

Shackleton Scholarship Fund Report

Visit to the Falkland Islands 7th-13th March 2013

Klaus Dodds and Alasdair Pinkerton

Klaus Dodds and Alasdair Pinkerton visited the Falkland Islands for the expressed purpose of observing the referendum held on the 10-11th March. We were, thanks to the Falkland Islands Government (FIG), accredited as official observers and thus able to not only monitor the referendum itself but also observe closely the work of the international observer mission headed by Brad Smith. Our research was thus twin-tracked but closely inter-related.

The research undertaken in the Falkland Islands and immediate aftermath involved three stages. First, on arrival in the Islands we quickly caught up with Darren Christie (PR and Media Manager for the FIG) who reaffirmed our observer status (see figure 1 official letter). He also introduced us to the international observer mission team, and in particular the executive composed of Brad Smith, Juan Manuel Henao and Alisha Todd. This proved critical because it was through their good offices that we were allowed to attend all the pre-referendum briefings and learn more about the work of the mission. The full team of observers included representatives from North America, Latin America and New Zealand and most team members had experience of monitoring elections and referenda around the world including Ukraine, Guatemala and Georgia.

Under Brad Smith's leadership, the mission organized a series of detailed briefings concerning the background to the referendum, the proposed operation of the referendum and the modus operandi of the mission itself. One key detail to emerge, for example, was the reminder to all of us (including accredited observers) that we were not to speak to the international media and certainly never to offer any comment or reflection on voting turnout, likely result and or in any way be seen to influence or interfere with the process itself. This was a timely reminder because most of the world's major organizations were staying in the same hotel as the observation mission and clearly there were multiple opportunities to interact.

The days before the referendum were spent observing preparations for the referendum itself (including learning details about the locations and movements of ballot boxes) as well as memorably driving over to the Camber to see local organizers arrange a YES 4x4 formation designed to be seen by journalists arriving on the Saturday afternoon Lan Chile flight from Punta Arenas. One little milestone event we witnessed, alongside the BBC camera staff, was the dispatch of the ballot boxes from Stanley Town Hall to Stanley Airport in order that they could be flown to West Falkland locations (see fig 1). As part of the complex arrangements governing the referendum, ballot boxes and observers flew to Port Howard and the

surrounding area to make sure that no part of the referendum itself was unobserved. One consequence of the accredited observer status was that we were permitted to speak with officials working on the referendum (e.g. returning officer, referendum staff) and learnt more about the mechanics involved (e.g. updating the register, voter qualification and numbers of voters on the register itself). So our mission as accredited observers was just that – to observe and to keep our questions in the main to technical matters.



Fig 1.

The second phase of the research focused on the referendum itself. On day 1 we followed Mobile Team 1, which essentially involved a convoy of cars following a pre-assigned path to and from various mobile voting stations. As had been publicly explained by the FIG, great effort had been made to ensure that there were multiple opportunities to vote via static polling stations (e.g. Goose Green, Stanley), mobile polling stations (in both East and West Falkland) and through proxy and postal voting. On day 1 four mobile ballot teams snaked their way around East Falkland. We chose Mobile Team 1 because it involved stops at farms, road junctions and settlements. To be candid, we also knew that most journalists were going to Goose Green because they were convinced that they could file reports from the internet café.

The highlight day of our trip thus began in Stanley at 8am and our first destination was Long Island Farm where we chatted with Neil and Glenda Watson about Camp life,

including the growing importance of visiting tourists. The referendum observation team made sure that their voting was carried out in private (i.e. in the kitchen) while we sat with the family in their living room of the farmhouse (see fig 2).



Fig 2.

After the allotted time of 20 minutes, we travelled to Green Patch or more precisely the turnoff to the settlement. For 25 minutes we waited for any visiting voter. None arrived and thus no votes were recorded (in reality the voters from Green Patch had already submitted their votes by post). Thereafter, we travelled to Brookfield, Horseshoe Bay (gate at settlement entrance), Rincon Grande, Port Louis and finally Johnson's Harbour. At each stop, the mobile ballot box was positioned and voting occurred in private, and the team waited the allotted stop time (see. Fig 3).

