

[Global Histories]

A student journal

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2018.193>

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 4, No. 1 (May 2018), pp. 2–19

ISSN: 2366-780X

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Publisher information:

'Global Histories: A Student Journal' is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. 'Global Histories' is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

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BRITISH GRAVES LOCATED NEAR THE AJAX BAY FIELD HOSPITAL, FALKLAND ISLANDS. 1982.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KEN GRIFFITHS.

‘Not Britain’s Cause Alone’: The Commonwealth, Britain, and the Falklands Crisis, 1982–1989

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The British Government was plunged into crisis on the 2 April 1982 after Argentina launched an invasion of the Falkland Islands. The sovereignty of the islands had long been disputed as an issue of decolonisation and the Argentine seizure of the land forced the question to be addressed by the international political community. One of the most noteworthy aspects of the ensuing dispute was the ardent support the Commonwealth nations offered to Britain in the face of this aggression, earning the gratitude of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Many expected the Commonwealth to condemn the British use of force to settle the dispute given their previous colonial status. On the contrary, however, many were quick to show their disdain for the Argentine actions and offered practical support to the UK government in their attempts to recover the islands. This paper exploits newly released material available through the National Archives to examine the nature of this support and its effect on the Falklands Crisis throughout the Thatcher Premiership. The thirty year anniversary of the conflict in 2012 combined with the adoption of the new Public Records Act (2013) has led to a large amount of source material becoming available that had previously been unavailable for public viewing. The study evaluates both the practical reasons for the support as well as the importance of personal relationships between government ministers to uncover a new aspect of this important period in contemporary British history.

Introduction

When Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands on 2 April 1982, many of the world’s governments and media were caught off guard—not least in the United Kingdom itself.¹ Despite a dispute that had begun in 1833 with the British capture of the islands, British diplomats and intelligence officials did not expect Argentina to resort to military action to assert its claim to sovereignty. As a result, a diplomatic crisis ensued.² Britain assembled and dispatched a naval task force which

¹ The Spanish word for the islands is ‘Las Malvinas.’

² For the purposes of this article the Falklands Conflict refers to the period between April 2nd and June 14th, 1982 and the military engagements between Argentina and Great Britain.

would retake the islands after several peace negotiations failed to find a resolution. The fighting marked the first instance in which live images of military conflict were broadcast worldwide. Footage of ships burning and wounded soldiers being rescued from wreckage brought the conflict to public as well as political attention. Immediately upon the loss of the islands, the British government sought international support for the cause of re-establishing British sovereignty in the South Atlantic.³ Gaining the approval and backing of the international community was crucial to legitimise Britain's role in a fight that ultimately cost 907 lives, a figure that represented more than half of the islands' population at the outbreak of the crisis.⁴ Although the islands were eventually retaken through military means, much of the British strategy was dependent on resolutions that would be passed in the United Nations. Gaining the approval of the international community was vital to this end and also gave the British more guarantees over the security of the islands after the conflict.

This article addresses the response of Commonwealth nations to Britain's request for support and is concerned specifically with the relations between Britain and the Commonwealth during the crisis period. The study analyses the nature of the support offered by the Commonwealth both during the conflict and after, through utilising documentary evidence available from the years of the crisis and evaluating the response of the Commonwealth states to Britain and the Falklands. This paper also looks at the relationship between Britain and the Commonwealth States prior to the crisis, as to provide a background for the political climate during the conflict. Most academic writing on international reactions to the Falklands Crisis has focussed on the response of the governments of the European Economic Community and the United States of America. As these states represented Britain's most powerful and influential allies, Margaret Thatcher did prioritise securing support of both; however, the Commonwealth of Nations was another important bloc whose backing needed to be urgently secured.

The Commonwealth was Britain's link with its colonial past. As many actors in favour of the Argentine cause attempted to describe the Falklands Crisis as an issue of colonialism, Commonwealth support for Britain was crucial in combating this notion. Commonwealth support for British action placed focus on the issues the UK government said were at stake, such as: the right to self-determination of peoples and the rejection of violence as a means to settle international disputes.

The Falklands Crisis refers to the subsequent diplomatic negotiation that took place after the outbreak of the conflict including all votes on the matter within the United Nations General Assembly until 1990.

³ The debate also concerned other British possessions in the South Atlantic such as South Georgia.

⁴ Figure taken from "Ley 24.950: Decláranse 'Héroes nacionales' a los combatientes argentinos fallecidos durante la guerra de Malvinas." *InfoLEG*, 18 March 1998, <http://servicios.infoleg.gob.ar/infolegInternet/anexos/50000-54999/50278/norma.htm>; and "Databases – Falklands War 1982," *Roll of Honour*, www.roll-of-honour.com/Databases/Falklands.

