

INTERVIEW WITH NICHOLAS RIDLEY, ON HIS RETURN FROM FALKLAND ISLANDS
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Q: Minister, what was the purpose of your visit? *fr*

A: I went to the islands to discuss with them what would be the best way of responding to the Argentines' request for further rounds of negotiations about the future of the islands. Rather than to go into those negotiations I thought it better to go down to the islands to consult the people as to how they saw it and what they thought we should do.

Q: Why did you consider that it was necessary to do that at this particular time?

A: If you are going to negotiate on somebody else's behalf, you ought to find out what the somebody else thinks ~~before~~ *beforehand* you go and negotiate.

Q: Could you summarise for us, Minister, the alternatives that you put to the islands' representatives and indeed I understand to several hundred of the islanders themselves?

A: I think I must have spoken to nearly half the inhabitants of the islands in my 6 days ~~per~~^{pe}grinations around. I put to them that if we wanted to seek a settlement of the dispute, then there were possibly three options - one of these has fallen right by the wayside already - but there was the possibility of trying to freeze the dispute for a period of years, which would ^{probably} only be short ^a (if we could get it) because there is nothing ^a in that which the Argentines would find likely to help them; secondly, the idea of a lease-back solution, whereby we took a very long lease on the islands having been handed to Argentine and immediately leased back. That would secure the island way of life and British ^{control and} administration, and would I believe also open up the resources in the sea, the fish and the oil, which I think everybody feels we should be exploiting.

Q: So the Government's feeling is that the lease-back solution perhaps does contain some of the seeds of a solution at some time in the future?

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- A: I don't know what reaction we would get from the Argentine to that, and I can't say if it would be acceptable, but it does seem, from all that has happened in the last week that this is the best possibility of a way forward, and it certainly does guarantee the one thing which we are all determined to guarantee, that the islands remain British, British administered, with their present system of law and democracy, and the way of life that the people there have been living for the last 150 years. It is to secure that which we are after - the whole point of the operation.
- Q: You feel that this would remove what you describe as the 'dead hand' of the dispute from the islanders' backs?
- A: Yes, the islands are declining in population - 104 of the 1800 inhabitants have left last year (net, that is) and the economic problem is apparent to all who go there - the shortage of activity, the shortage of jobs, new jobs and new industries, the inability to open up the resource of the sea, and possibly the oil that lies underneath it, if any, and we think there might be - all that is stagnating because this dispute makes these problems insoluble while it continues.
- Q: Since we are talking now here in London, what would be in this for Britain, in the way of opening up for exploitation possible oil resources, fishing resources, and so on?
- A: Well, that is the point. There is not much commercially for Britain in this because the fish and the oil really belong to the Falkland Islanders, not to Britain, and so if there is to be ~~... if anybody's interests have been considered~~, it is the islanders' interests that we are considering, and that must be right, it must be first and foremost. We don't have such a problem about this as the islanders themselves, because they are the people who are suffering from the dead hand of a dispute, not the British.
- Q: Minister, what sort of time scale are you looking to in all this? You have asked the islanders to consider these various suggestions, in particular the lease back suggestion, and in due time to let you or the British

Government to have their views. What sort of time frame are we thinking of here?

A: I am not hustling them, I don't want it to be an ultimatum and there is no pressure put upon them. When they have had time to consider it I will no doubt hear from the Governor how they are progressing in their debate, and what finally he believes the right verdict to be. When we have all that, we will then have to proceed to try and arrange negotiations with the Argentines. At the moment no dates or response has been given to Argentine requests for a further round of negotiations.

Q: The British Government does absolutely unequivocally declare that the islanders' wishes will be respected in every particular?

A: That has been said on every occasion that this subject has been raised, both before and after my recent visit to the islands. There is no wavering from that position. I would say two things - that as an earnest of our intentions in that respect it must have been right to go to the islands and discuss it with them before anybody else and secondly, that those who presume to know more what the islanders think than the islanders themselves do should also ponder that, and realise that if the islanders decide to do one thing or another, then who are they to criticise what the islanders decide.

Q: Was your reception in the Falkland Islands such as to make you think that the islanders are indeed convinced of the British commitment and are happy with the form of consultation that you have now instituted, or carried on?

A: Our welcome was there and warm - there is no question of doubting our word or our commitment. I believe that if there ever was I was able to put that right. That was not the issue. The issue was that it is perhaps unwelcome to have to think about these difficult matters and what I thought was remarkable about the islanders was the way they were very prepared to sit down and listen and discuss and debate and take the whole matter seriously and responsibly - that is what I thought was impressive.

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Q: Finally, Minister, may I ask are you satisfied that there is indeed an adequate 'barometer' of the islanders' feelings now in being?

A: I have not read the barometer yet - I am waiting to show a reading. I don't wish to interpret what they might say or what might be the result at all at this moment, because that would in a sense be hustling them. I just say that I think that the issue was properly put to them and I think they are taking it very responsibly and I won't be putting pressure on them until they decide that they would like to respond as to what they think.

Q: Then let's hope that the barometer reads 'Fair' and not 'Stormy'. Thank you, Minister.

A: The barometer could be 'stormy' in more ways than one!

Minister, thank you very much.