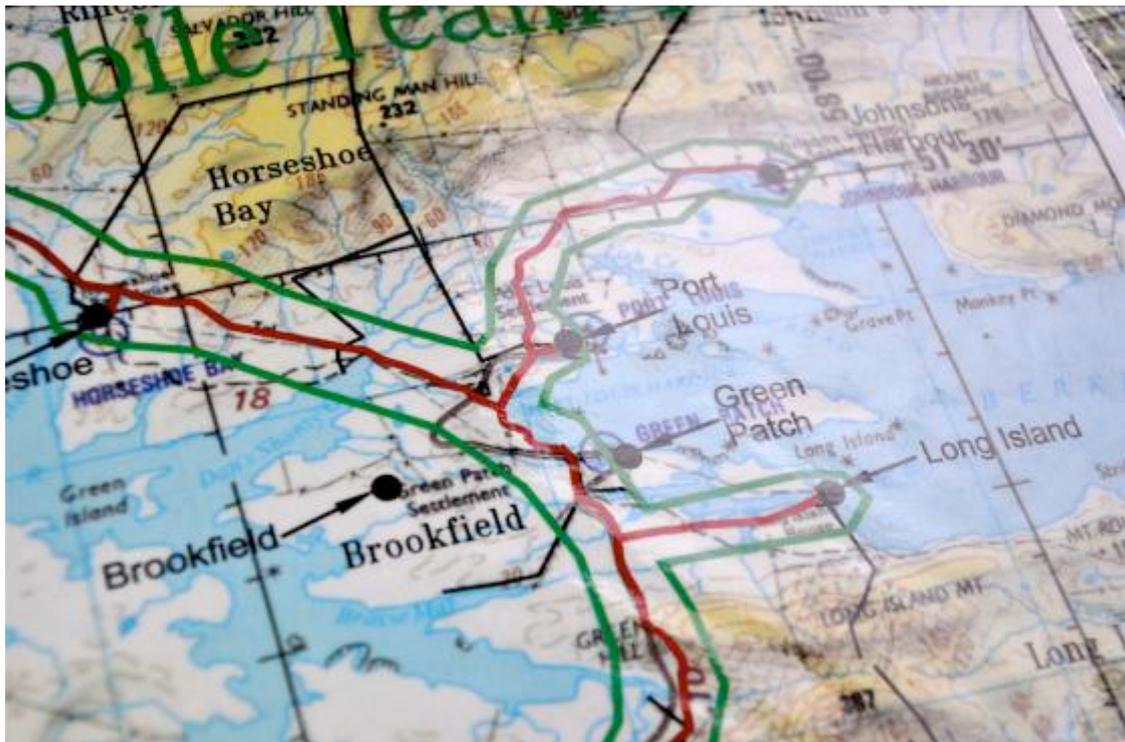


Fig 3.

While we were careful not to speak to voters about the referendum, one of the most prominent themes to emerge in our conversations with the families was their individual and collective memories of the 1982 occupation. At times, these recollections proved intensely moving as residents recalled what had happened to their homes, their livestock and their own families in the face of uncertainty. As one Islander noted to us, nobody knew what the Argentine soldiers might have done to the Camp communities, especially as the fighting with the British intensified. Thus, the referendum was widely considered to be an opportunity to send a message to the wider world about Islander 'wishes' while also provoking reflections about a past that is still animated by living memory. Not all the conversations were dominated by sadness. Many stories dealt amusingly with bad roads, poor driving, outrageous behaviour and complaints about service providers.

Day 2 was, for us at least, split into three parts. In the morning we travelled to Goose Green to talk with the staff responsible for the static station at the community hall (Fig 4). They expected one voter to turn up on that day. For the observers, regardless of numbers, their job was to ensure that the referendum continued to operate in the manner publicized. The second part of our day involved a wide-ranging conversation with the Governor where we reflected on the significance of the referendum and Anglo-Argentine-Falklands relations. Finally, we went to Stanley Town Hall to witness the counting and announcement.



Fig 4.

The most dramatic part of Day 2 of the referendum was undoubtedly the final counting and announcement of results (Fig 5). Despite having only 1517 votes to count, the counting took around 2 hours as the numbers were triple-checked.