Many member states of the Commonwealth had resolved sovereignty disputes with the British in the recent past and the issue of majority rule in Rhodesia had dominated discussions between Commonwealth states in the immediate years before 1982. As such, when General Secretary of the Commonwealth Secretariat Shridath Ramphal announced that the Commonwealth was firmly behind the British cause it was a significant boost for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's (FCO) attempts to legitimise the campaign to retake the islands. Writing thirteen years after the conflict, Thatcher referred to the leaders of the Commonwealth as "the staunchest of our friends," highlighting that, despite disagreements between herself and other Commonwealth heads of government in the years after the conflict, the support offered during the crisis left a strong and lasting impression.⁵

Thatcher's sentiment, however, gives an inaccurate impression of the responses of the Commonwealth states. Unlike in relations with the government officials in the USA and Europe, Thatcher did not take much of a personal role when interacting with the governments of the Commonwealth. Instead, negotiation was left to the Commonwealth Coordination Department (CCD) in the FCO. The individuals who engaged most with the Commonwealth nations on behalf of the British government were relatively junior ministers and diplomats such as Cranley Onslow and Roger Barltrop. This is not to say that the Commonwealth was unimportant. Much to the contrary, the entire CCD concerned itself with gaining Commonwealth support and British diplomats with specific expertise in this area were tasked to garner unanimous support throughout the years of the crisis. This therefore signifies that Thatcher's own reflections are based on a narrow sample of all interactions with Commonwealth states and her conclusions are self-justifying. Furthermore, given the structure of the Commonwealth of Nations, the opinion of the General Secretary of the Secretariat is not always representative of that of all member states. When the crisis is tracked through the years after the conflict, it is evident that the support offered to Britain by the Commonwealth was not without limitations and ultimately the islands themselves were only of real importance to Britain and Argentina. It was the principles that the conflict represented which were of value to the governments that made up the Commonwealth. The rejection of violence as a means to settle disputes, which Ramphal spoke of, is better described as a desire to maintain peace. As the UK continued to refuse to negotiate with Argentina, many Commonwealth governments viewed the UK as not sharing that same desire. Furthermore, not dissimilar to other non-western states that supported Britain openly or secretly such as Chile, which was involved in its own sovereignty dispute with Argentina, the Commonwealth countries had their own interests in the Falklands. Ultimately, who held sovereignty of the islands did not matter for the Commonwealth so much as the ability of the islanders to live without fear of transgressions by more powerful states. This, coupled with disputes

⁵ Margaret Thatcher, *Downing Street Years* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), 182.

between Britain and its Commonwealth partners at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGM), resulted in many member states voting against the British on resolutions concerning the Falkland Islands in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Extending the crisis beyond 1982 forces a re-evaluation of Thatcher's conclusions and thus the nature of Commonwealth opinion on the crisis can be understood.

No Longer a Leader

Commonwealth responses to the Falklands Crisis were heavily influenced by how the relationship between Britain and the Commonwealth had developed in the decades leading up to 1982. Successive British governments in the early twentieth century had not prioritised maintaining links with colonies who were seeking independence. It was only after nations such as Egypt and Ireland gained independence that the idea of a political union to maintain British influence in its economic areas of interest became popular in the UK, and thus the Commonwealth of Nations was formed in part to foster those partnerships.⁶ The economic cost of the Second World War and the gradual dismantling of the British Empire meant that Britain needed to establish links with its former colonies more than the newly independent states depended on links with the UK. Britain sought to ensure that pro-British sentiment remained in its former colonies to secure favourable trade deals as well as prevent the spread of communism.⁷ Nationalist leaders had risen to power in many of the new states and were able to attach conditions to their membership of the Commonwealth that were unfavourable to the British. An example of this was the withdrawal of South Africa from the Commonwealth in 1961 after Britain had weakened its links to the nationalist government in Pretoria in hopes of persuading other African countries to join the Commonwealth. The context of the Cold War meant that Britain chose to prioritise its western allies over its old colonial ties and the UK began working with the USA on matters which had once been Commonwealth affairs. This is not to say that the Commonwealth nations were against such actions, as it was hoped that the inclusion of other Western states would accelerate the resolution of problems in Southern Africa.⁸

World Politics Scholar at the University of London, Stephen Chan has commented that “even idealistic views of a future Commonwealth world role were

⁶ For a fuller discussion on this as well as a comparison with the French model of decolonisation, see: Stephen Chan, “The Commonwealth as an International Organisation: Constitutionalism, Britain and South Africa,” *The Round Table* 78, no. 2 (1989): 396.

⁷ “The London Declaration,” *The Commonwealth*, 26 April 1949, archived from the original, <http://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/history-items/documents/London%20Declaration%20of%201949.pdf>.

