

FALKLAND ISLANDS



United Nations General Assembly

Special Committee of 24 on Decolonisation

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Statement by
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Member of the Legislative Assembly

Mr. Chairman, Honourable delegates, ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee and speak to the draft resolution before you. I am an elected Member of the Legislative Assembly of the Falkland Islands and today therefore am representing the views of those Islanders.

Argentina demands negotiations with the United Kingdom over the Falkland Islands, but negotiations are acceptable to that country only if they end in a full transfer of sovereignty. Argentina's sovereignty claims are unfounded. The Falkland Islands never formed part of Argentina and no civilian population was ever expelled from the Islands. There were no indigenous peoples to be expelled, as happened in Argentina. People in the Falkland Islands have settled and developed the Islands naturally over the past 178 years. It is our land and our people.

Falkland Islanders do not wish to see a change from British sovereign status. I therefore urge all delegates not to adopt this resolution as presented, without reference to the wishes of the Falklands people and their fundamental right to self determination. Self determination is a modern and global value, a cornerstone to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter. It applies equally to all people of the World – including the Falkland Islands.

The Falkland Islands are self sufficient and self governing, with the exception of external affairs and defence. A strong defence is important as we live close to a neighbour whose aggressive stance against the Falkland Islands has been demonstrated over many years, not least in 1982. Events that followed the 1982 invasion led to a return to democracy in Argentina, democracy that they still enjoy today, actually the longest period of democracy since the 1930's. Despite the defeat in 1982, Argentina continues with its attempts to apply diplomatic pressure and rhetoric while introducing aggressive sanctions against our people.

Argentina claims sovereignty over the Falkland Islands on historic, geographic and legal criteria inherited when it colonised the country subsequently named Argentina. These criteria are flawed. They are based on myth and self imposed changes to historical facts to suit its own ends. Argentina's position is neither logical nor coherent. Argentina argues for de-colonisation of the Falkland Islands from the United Kingdom only so that it alone can re-colonise those same Islands.

I believe, Mr. Chairman, that we in the Falkland Islands enjoy a level of independence and democracy that many nations would be proud of. Every four years, we vote for eight of our people as Members of the Legislative Assembly and we form our own elected Government of choice. Our Government manages an economy that is both robust and varied. We enjoy a high standard of living, a highly regarded education system and a medical service free at the point of use. In the last few decades we have seen our population grow at a very healthy rate and we look forward to a safe and prosperous future.

With the introduction of the Falklands fisheries zone in 1986, additional revenue was raised by licensing foreign fishing vessels and charging fees for transshipment of cargoes, In 1990, when we established the full 200 nautical mile Outer Conservation and Management Zone, revenue rose even higher. Local companies had the

confidence to form joint ventures with these foreign vessel owners, thus enhancing their participation as well as their rewards from this valuable asset. Many Islanders now own their own vessels and are extremely successful.

The delicate balance and bio-diversity of this eco system has been well recognised by successive Falkland Islands Governments and considerable effort and funds have been employed both to conserve and manage this valuable resource, so ensuring its long term future.

Wealth created by the fisheries was carefully managed by the Falkland Islands Government and the additional income enabled greater monetary assistance and support to be given to the farming community. This, in turn, led to diversification into new rural businesses, new crops and new breeds of sheep producing finer wool and / or meat. The construction of a European Union approved abattoir enabled meat products to be sold into new markets across Europe.

Tourism has increased and the Islands have come to be recognised as one of the world wildlife hotspots. Every year, cruise ships calling into both Stanley and the outlying Islands disembark thousands of tourists who can enjoy this spectacle in a safe and eco-friendly environment. Many tourists also visit to walk the battle fields of the 1982 conflict. Veterans, both Argentine and British, return to these sites to lay their ghosts to rest.

New schools have been built and our children receive free education to a level that would be envied in many countries of the world. Results have been impressive in GCSE examinations and higher education and many of our youngsters have graduated with degrees in medicine, veterinary science, engineering, law and accountancy. With renewed political, social and economic stability these youngsters are returning to the Islands to work, thus reversing the trend of the situation prior to 1982.

