

Legacy

The inhabitants of the Falkland Islands have held a referendum in which they overwhelmingly affirmed their attachment to the Old Country and the Union Jack. As well they might because the Old Country is all that stands between those 2,563 islanders and 40 million angry Argentines. It has never been a secret that the Falklanders are gaucho-phobic.

In 1980 Rex Hunt was appointed Governor of the Falkland Islands, tasked with the ticklish mission of softening up the inhabitants for an eventual Argentine takeover. He was soon obliged to report to London, "There is no way we will convince these islanders that they will be better off as part of Argentina."

What was not known at the time by the British public, or the islanders, was that the government of then prime minister Margaret Thatcher was discretely negotiating with the ghastly Argies to find a suitable formula for the conversion of the Falklands into Las Malvinas.

The British economy at the beginning of the 1980s was in a slump. The Tories of the time fervently believed, like those of today, that the best medicine was to cut government expenditure to the bone, nay, to the very marrow, and Whitehall's beady eye had spied this little remaining shred of empire and cried, Waste!

There were then around eighteen hundred Falklandians. About the population of a modest village. A village located as far south from the equator as London is north from it, or, to put it another way, a very great distance from Whitehall. This made the villagers vulnerable in an age when British interests in the South Atlantic region amounted to a big fat nothing. But these pesky islands were still on Britain's books and they were making horrible red ink (the cost of the Governor's plumed hat alone was enough to outweigh the value of these perishing rocks to the Crown). It is well known: Tories hate red.

The Falklands are a BOT (British Overseas Territory), the newspeak name for what was once called a Crown Colony. Thus the Falkland folk were dependants of the UK. This and the fact that we were talking about no more than a couple of thousand sheep shaggers made the islanders eminently disposable. They were doomed to the gauchos.

However, this story is set in the level of history that Fernand Braudel called the *courte durée*, the story of events, politics and people. This is the level where an apparently clear historical trend can abruptly change direction due to the unanticipated behaviour of a few individuals. It is also the level where we often see the appearance of unintended consequences, as our tale will presently demonstrate.

Back to Whitehall, where the Secretary of State for Defence, John Nott (once famously described as a "here today, gone tomorrow politician", a perfect example of the *courte durée*), was bleeding the Royal Navy with the conviction of a disciple of Galen laying on the leeches. The navy brass protested strenuously at this draining of their strength but to no avail. No doubt the admirals pointed to the Law of Unintended Consequences, the military always do in these cost-cutting situations. Perhaps Nott should have listened this time.

The 1981 Defence White Paper detailed the planned cuts. Since this was a public document the generals holding power in Buenos Aires soon found out that the British were going to decommission HMS Endurance, a Royal Navy patrol vessel. This jolly red icebreaker had the job of sailing around the southern ocean waving the Butcher's Apron at the sheep and the penguins and the gauchos and generally letting the world know that this was all British thank you very much.

Now a gunboat could not have resisted an invasion, but its presence sent a signal. And in international politics signals are of great moment. Too busy chasing the holy grail of über-austerity Thatcher's government forgot about this detail of diplomacy and went for the small saving that would eventually cost the country dear.

When the Argentine junta saw that the Royal Navy would no longer be flag waving in Las Malvinas, they interpreted the White Paper as a flag of surrender. Which was in essence true. Unfortunately, instead of waiting patiently for the now-ripe plum to drop into their laps, the military decided to play war games to distract the unhappy gauchos from the miserable economy in their country.

Having seen the British white flag Argentina's rulers assumed they could grab the islands with a minimum of fuss and, while the Brits might huff and puff, I say old chap, they wouldn't actually do anything. Simply by conquering a clutch of kelpers, the junta would be heroes, Las Malvinas would be Argentine and all the gauchos would forget about the high price of maté. A glittering prospect for men who liked uniforms, colourful sashes, large shiny medals and power.

The wannabe heroes' medal hopes were not entirely unfounded. After all, the British had clearly indicated they were broke and, surely, the last thing a hard-up government might want was a war eight thousand miles from the homeland. It was also quite evident that the Old Country considered the islanders a nuisance, a post-imperial loose end. The junta perceived no risk and much *gloria* and made their plans for an invasion.