⁸ James Barber, *The Uneasy Relationship: Britain and South Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1983), 97.

expressed in terms of a British-centric power grouping.”⁹ However, this changed with the establishment of the Commonwealth Secretariat and the office of General Secretary. Calls for change were led by Julius Nyerere, President of Tanganyika following serious reservations about Britain’s commitment to racial equality in South Africa and a move towards Rhodesian independence. At the 1964 CHOGM the Commonwealth Secretariat was established, with Arnold Smith as its first General Secretary in 1965. The Secretariat was supposed to represent the general opinion of the Commonwealth and thus placed pressure on Britain to compromise on issues of importance so a joint Commonwealth strategy could be formed. In the first decade of the Secretariat the Commonwealth became increasingly involved in matters of international development and economic relations. Although its reach and influence was still limited, by the time Ramphal was elected General Secretary in 1975 there was a lot more scope for the Commonwealth to intervene in affairs important to its member states. By the beginning of Thatcher’s first term as Prime Minister, Britain had found itself being coerced into settlements it did not desire and the Commonwealth of Nations was a political entity free from supremacy of any of its member states.

Although the Commonwealth of Nations was important to Thatcher, her first few years in office highlighted the difficulties Britain had in agreeing to the policy consensus put forward by the other member states. Although she enjoyed a good personal relationship with Ramphal and usually agreed to compromise in the end, she often came into conflict over policy with many of the other Commonwealth Heads of Government. She would often argue her point forcefully even when everyone else disagreed with her. She once told a reporter “If I were the odd one out and I were right, that would not matter would it?”¹⁰ Such attitudes led to difficult negotiations and also led to more questions about Thatcher’s commitment to such issues as racial equality. This in turn made her very unpopular on the African continent.¹¹ Indeed, Thatcher disagreed with the majority of the other Heads of Government over the issue of Rhodesian independence, even being warned by Malcolm Fraser, Prime Minister of Australia, with whom she shared a strong mutual respect, that he would not support her if she continued to support the Ian Smith-Abel Muzorewa government. Although she did accept a compromise, an early leak of the agreement on the Lancaster House talks caused further tension. After Rhodesian independence, new disagreements emerged over how to tackle the issue of apartheid in South Africa. Thatcher did not share the belief that sanctions should be imposed against the nationalist government in Pretoria. Although Thatcher was largely unmentioned at the 1981 CHOGM in Melbourne, Ramphal

⁹ Chan, “The Commonwealth,” 397.

¹⁰ Quoted in: Derek Ingram, “Thatcher and Ramphal: A Long and Turbulent Relationship,” *The Round Table* 97, no. 38: 785.

¹¹ Peter Carrington, *Reflect on Things Past: Memoirs of Lord Carrington* (London: Collins, 1988), 277.

did make passing reference to her apparent support for the South African government in a speech made in advance of the summit.

Along with Thatcher, the FCO also struggled to work with officials from Commonwealth states. Ken Flowers, Director of Intelligence in Salisbury, summed up the frustrations of senior civil servants when he wrote of the struggles the British government had in getting 'fair' settlements on issues in Southern Africa when having to work with other African states and wrote with anger over the perceived U-turns that Britain had to make.¹² Lord Carrington had public disagreements with Ramphal, Nyerere and Kenneth Kaunda, President of Zambia over the Lancaster House talks. Ramphal accused Carrington of not acting within the "letter of spirit of the Lusaka agreement" and Carrington responded later by claiming that Ramphal "had no credibility as an impartial observer."¹³ Carrington and Ramphal clashed again over how to observe the Rhodesian elections from within Rhodesia. Although Ramphal won that particular argument, there was a reinforced sense of condescension from Britain.

Although Thatcher enjoyed positive personal relationships with many of the other Commonwealth Heads of Government, there was always an underlying sense that Britain, while agreeing in principle with many of the objectives of the Commonwealth, disagreed strongly on the practicalities of achieving those objectives. The concerns (such as individual trade agreements) that Britain championed over principles such as racial equality led to turbulent negotiation. The Commonwealth of Nations was a union that based its action very much on the principle outlined in the Singapore declaration of 1971, seeking resolutions that aided in the movement towards racial equality regardless of their economic impact on member states. When Britain disagreed with the practicalities of policy implementation it was often seen to be acting against those principles. Over the issues of Rhodesia and apartheid, Britain struggled to adhere to the general opinion on how to best achieve racial equality. This led to long and difficult negotiation as well as a distrust of British intention from other Commonwealth nations. It was with this background that Britain sought the support of the Commonwealth following the loss of the Falklands.

'Patriotism is a Strong Plant not a Weed'

Ramphal was a very popular and influential figure within the Commonwealth and it was much due to his influence that the initial offerings of support from the member states came the way of Britain at the outbreak of the crisis. His reputation was formed during the Lancaster House talks and he was credited with ensuring that Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo continued to negotiate despite their reser-

¹² Ken Flowers, *Serving Secretly: An Intelligence Chief on Record: Rhodesia into Zimbabwe, 1964–1981* (London: John Murray, 1987).

