

Doing the bulldog thing

Some said it was war, to others it was more like comic opera. Most people's knowledge of the Falkland Islands was limited to what they had read in their stamp album but they were sure that it was a place worth defending against a vile foreign dictatorship. The Argentinians were rather better known, since their football team was once called "animals" by the then England team manager Alf Ramsey, who was not averse to including one or two cloggers in his own side.

The British fleet which was despatched to deal a mighty blow at the invaders of the Falklands sailed out of Portsmouth trying not to look as if it was redundant. It was led by two aircraft carriers, one of which will be sold to the Australian Navy and the other scrapped. Five hundred of the sailors preparing for battle had had notices of redundancy and so had 180 of the workers in the Portsmouth dockyards where the ships were made ready. Among the crew was Prince Andrew ("a serving officer like anyone else") who truly is redundant but gets paid handsomely for it and who seemed liable to fly an expensive helicopter into battle. It was in a rather desperate patriotism that thousands of workers waved the fleet away: "We have to do the bulldog thing" urged the wife of one of the sailors, perhaps reasoning that a dead dog is better off than a live unemployed sailor.

There was too some bellicose relief. Capitalist powers devote an enormous amount of resources to training their people in how to kill other workers in a war. Servicemen are liable to become frustrated, if all their expensive training and equipment is allowed to atrophy for want of the nourishment of a nice, destructive war. So the *Guardian* could report: "The men, with their planes and missiles are, after years of war games, spoiling for the real thing". There was also some relief at the sudden emergence of this external "enemy", who are always useful in helping persuade workers to accept sacrifices. And sacrifices, as the dole queues get longer and prices rise and rise, are what British capitalism wants from its workers right now.

The government's acute discomfiture at the "humiliating affront to this country" (the departing Lord Carrington's description) was in large part due to the fact that they had based a lot of their electoral appeal on the promise to be strong on "defence". Was the Iron Lady to be foxed by a bunch of gibbering foreigners who spend all their time turning out cans of poisoned canned beef? Would the Tories ever live it down? There was much praise and sympathy for the hugely suave, hugely wealthy, Lord Carrington. Even American Secretary of State Alexander Haig had a good word to say for him, forgetting that only recently he called him a "duplicitous bastard". Carrington didn't need sympathy; he retired in good order to his acres in Buckinghamshire, a green and pleasant county of which he owns a substantial amount.

There was nothing comic about the Labour Party's nauseous frenzy to exploit the situation. It was almost as if a general election had already been called. In the Commons on March 30, Denis Healey accused the government of being "caught with its trousers down in the South Atlantic—a phrase for the connoisseurs of Healeyisms. Callaghan, pretending to be helpful, recounted how much better the interests of British capitalism had been looked after when he was responsible, In 1977, he claimed, there was a similar crisis but the Labour government resolved it secretly, with a combination

of military threat and diplomatic pressure. No MP took Callaghan's trousers down by asking why the leader of a party which once claimed to stand for international working class interests should be fishing in the murky waters of capitalist diplomacy. In fact, Carrington had been following the same policy—on this issue, as on others there is no difference between Tories and Labour—but his bad luck was that the Argentinian rulers were under pressure to call his bluff and the whole thing was played out in public.

Of course the real star of the Labour benches was Michael Foot. Belying his reputation as a doddering, ineffectual bungler, the Labour leader lashed the government for their "betrayal of those who looked to it for protection" (he was not talking about workers struggling to live on social security). "We should not", he raged, "see foul, brutal aggression successful in our world". (He was not attacking the record of past Labour governments on Korea, Malaysia, Biafra, Vietnam . . .) Foot's speech was applauded by the MPs as a flag-waving, drum-banging demand for the war in which, of course, he would not personally be in the front line. It was, we remember, only a few months ago that he won an affectionate ovation at a Labour Party gathering by describing himself as "an inveterate peacemonger".

Many Tory MPs were delighted with Foot's performance. One sure way of winning their respect is to make a speech calling for workers to be sent off to war. One of the more effusive—or perhaps he had merely lunched well—gurgled, "For once, you truly spoke for Britain". There was no report that Foot so much as blushed at this insulting compliment (a few days later he was calling himself "an international democratic socialist"), nor that he was perturbed by Labour MP George Foulkes' warning that "inevitably thousands of British troops will be killed". The Labour Party has never flinched from the prospect of workers dying in the conflicts to protect their masters' interests, especially if an inveterate votes-monger like Foot may be able to translate their deaths into an election win.