This was neither sporting nor gentlemanly of the generals but then what do you expect from characters whose idea of politics was throwing people from helicopters into the Rio de la Plata. Only when Argentines dressed as civilians landed on South Georgia, did the UK grasp that this bunch of uniforms was not playing cricket. The British were nonetheless surprised when on 2nd April 1982 Argies dressed as commandos barged into Stanley, the little BOT's capital, and declared, Viva Las Malvinas, Viva Argentina! Really, very rude.

And so the British woke up to the first unintended consequence in the Falklands story. The Argentines soon met the next one: the British Armada. A total of 127 ships formed the British Task Force, including two aircraft carriers, a submarine and the QE2. Not bad for a bankrupt nation. (The Spanish Task Force of 1588 had 130 vessels but, *ay de mí*, no aircraft carriers or submarines.)

It is a sweet little historical coincidence that this flotilla set off for war against the former Spanish colony just 6 years short of the 400th anniversary of the sailing of the Spanish Armada. Somehow I think those old sea dogs, Hawkins, Drake, Frobisher and all, would have rather liked this. For, unlike the Spanish Armada, Admiral Maggie's marine expedition was successful.

The Brits had come over all Battle of Britainish. Göring or Galtieri, it didn't matter, they were going to fight by golly. Those kelpers were kith and kin. Britannia would not desert her kelpers, she would fight the Argies on the beaches, in the fields and in the hills and so on.

As we have seen, fighting on beaches, or hills, indeed fighting anywhere, was not at all what Argentina's generals had in mind. As is well known, this unexpected consequence cost them their glorious victory, their jobs and their freedom.

Lucky Maggie was the one who got the laurels and went on to become a living legend. What's delicious is that her government's expensive blunder proved to be the very engine of her rise to Tory superstardom. O, fickle hand of fate.

It is now 2013 and Thatcher is long gone from the political scene. But the Iron Lady's legacy still hangs like an albatross around the British government's neck. True, the Falklands' seas may hold interesting quantities of oil and the local economy is flourishing, but to what extent these factors can offset the financial and diplomatic costs of this distant colony is impossible to say.

It is a pricey legacy. The Falklands' defences are formidable. The Royal Navy has a destroyer, a supply vessel, a patrol boat and, it is said, a Trafalgar-class nuclear submarine in the area. The British Army maintains a 1200-strong garrison on East Falkland, while the locals do their bit by serving part-time in the FIDF (Falkland Islands Defence Force), a company-sized light infantry unit. The Royal Air Force has a new airbase at Mount Pleasant with three flights on hand: two Sea King anti-submarine helicopters, a VC10, a Hercules C3 and four Eurofighter Typhoons. Rapier surface-to-air missile sites dot the islands. The annual cost for all this defending is an estimated £365 million which is more than £140,000 per Falklander. Well over two hundred times the per capita cost of defending a Brit resident in the UK.

Against this gold-plated version of a gunboat any future Argie invasion of the Crown's outpost doesn't stand a chance. Presidente Cristina Fernández de Kirchner can lump it with her threats to put the squeeze on the Falklands' economy. Try that and you can forget about exporting your beef and your wine to our green and pleasant land, madam.

When the results of the Falklands' plebiscite were announced Prime Minister David Cameron was proud to proclaim the islanders' right to self determination and he boldly defied the Bitch of BA to do her worst: "The Falkland Islands may be thousands of miles away but they are British through and through and that is how they want to stay. People should know we will always be there to defend them." Somewhere, Churchill must be smiling at this staunch stand (if not the limp rhetoric).

It is perhaps unkind, at this moment of imperial jubilation, to note that this whole thing is a thoroughly cheesy exercise in colonial hypocrisy. Other subjects of Her Majesty have, over the years, also sought help from Her Majesty's Government in their hour of need. But these subjects did not qualify for the gold-plated-Armada treatment since they were not kith and kin, being a bit on the dusky side or having slitty eyes as the Duke of Edinburgh might put it.

For the connoisseur of historical irony the Falklands saga has much to offer. How absolutely delightful it is that a Tory minister, in a desperate attempt to save a few quid, ends up creating a legacy of unending, useless expenditure. And a sacred cow to boot. Yesterday's sheep shaggers are

now plucky Brits and thus untouchable. Amazingly enough, the Argentine invasion of their village was the best thing that ever happened to them.

But who knows? Maybe there is another unintended consequence in the history pipeline. Maybe the area around the Falklands will see the world's next big oil strike and Britain will become fantastically rich as a result. In which case that here-today-gone-tomorrow politician of 30 years ago, whose name everybody has forgotten, will be the zero who became the unintentional hero.