled to about 3,000. GDP rose from £5 million in 1980 to more than £100 million in recent years. And in the face of a sustained Argentine effort to prevent them from doing so, the Falkland islanders have developed a thriving local economy, with a responsibly managed fishery, growing tourism based on their unique natural environment, and the beginnings of a commercial hydrocarbons industry (p. 22).

Fishing and sheep farming have always been the two main economic activities on the islands. In recent years, however, the hydrocarbon industry has come into play. From 2010 till the present, the oil and gas exploration has boosted the local economy, with foreign companies investing in offshore exploration. According to the Falkland Islands Economy Report (2015), “because most goods consumed in the Falkland Islands are imported this makes the Islands highly integrated in the world economy. The economy is vulnerable to yield and world market prices of fish, wool, and meat. The government wishes to diversify the economy to decrease volatility and risk, but this is difficult for a small economy with limited resources to benefit from economies of scale” (p. 5).

Although the economy is growing, certain aspects, such as the limited size of the territory and the geographical isolation cannot be denied. The remote position of the Islands is one of their greatest problems: distance to markets and transportation are the main obstacles that local businesses have to face. Some other drawbacks are shortage of skilled labour, access to finance, taxation, cost of electricity, external politics, and telecommunications (FI Economy Report, 2015, p. 24).

Tourism has become another stable source of income, generating around 10 million pounds per year. Many international tourists feel drawn by the unique and untouched natural resources that the islands possess. Historic war spots also attract many veterans that return to the islands to visit memorable battlefields. The Falkland Islands is a popular destination for cruise ships sailing in the South Atlantic. According to the Falkland Islands Tourist Board, “the number of cruise passenger arrivals grew from a few thousand in mid 1990s to over 60,000 during the 2008/09 season” (Ibid.).

About local media, there are no daily newspapers in the Islands but there are two weekly newspapers. The more important one is the *Penguin News*: founded in 1979 and published by Mercopress, it is issued weekly with an online edition. The second newspaper in relevance is the *Teaberry Express*, with a weekly publication by The Falkland Islands News Network. There are seven FM radio stations and one AM; two local television stations run by the British Forces Broadcasting Service. An interesting piece of information that arises from the latest Census is that 77% of households have access to the internet, which grants quick access to the world news and services (2012 Census). This high number of internet availability for families may also suggest a desire for the inhabitants of this remote place to be in permanent connection with the outside world.

Travel communications between the Islands themselves and abroad have always been difficult. Prior to the war, the main link with the outside world was a weekly flight to and from Patagonia (Comodoro Rivadavia, Argentina) operated by LADE, the Argentine government air service. At present, there are weekly flights from Chile, operated by the Chilean airlines LAN. From Britain, there are MoD (Ministry of Defence) charter flights twice a week. People from Argentina can visit the Islands without special restrictions, according to the information provided in the official webpage of the Islands.

Haynes (2012), defence editor of the *Times*, published a newspaper article titled “The memories of war are vivid, but islanders know it led to greater prosperity”. The article is mainly based on the narration of the life-experiences of some residents interviewed

by the author, who proudly noted how their remote territory has prospered in the last thirty years: the population has doubled, the fishing industry has grown and oil was discovered offshore. Haynes concludes that the whole transformation has not only expanded the Islands' economy but it has also boosted the native people's confidence (p. 8-9).

Conclusions

All in all, this paper has tried to illustrate the current socio-economic situation of the Falklands Islands in terms of their connection with the rest of the world. Issues such as economy, resources, demography, and international tourism have been covered. In conclusion, it can be argued that the Falkland Islands have experienced a boom in many senses, especially after the war, which proved beneficial to the growth of the local community in several aspects. The perspectives for the future are also encouraging. The islanders feel very proud of their identities as Falklanders and wish to preserve their customs and traditions, but at the same time they strongly wish to become more integrated into the global market, culture and society; in opposition to a post- or anti-globalised tendency that some societies are experiencing nowadays.

I will finish this paper with a short passage extracted from the Falkland Islands government's website, in the section titled 'Our People', which perfectly summarises some of the ideas expressed in the paper and the spirit of the community:

Our growing community of 2,563 people is diverse; with people from over 60 nations living in the Islands we are a truly cosmopolitan society. The heart of our community lies in the families who can trace their heritage back through 9 generations in the Islands [...] Through our own efforts, our economy allows us to enjoy excellent health services and education provision, with Falkland Islanders studying for their A-levels and degrees overseas, paid for by the Falkland Islands Government. It is testament to the strong bond our young people have with their home that nearly all return on completion of their studies. Externally, we are equally well connected. Our international port and airport welcome people, trade and business from all over the world. We have broadband internet access provided via satellite, which even our remote farms enjoy. The Falkland Islanders are a peaceful, hard-working and resilient people. Our society is thriving and forward-looking ('Our People', FI official website).

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