The Conservatives, also worried about their political standing, simply tried to shelter in a measure of fantasy. Thatcher declared:

The Falkland Islands and their dependencies remain British territory . . . It is the government's objective to see that the Islands are freed from occupation and returned to British administration at the earliest possible moment.

But in the reality of world capitalism 1982, places like the Falklands are not defensible by any available British force for any length of time. British foreign policy has been based on that reality for some time now. In historical fact the "British administration" of the Islands was itself an "occupation". The British settlement of the Falklands was contested by France, Spain and Argentina, from the latter half of the 18th century. The Spanish were there until 1806, when the Argentinians threw them out and in 1833 a British force arrived and, politely but firmly, ejected the Argentinians. The Prime Minister of the day made it plain that the British ruling class would not allow " . . . any other state to exercise a right as derived from Spain, which Britain had denied to Spain herself". This has never been accepted by any Argentinian government and, at the very least, they have registered an annual protest. Children there are taught about the perfidy of the British over the Falklands, rather as British children have been taught about the Germans, French, Japanese, Argentinians . . .

In 1851 a Royal Charter—the official sanction to the exploitation of the resources and the people—was granted to the Falkland Islands Company and since then the Islands' economy has been dominated by that company. The FIC owns nearly half the land, a third of the sheep (wool is the Islands' only product of any significance) and employs over one sixth of the population. It controls the bank, the dock and the supermarket. In 1972, after a brief spell of ownership by an offshoot of Slater Walker, the FIC was taken over by Charrington Industrial Holdings, which has big interests in fuel distribution and was probably attracted by the FIC stake in the islands' transport and warehousing and the possible presence of oil. Argentinian investors almost pulled off a stealthy take-over in 1977 but this was thwarted, partly by the Foreign Office. Charrington seemed shaken by the experience, and declared that they would never sell out to a foreign concern. Soon afterwards they were themselves taken over by Coalite, a company based in Derbyshire. Through all these machinations the workers of the Falklands plodded on, in the bare, windswept landscape, raising sheep and turning out the surplus value for whichever bunch of capitalists was appropriating the wealth they had produced.

Those workers are in the main descendants of the Scottish, English and Welsh who went to the Falklands after 1851. Most families are tenants of the FIC and live in tied cottages which they must leave when they are too old to be exploitable any longer. Until recently the majority of members of the Legislative Council were nominated by the British government. If the Falklanders prefer this kind of feudal paternalism it can only be because they think—with good reason—that that life under Argentinian military rule has even less to offer them. A final irony is that, if any of them tries to take refuge in Britain they will have no automatic right of entry. The Foreign Office has promised them special concessions but, although they hold British passports, they are legally excluded because they are defined as non-patrials under the 1971 Immigration Act.

Behind the feigned concern for the fate of the Falklanders is the fact that for a long time it has been British policy, under Labour and Conservative governments, to phase the Islands over to Argentine rule. As James Callaghan pointed out in the Commons on April 7, in a brief respite from his jingoism, there had already been negotiations about the British hold over the Falklands, which might have led to some sort of leaseback arrangement with Argentina. In 1971 a commercial agreement gave Argentina a near monopoly in fuel supply and air travel and the first big runway at Port Stanley was Argentinian built. The Director General of the Falkland Islands Office in London had this to say, about the British attitude to their efforts to resist this trend: "We have consistently not been getting sufficient support from the Foreign Office these last twelve years".

Naturally a lot of publicity was given by the British media to the transparent cynicism behind the invasion. Argentina is another country in the grip of a severe recession. At the end of March a trade union demonstration against the effects of unemployment and rising prices brought some of the worst civil disorder since the military took over in 1976. But the move against the Falklands brought a miraculous change; patriotic frenzy swamped the reality of the workers' parlous condition and of the murderous repression by which the Argentinian rulers defend their position. As the news came

through there was another demonstration but this time the Argentinian workers were chanting support for Galtieri and his annexation of *Los Islas Malvinas*.

The hysteria and deception on both sides ensure that it will take a long time to purge the Falklands crisis of historical myth. It will be written up as an affair of honour; the Argentinians will describe it as a blow against foreign imperialism and the British as a defence of human rights. But the wars of capitalism have never protected human rights; in truth they have damaged those rights, at times destroyed them. Diplomacy—one of the practised arts of the capitalist system—cannot be an affair of honour; it must function by double-cross, concealment, treachery and lies.

So British and Argentinian servicemen went across the ocean to do battle with each other in their masters' cause. It was another doleful example of ignorant workers being easily duped by the empty jingoism of desperate politicians. Animals do it better; at least they don't take themselves willingly to the slaughterhouse.

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