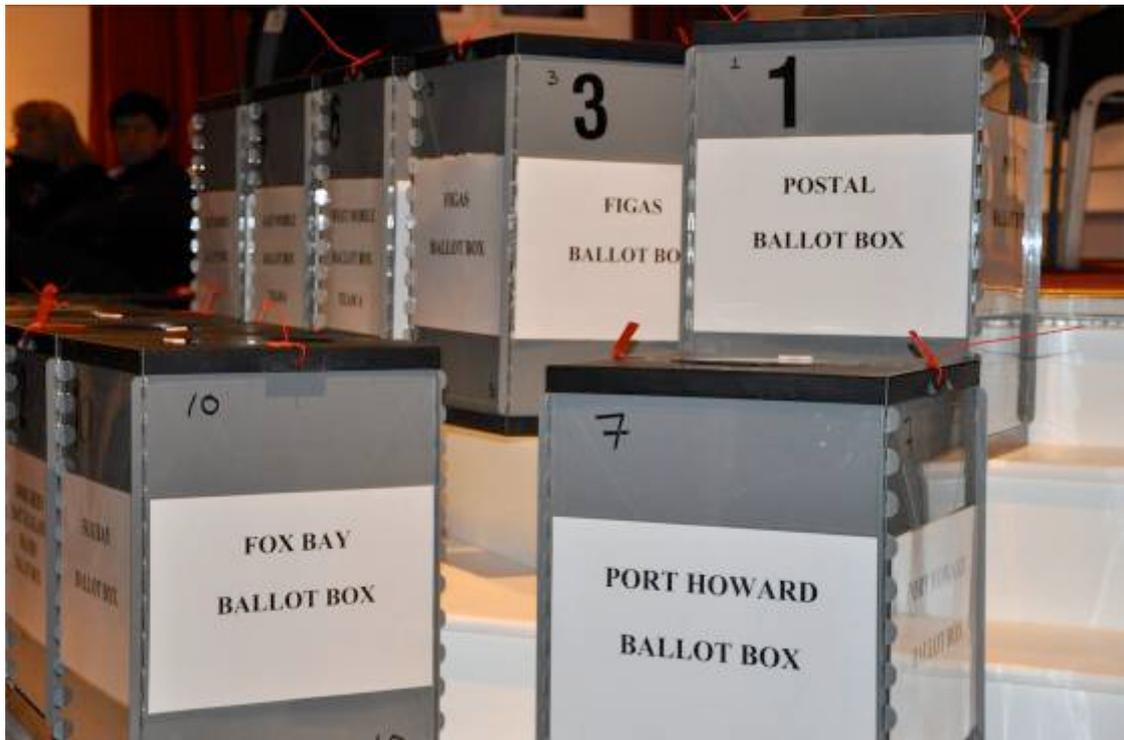


Fig 5.

Eventually, the chief returning officer announced the following: voter turnout (92% - which elicited a cheer from the assembled crowd) and the result itself to the following question:

Do you wish the Falkland Islands to retain their current political status as an Overseas Territory of the United Kingdom?

— 99.8% responded YES and only 3 voters choose NO.

With the world's media poised to record the actual result, the size of the YES vote was greeted by the loudest cheer of the night. Immediately after the result was announced, the international mission released a short statement and press release confirming that the referendum was carried out to international standards and fairly and freely reflected the opinion of voters. Shortly afterwards, a celebration was held at Arch Green where the crowd waved flags and sang a list of prearranged songs with great fervour (fig 6).



Fig 6.

As our research progressed we produced a series of referendum updates via the RHUL geopolitics blog from the moment we travelled down to the Falkland Islands to the moment we completed our observation of the referendum

(see: <http://rhulgeopolitics.wordpress.com/category/falkland-islands/>). We were careful to simply comment on some observations of our work and not to reflect on the referendum and possible result. It also proved useful as a real-time record of our short research trip.

The final element of the research is ongoing and that involves charting the reaction and likely long-term implications of the referendum. At present, the political status quo has been overwhelmingly endorsed but Islanders and journalists alike speculated on possible independence in the future (should for example oil/gas related revenue streams emerge). What is clear is that the YES/NO vote does not rule out either the status quo or independence in the future. As an aside, Professor Peter Willets gave a lecture at the Chamber of Commerce on the Friday before the referendum, which was politely received by the audience. In his lecture, he argued that the UN Decolonization Committee (C24) would consider the Falkland Islands remaining as a British overseas territory unacceptable. Willets' intervention attracted some press commentary

(<http://en.mercopress.com/2013/03/11/free-association-an-option-for-the-current-falklands-dispute-at-un>) and did animate a conversation within the Chamber of Commerce, and beyond about what kind of models would satisfy the UN such as 'free association'. One thing that emerged from the lecture and its aftermath was how well informed many Islanders are on UN debates and past treaties and international legal norms regarding UK-Argentine relations and decolonization respectively.

In terms of future research, we will be doing a number of things. First, we will write an observation piece about the referendum. This will focus on the referendum process and the importance of the imprimatur of the international observation mission. Second, we believe that there is scope for further research into the role of social media. The exponential growth in social media usage by Islanders and their supporters deserves more reflection. The referendum result was rapidly tweeted around the world by Islanders as soon as it was announced around 1030pm Falklands time. Third, we this referendum needs to be contextualized further within the broader currents of UK-Argentine and UK-Latin American relations in particular. Clearly, the referendum itself will not remove the Argentine claim but it might prove decisive in consolidating support for the Falkland Islands regionally speaking. So monitoring the implications of the referendum needs to be ongoing.

We would like to reiterate our thanks to the Shackleton Trust Fund for helping to fund our observation mission. The referendum was arguably the most important event to affect the Islands since 1982. It was a great honour to be first hand observers and the FIG and the international observation mission generously supported us.