¹³ See: Ingram, "Thatcher and Ramphal," 781–790.

vations over British intentions. British Economist Barbara Ward summarised the importance of Ramphal when writing that the General Secretary saw the Commonwealth as a “quiet influence for common good” reflecting the desire of member states through “raising aspiration to ethos and turning ethos into action.”¹⁴ Like the Commonwealth as an organisation, he believed in the importance of principle.

Ramphal saw the Argentine invasion as a violation of the right to self-determination through force, and swiftly wrote to Thatcher to offer his assistance. In his letter dated the 5 April 1982, he commented: “We have already had in our time too many acts of aggression by those who calculate on getting away with it ... Argentina’s action requires, from the whole international community, a stand for the maintenance of law and order worldwide.” In doing so, he immediately underlined the principle based on which he was offering his support to Britain: the blatant violation of international law that Argentina committed.¹⁵ This was reiterated in his subsequent letters to the other Commonwealth Heads of Government calling on them to support the British cause: “I am sure you will agree that in the face of such unprovoked aggression, there is need for Commonwealth countries to stand by Britain in this matter, consistent with your support for the principles of territorial integrity, the right of self-determination, and the rejection of the use of force to unsettle long established boundaries—principles [for which] the Commonwealth has persistently stood.”¹⁶ His words underlined his view of the conflict as less a matter of colonialism than a matter of the maintenance of law. Contrary to many cases of African nations becoming independent in the twentieth century, there was no clear majority in the Falklands that wished to be free of British rule.¹⁷ As such, claims regarding the right of self-determination resonated more widely with the former British colonies in the Commonwealth. As a union that had been formed by ex-colonies, the Commonwealth stance was of importance in persuading other political blocks committed to the rejection of colonialism to side with Britain as well. Ramphal spoke personally with Commonwealth Heads of Government such as Forbes Burnham, President of Guyana, to persuade him to use the role of the country on the UN Security Council to aid Britain, as well as speaking with the government of Uganda, another Commonwealth member, which helped secure crucial votes in favour of Britain from the Non-Aligned Movement.¹⁸

¹⁴ Barbara Ward, “Introduction,” in *One World to Share: Selected Speeches of the Commonwealth Secretary-General, 1975–9* (London: Hutchinson Benham, 1979), 1.

¹⁵ Ramphal to Thatcher, 5 April 1982, TCHR 3/1/20, f.27.

¹⁶ Ramphal to Commonwealth Heads of Government included with his message to Thatcher, 5 April 1982, TCHR 3/1/20, f.27.

¹⁷ “FCO Record of Nick Ridley’s Visit to the Falkland Islands,” 24–26 November 1980, *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/121850>.

¹⁸ The Non-Aligned Movement (henceforth referred to as NAM) is a group of states that were not formally aligned with or against any major power bloc of the cold war. In the Havana declaration of 1979, Fidel Castro outlined the purpose of the movement as ensuring “the national independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and security of non-aligned countries” in their “struggle against imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism and all forms

Ramphal kept in contact with the FCO throughout the conflict and maintained support for the principles for which he believed Britain had to fight. Following the Argentine surrender on June 14, Ramphal wrote to Francis Pym saying, “[w]hat has triumphed... are the principles for which you stood steadfast on behalf of a wider international community.”¹⁹ Although the FCO never directly asked Ramphal to intervene, the initiative of the Secretary-General highlighted his agreement with the principles he saw Britain defending. Pym duly thanked Ramphal for his “magnificent efforts.”²⁰ Ramphal expressed the same sentiments when speaking in public. In an interview on the Today programme on 28 April, he reaffirmed that there was joint Commonwealth backing for the British efforts, emphasising that the issues involved were not colonial in nature. His most ardent show of support for the British government, however, came at a speech given to the Commonwealth Press Union on 15 June, which was titled “Not Britain’s Cause Alone.” In his speech Ramphal stated that “Britain’s response in this instance has been a service to the world community which condemned the invader but lacked the means to deny him the fruits of aggression, which demanded his withdrawal but was powerless to enforce its demand.” In the same speech he also condemned aggressors who attempted to justify their actions through “waving the anti-colonial banner.”²¹ Ramphal never outright stated his support for the Task Force, although he did speak openly of his delight at their victory.²² He maintained throughout that he supported the principles of self-determination and the rejection of violence as a means to settle disputes. It was Britain’s defence of these principles which motivated Ramphal’s support for the British cause.

Ramphal was just one voice in the Commonwealth and although many of his sentiments were shared by others, the response of other government leaders of the Commonwealth highlights the limitations to their support. Many leaders also wrote personally to Thatcher to state their agreement in the condemnation of the Argentine actions, however, it is important to note that many urged both Thatcher and the UK government to settle the dispute by peaceful means. Prime Minister George Price of Belize serves as an example of this concern, as he wrote: “please accept assurance that Belize strongly supports the principle of self-determination and the settlement of disputes by peaceful means.”²³ After the dispatch of the Task Force, Forbes Burnham, President of Guyana, wrote to Thatcher, stating that his

of foreign aggression, occupation, domination, interference or hegemony as well as against great power and bloc politics.” By 1982, the movement had 95 members and made up just under two thirds of the United Nations General Assembly, another organisation committed to the end of colonisation.