Some 1,000 kilometres of road and 'all weather tracks' have been built across the Islands and we have a ferry service that links the two main Islands, East and West Falkland, and provides a shipping link to all outlying Islands thus opening up new opportunities in trade and commerce. We enjoy the advantages of an international airport.

Our people benefit from a superb medical service based at a modern hospital with our own doctors operating a general practice type service with specialist skills being brought in to provide backup as required. Patients requiring other treatments can be flown out to the United Kingdom or to modern hospital facilities in Chile.

Other benefits bestowed on Islanders as a result of their improved economic situation include television, telephone, facsimile, internet and e-mail links. Salaries, pensions and benefit supplements have all risen to a level comparable to those of Western Europe thus allowing us to freely compete for high quality professional staff, including medical staff, teachers and others from across the world.

For some time, oil has been thought to exist within the territorial waters of the Falkland Islands. The drilling round in 1998 showed we had some very rich source rock but sadly no commercial finds were discovered. We are now well into the second

drilling round and oil has been brought to the surface but, as yet, it has not been determined if it is commercially viable. We make no allowance in our budget deliberations for any oil revenue.

Following the last change of Government in Argentina, our relationship has grown worse to the extent that there are now attempts made to disrupt and damage the Falkland Islands economy. In the 1990's, we enjoyed closer relations with Argentina; there were joint fisheries research cruises, a joint area of co-operation for minerals and an Argentine Foreign Minister trying to win over the hearts and minds of the Islanders. Unfortunately, all of that has now changed with Argentina pulling out of these agreements unilaterally. Presidential Decree 256 illegally demands that vessels transiting to the Falkland Islands through Argentine waters must gain signed permission from Argentina. All companies involved in legitimate and legal oil exploration in Falkland waters are threatened and any company with duplicate operations inside Argentina is penalised. We impose severe limitations on fish stocks in our zone only to see Argentina setting impossibly high quotas so threatening stocks within the whole South West Atlantic. Furthermore Argentina has banned all over-flights of its territory with regard to tourist ship crew and passenger exchanges.

The challenges we face are many. Our approach is not to react to each and every report but to continue to develop the economy in our way, and to ensure that we are not diverted by outside pressure. Our focus must not be diverted by antagonistic attempts to thwart us in the pursuit of our aims. We must concentrate on our goals and our agenda, not someone else's.

We are accused by Argentina of having an 'imported, temporary' population. I would suggest our people are the same as many other 'people', descending from immigrants to the Americas in the 19th Century. Some 22 genuine civilians remained when Britain re-asserted its sovereignty in 1833, the last one dying in Stanley in 1871. A recent census of our current population showed that we have peoples of British, Chilean, French, St Helenian, Australian, Russian and Argentine origin, even since 1982 some families from Argentina have settled in Stanley. We are a small country of only some 3,000 people but we have been in existence for over 178 years, suffering both good times and hardships together and have developed our own unique culture and institutions.

Our population may be small in number of people but does that give us any fewer rights than the peoples of Argentina or Uruguay? Surely, we have the same rights to our land as the majority of Argentines have to theirs? We have chosen not to become independent from Europe like Argentina or Uruguay. We are a genuine and distinct 'people' within a distinct geographical area. We are a people in our own right. Everything we have, our roads, our industries, our education system and our infrastructure, was developed and put in place by us – Falkland Islanders.

Mr. Chairman, your predecessor Mr. Donatus Keith St Aimee visited Argentina and no doubt received a very biased briefing. He was invited to the Falkland Islands in order to experience the reality of the Falklands but did not visit. Mr. Chairman I hope that you are a man who is open to the truth as I would now like to invite you, publicly, to visit the Falkland Islands to see for yourself our unique way of life and the freedoms we enjoy.

We do not feel that we are a downtrodden colony of an old Imperial Britain. We are proud, economically entirely self sufficient and our relationship with Great Britain regarding external affairs and defence is one of consultation, dialogue and partnership. I have asked delegates earlier but I will ask them again now, please respect our people's wishes and our right to self determination. We do not wish Argentina or any country to dictate our future, so in your considerations today I ask you to recognise the primacy of our right to self determination above anything and everything else.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for allowing me to speak to this Committee.