

The Geopolitics of the South Atlantic: The Falklanders Have the Right to be Stupid

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When there is a 99.8% vote for something, either it isn't a democracy or it is a very stupid question. Nobody has ever disputed that the majority of the Falkland Islanders wish to remain British. The point of the referendum was simply to annoy and upset Argentina, and that is very stupid indeed.

You cannot escape geography. The trade and communication links of the Falklands should naturally be with Latin America, not with another small island half the world away. Given that Latin America is undergoing an economic, cultural and political resurgence that is truly exciting, while the UK is in an accelerating spiral of decline, that should be a good thing. Unless you are very stupid.

David Cameron is fond of citing individual cases of families in the UK whose benefits cost the British taxpayer over £30,000 per year. But each and every family in the Falkland Islands costs the British taxpayer ten times that – something which Cameron does not detail.

But the first expenditure is motivated by compassion, which enjoys precious little political and media support. The second expenditure is driven by militarism and jingoism, which can never be questioned and enjoy unlimited political and media support.

Britain's ability to sustain the Falklands will not last forever, not least militarily. With expenditure cuts and every last penny of discretionary expenditure going into the black hole marked "Trident", Britain would be hard pushed to re-invade the Isle of Man, let alone the Falklands. The inability of the islanders to read the writing on the wall is astonishing. They have all the long term vision of that other island race, the dodo.

But they do have the right to be stupid. Attachment to the rule of international law is central to my belief on how the world should be run, and I am obliged to say that, in international law, Argentina's claim to the Falkland Islands is a nonsense. The Argentinians are not the indigenous inhabitants of the islands, nor does the Argentine government represent the indigenous population of the Falklands. The large majority of Argentinians are not even the indigenous population of Argentina. They are simply a rival bunch of colonialists, very many of British descent.

Like Diego Garcia, which should and must be returned to its native population, any genuine indigenous population would have the right to the islands in international law under decolonisation. But there is not one. A rival and defeated colonial occupier does not have the claims of an indigenous population. There is no important rival here to the principle of self-determination in the legal argument.

The Falklanders do have the right to be stupid. The referendum is a prime example of how to be stupid, as it is the opposite of the link-building and cooperation that needs to be done. The potential oil fields have been greatly exaggerated, but what oil there is lies under deep water and is already very difficult; potential conflict blights the possibilities for investment completely. Cooperation is in everybody's interest.

Were I the Argentinian government, I would smother the Falklands with love. I would completely open all air links and sea routes. I would initiate a regular free postal service to forward on mail through Argentina. I would provide an air ambulance service on permanent standby to whip very serious cases from the Falklands to the mainland for free treatment. I would organise a regular supply ship of subsidised goods and food. I would provide free university scholarships to all Falklanders. I would give a large government subsidy to any company in Argentina which employs a Falklander.

I would also work hard on the darker diplomatic arts. I would identify a couple of Falkland Island councillors and put ten million dollars each into numbered Swiss accounts for them, on condition that they facilitate the provision of the free air ambulance service (which is easy to reconcile the conscience to, and an easy way to start). I would put attractive young Argentinian agents into the path of Falklanders, any Falklanders, at every opportunity.

I appreciate that all Argentinian offers would suffer initial rebuff. But Argentina should keep trying. Switch off the rhetoric, and turn up the love. Geography and economic trends are with the Argentines here. The Falklanders do have the right to choose. Argentina's task is to change their minds.

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