¹⁹ Ramphal to Pym, 15 June 1982, FCO 7/4574, f.40.

²⁰ Pym to Ramphal, 18 June 1982, FCO 7/4574, f.41.

²¹ “‘Not Britain’s Cause Alone’ Extracts from Shridath Ramphal’s speech to the Commonwealth Press Union,” 15 June 1982, FCO 7/4574 Part B, f.36.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Price to Thatcher, 5 April 1982, THCR 3/1/20, f.21.

government “called for an urgent return to negotiations for a peaceful solution.”²⁴ Many of the Commonwealth Heads of Government also conveyed messages to President Leopoldo Galtieri of Argentina, to outline their condemnation of his government’s actions directly.²⁵ The British cause was further aided in that the Argentine Government did not concern itself much with the Commonwealth but focussed its attentions on gaining support through the United Nations and the Organisation of American States.

The governments of the Commonwealth could condemn the actions of the Argentine Junta given how the invasion had violated several basic principles of international law, however, to support Britain in waging further violent conflict to resolve the matter was something quite different. It became apparent that many Commonwealth governments felt one could not condemn violent action by one party yet support similar violence by another. The governments of the Bahamas, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Nigeria, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, and Swaziland all rejected the use of force to settle the dispute. Jamaica urged “both governments to exercise restraint” while Singapore and Sierra Leone expressed hopes that nothing further would be done to aggravate the situation.²⁶ Incidentally this had the potential to play in favour of the Argentine strategy, which sought to avoid a conflict but had miscalculated Britain’s capacity to respond to the invasion of the islands. Commonwealth pressure on Britain to show restraint when using the Royal Navy unconsciously supported that Argentine strategy in its call to avoid further violence.²⁷ However, the failure to follow their expressions of concerns with concrete action to curtail the use of force underlined that they nevertheless supported the British position in the conflict. It is important to note that this reluctance to support violence may be explained by a rationale existing outside of principle. Not only do smaller states tend to uphold the principles of international law to protect themselves from more powerful states, but countries such as Belize were also involved in their own territorial disputes.²⁸ Argentine victory in the Falklands would have sent a message to other states that military force was an acceptable measure to settle such disputes. Condemnation for Argentine actions was offered out of the desire to see a peaceful negotiation to the settlement. In this respect, the Commonwealth reaction was not dissimilar from countries within the non-aligned movement in that they were both based on principle. As countries such as Cuba focused on the principle of decolonisation, the Commonwealth focussed on the

²⁴ Burnham to Thatcher, 8 April 1982, THCR 3/1/20, f.44.

²⁵ THCR 3/1/20 held at the Thatcher Archive in Churchill College, Cambridge.

²⁶ “Commonwealth Governments’ Reactions to the Falklands Crisis,” Commonwealth Co-ordination Department, FCO 7/4574, f.46.

²⁷ See: David Rock, *Argentina, 1516–1987: From Spanish Colonisation to Alfonsín* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

²⁸ Belize was involved in a territorial dispute with Guatemala following Belize’s independence in 1981. Guatemala still claimed territorial sovereignty over Belize at the time of the Falklands Conflict.

maintenance of peace. The British willingness to retake the islands by force contradicted the desire for the maintenance of peace and thus many Commonwealth states could not openly support those actions.

There were some governments in the Commonwealth that did offer practical support to the British cause. The Fraser government in Australia recalled its ambassador from Buenos Aires, as well as agreeing to delay its purchase of *HMS Invincible* from Britain so the vessel could be used as part of the Task Force. The Canadian government also ordered its ambassador to return to Canada and banned sales of military equipment to Argentina along with Argentine import and export credits. Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau wrote to Argentine President Galtieri condemning the actions of the junta. The New Zealand government released *HMNZS Canterbury* to take over some of the NATO obligations of the Royal Navy to free up more ships for use in the South Atlantic. New Zealand PM Robert Muldoon broke off diplomatic relations with Argentina and banned all trade, supply of arms, military material, and export credits.²⁹ Of all the Commonwealth leaders it was with Fraser, Trudeau, and Muldoon that Thatcher interacted most. She had maintained positive relations with her Anglosphere counterparts during her first few years as Prime Minister, and indeed Fraser had even sent his own advisors to aid her in the 1979 general election campaign. In a letter to Muldoon in June 1982, Thatcher wrote that “the response of the people of this country, and of the Commonwealth, especially in New Zealand, has convinced me that patriotism is a strong plant, not a weed, and that its flowers will indeed bloom even when peace is restored.”³⁰

The narrow sample of leaders to whom Thatcher spoke would explain the opinion of the Commonwealth’s response expressed in her memoirs. This response came from only a small proportion of the Commonwealth as a whole. The records of the meetings of Commonwealth High Commissioners held in London portray a different attitude. There is evident concern at the escalation of the conflict as well as repeated questions concerning what non-military options were being pursued.³¹ Even the support offered by the other Anglosphere nations in the Commonwealth had limits. Australia and Canada both sent the ambassadors back to Buenos Aires when it was evident that a military conflict was unavoidable.³² Most notable was the AU\$ 250,000 donated by the Australian government to the South Atlantic fund.³³ Regional Australian governments also donated large sums of money to the

²⁹ “Commonwealth Governments’ Reactions to the Falklands Crisis,” Commonwealth Co-ordination Department, FCO 7/4574, f.46.

³⁰ Thatcher to Muldoon, 11 June 1982, THCR 3/1/22 Part 1, f.40.

³¹ “Record of Mr Onslow’s meeting with High Commissioners: India Office Council Chamber,” 27 May 1982, FCO 7/4573, f.36.

³² The Canadian ambassador returned on 21 April and the Australian ambassador returned on 28 April.

³³ The South Atlantic Fund was a private charity established to support servicemen and their dependents’ needs as a result of the servicemen’s involvement in the Falklands Conflict. It was established during the conflict and remained as a registered charity until 1993.

fund through unofficial channels. This could be seen as support for the conflict but the fund was actually set up to support the victims and their families. The Australian government was not backing the use of force but offering empathy to those who had suffered as a direct result of the fighting.³⁴

The Commonwealth did offer support through criticising the seizure of the islands by Argentina. However, this was not a support for British sovereignty rights there nor was this support unconditional. The Commonwealth (both the office of the Secretariat and its individual member states) ultimately championed principles of self-determination and the resolution of disputes through peaceful means. The Commonwealth's collective refusal to openly support the dispatch of the task force, along with repeated calls for the British government to show restraint, reflect the true stance of the organization on the conflict. This would become more apparent upon the conflict's resolution when Britain refused to negotiate on the issue any further. The refusal to openly support the dispatch of the Task Force highlighted that the Commonwealth did not universally condone British action during the conflict. Rather, the Commonwealth states were concerned with the upholding of international law and the principle of peaceful negotiation to settle disputes. This became even more apparent after the conflict as the Commonwealth removed support for Britain when Her Majesty's Government refused to negotiate with a democratic Argentine government.

The Legacy of the Falklands

Upon the resolution of the conflict, the Falklands returned to obscurity. Since the principles outlined had been defended and international law was upheld, there was no need to further discuss the issue. The will of the majority in the Falklands had been restored and the military junta in Argentina had been replaced by a democratically elected government in December 1983. This made it unlikely that there would be any further military attempts to retake the islands. The issues of Grenada and apartheid dominated the discussion at the CHOGMs in the rest of the 1980s with only fleeting mention of the Falklands at the 1983 meeting in New Delhi. The 'Question of the Falkland Islands' was voted on annually in the UNGA from 1982 to 1988, and as such it is possible to track the opinion of the Commonwealth states through the voting records here and the British response to each vote.³⁵ The British refusal to formally negotiate with the authorities from Argentina led to questions about Britain's commitment to the maintenance of peace. Furthermore, as dissension became more apparent from Britain over South Africa, Commonwealth nations began to abandon their support.

³⁴ "Details of the Australian National Appeal," FCO 107/510.

³⁵ Argentina proposed a series of resolutions beginning in October 1982 which attempted to force Britain to negotiate on the issue of sovereignty. Following the restoration of Anglo-Argentine relations in 1989, there were no further votes on the matter.

The first vote on the Falklands after the conflict took place on 28 October 1982. The vote passed with 90 in favour of Britain and Argentina negotiating on the issue of sovereignty to 12 against and 52 countries abstaining.³⁶ Despite several Commonwealth states such as Guyana and Ghana voting yes, there was no great concern from London. The FCO was much more concerned with the USA taking the first opportunity to support an Argentine resolution in the UN, seemingly abandoning the position they had taken during the conflict. Given that many of the Commonwealth countries had previously urged both sides to find a peaceful resolution to their disagreements, voting in favour of talks was to be expected. Many of the Commonwealth states showed some support for the British arguments by abstaining, however, the vote displayed the true nature of the immediate Commonwealth response to the crisis as many Commonwealth countries within the non-aligned group, such as Uganda and India voted in favour of negotiation. The Commonwealth nations had not made a stand on the sovereignty issue but rather had stood for the maintenance of peace. Negotiation was, in their opinion, the best option for conflict resolution. The first vote at the UNGA affirmed those principles.

Even before the US invasion of Grenada took place, discussions regarding the agenda for the 1983 CHOGM showed that there would only have been fleeting mention of the Falklands. In a letter to Ramphal, Thatcher suggested that it would “perhaps be useful” for her to update her Commonwealth peers on Britain’s future plans for the Falkland Islands but no further discussion was planned regarding any future Commonwealth role in the dispute.³⁷ In the communiqué issued at the end of the conference, the matter was given a short paragraph which started by mentioning that the leaders had the opportunity to discuss the issue in the UNGA and that they had reaffirmed their support for the principle of self-determination and “for the people of the Falkland Islands to live in freedom and security.”³⁸ The matter had been resolved and the UN was the most appropriate place for the issue to be discussed. However, in the communiqué, the member nations ‘reaffirmed their commitment to the principles of independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity’ and called for the strict observance of these principles. In doing so they reaffirmed the same principles that they had acted on in 1982. The communiqué echoed Ramphal’s words to the Commonwealth Press Union in June 1982, affirming the Commonwealth would defend the rights of people who could not defend themselves, as Britain had done over the Falklands. The response recorded at New Delhi of the member states of the Commonwealth emphasised their role in the

³⁶ United Nations Bibliographic Information System (UBISNET), Voting Record A/RES/37/9, “Question of the Falkland Islands (Malvinas),” 28 October 1982.

³⁷ Thatcher to Ramphal, Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, 23 September 1983, PREM 19/969 f.21.

³⁸ Acland minute to Coles, “The Communiqué” [progress report on drafting of communiqué for New Delhi Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting], 27 November 1983, THCR 1/10/64, f.55.

defence of small states. Their rejection of violence as a means to settle disputes as well as their affirmation of the importance of the democratic will of the people underlined the same principles with which they had responded to the crisis.

The 1985 UNGA Falklands vote proved to be the clearest indication of the opinion of Commonwealth states on Britain and the crisis. The 1983 and 1984 votes produced very similar results to that of 1982. However, in 1985, relations between Britain and its Commonwealth partners had soured over the British approach to dealing with apartheid in South Africa. At the CHOGM in Nassau that year, Thatcher had argued against the imposition of sanctions to attempt to force the hand of the South African government. This generated a sense of irony given how Britain had pleaded for sanctions on Argentina in 1982. It also led to further questions on Britain's commitment to racial equality with some accusing Britain of operating colonial attitudes. Indian PM Rajiv Gandhi commented "[t]hese are the sort of reasons Britain gave to all countries for not giving them independence when we were under British rule. It's better for you, they said. You're not capable of doing it."³⁹

Despite three UNGA resolutions calling for further talks, Britain had still refused to speak with Argentina regarding the future of the Falklands. This was further compounded by the establishment of democracy in Argentina and the inauguration of Raúl Alfonsín as Argentine president in December 1983. Given the human rights violations of the junta, it had been easy for a Commonwealth which was mostly western and democratic to support Britain against an authoritarian junta but the 1984 UNGA vote was the first one that had called for Britain to negotiate with a democratic Argentine government and yet Britain still refused to do so. The condescension that had been evident in the early years of the Thatcher premiership reared its ugly head again. The result of this was eighteen countries changing strategy and joining the vast majority of those within the non-aligned group voting in favour of the 1985 resolution on the "Question of the Falkland Islands (Malvinas)." The resolution passed with 107 total votes for Britain to negotiate with Argentina to reach a settlement on the sovereignty issue.⁴⁰ Only four countries voted against, including the UK. Belize was the exception to this trend as its own sovereignty disputes with Guatemala meant that it continued to vote against negotiation on the Falklands. Most notable was that Australia and Canada both voted in favour of the resolution and rejected British calls for the self-determination of the islanders to be included in any discussions.⁴¹ Within the Commonwealth, there was a strong desire to prevent any future conflict over the Falklands issue. Britain's refusal to negotiate the sovereignty issue with Argentina only heightened concerns that violence may erupt again. As such, even Britain's

³⁹ Ingram, "Thatcher and Ramphal," 786.

⁴⁰ UBISNET Voting Record, "Question of the Falkland Islands (Malvinas)," A/RES/40/21.

⁴¹ "North Atlantic Council Meeting: Bilateral with Canadian Foreign Minister," FCO 7/6377, f.746.

closest allies in Canada and Australia attempted to exert pressure on the UK to return to negotiations as they attempted to build a relationship with Alfonsín's government. The inclusion of the self-determination of islanders in any talks would give Britain scope to refuse to compromise. The 1985 resolution was perceived as the best possibility to prevent another conflict. Despite further pleas from the FCO and Thatcher herself, the Commonwealth would not change its vote.⁴² Britain lost the remaining votes of the 1980s by heavy margins with the heaviest taking place in 1986 when 116 countries voted in favour of the pro-Argentine resolution.⁴³ The Commonwealth made clear that it did not support Britain's perceived stubbornness on the issue, opting instead for international cooperation. In refusing to abide by the general assembly resolutions, Britain was in direct contrast to international cooperation and negotiation to settle disputes. As such, Britain found itself isolated in its position on the Falklands.

Conclusion

The study of the Commonwealth and the Falklands Crisis highlights that for many countries the Falkland Islands were not so much the central issue as were the principles invoked during the crisis that needed to be defended. Although small and isolated, the crisis shared many characteristics of greater issues in the twentieth century. The crisis forced many states to discern the importance of principle versus practicality. Many had to weigh the benefits of good relations with the British or Argentine governments against defending the legal rights of sovereign states and their citizens. Britain's colonial past was brought to the foreground of international discussion in both political and non-political spheres. Despite more importance being placed on other actors in international politics, the Commonwealth still presented a vital body from which Britain needed to secure support. Initially, that support was swiftly offered. That being said, Thatcher's self-justifying conclusion on Commonwealth support, made in her memoirs, does not offer an accurate conclusion on the nature of Commonwealth opinion on the Falklands.⁴⁴ A closer examination of the documentary evidence uncovers that it was not Britain *per se* that was supported but the several principles that were at stake in the crisis.

Shridath Ramphal was the most active Commonwealth figure in rallying support for the British cause but his words had limitations. He made robust statements in public identifying a common condemnation of the Argentine actions and gave an impression of universal Commonwealth support for the British cause. However, it was not the Falklands that were important to him, but the principle.

⁴² "The Falklands at the UN 1985," FCO 7/6377.

⁴³ UBISNET Voting Record, "Question of the Falkland Islands (Malvinas)," A/RES/41/40.

⁴⁴ Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, 182.

His speech to the Commonwealth Press Union highlighted this commitment.⁴⁵ In achieving victory in the Falklands, Britain ensured that international law and the self-determination of people was upheld. This was a cause that echoed many pushes for independence from Commonwealth states. Ramphal held that sovereignty over the islands was of little importance and made no comment on the legitimacy of either side's claims. Rather he focussed more on the self-determination of the islanders and the rejection of violence. In asserting their claim to the islands through military force, Argentina had violated basic principles of international law, principles that the Commonwealth was dedicated to protect and that provoked Ramphal's reaction.

Although their membership of the Commonwealth was important, the member states also had their own motives and ideals which were not always met by their partner states in the Commonwealth of Nations. By 1982, Britain's relationship with other Commonwealth states was not reason enough alone to expect support. Although individuals such as Thatcher and Muldoon may have spoken of a sense of duty, there was certainly no patriotic feeling towards the crown prevalent across the member states.⁴⁶ Countries such as Ghana and India were deliberately hesitant in making any statement given their own experiences and their relations with both Britain and Argentina.⁴⁷ Some of the Commonwealth nations that did criticise Argentina for invading the islands, such as Belize, had their own vested interests in the outcome of the conflict while others stressed the need for negotiation, requesting both sides to exercise restraint. In doing so, they underlined the point that more than anything, they desired to see an end to the violence and a return to peace. The actions of the British government did not seem to support this same principle and it was in these moments that other Commonwealth nations did not support the UK's position.

The years after 1982 only served to reaffirm these notions and there was less difference in the actions of those Commonwealth states within the non-aligned group and those without. As Britain continued to refuse to negotiate, even its most ardent supporters during the conflict turned against them. Australia and Canada voted in favour of pro-Argentine resolutions in the UNGA and Britain found itself in an isolated position in its stance on negotiation. The Falklands Crisis was a testing time for Britain in its relations with many states, not least those which were also members of the Commonwealth. Both the conflict and the years after highlighted the nature of those relationships. The Commonwealth condemnation of the USA and Turkey for their invasion in Grenada and Cyprus respectively

⁴⁵ "Transcript of an interview by Stephen Cape with the Commonwealth Secretary General for the 'Today' programme," 28 April 1982, FCO 7/4573, f.29.

⁴⁶ Muldoon to Thatcher, 9 June 1982, THCR 3/1/22 Part 1, f.30; Thatcher to Muldoon, 11 June 1982, THCR 3/1/22 Part 1, f.40.

⁴⁷ "Commonwealth Governments' Reactions to the Falklands Crisis," Commonwealth Coordination Department, FCO 7/4574.

further highlighted the importance of these principles. The Commonwealth of Nations saw itself as the defender of the rights of small states to operate free of international interference, a notion that became manifest in the 1985 CHOGM communiqué and would intervene to defend the rights of people who did not have the means to defend themselves. The union stood for racial equality, the right of people to choose their own government and the achievement of these means through peaceful negotiation. Support was offered to Britain as a defender of these notions. Over the Falklands, Britain learned the importance of principle to the Commonwealth and when it was seen to be in violation of these principles, the member states could swiftly turn that support into condemnation.

