

***Full speech of Minister Hugo Swire speech at Falkland Islands Government's annual reception on 10 June 2014:***

It is a great pleasure to join you this evening in celebration of the Falkland Islands. I am very grateful to the Falkland Islands Government for their invitation to say a few words.

But before I do, let me at the outset formally acknowledge our host this evening, Sukey Cameron. All of you here will know Sukey. She is a formidable champion for the Islands. And who do you know that is better connected? Sukey works tirelessly to promote links between the Falklands and the UK – as well, of course, as keeping the FCO on the straight and narrow!

I visited the Falklands myself for the first time this year. You do not need me to tell you what an extraordinary place it is, with an incredibly precious environmental heritage that rightly deserves every kind of reasonable protection. I learned about the traditions, challenges and wonderful sense of community in Camp when I visited Goose Green, Volunteer Point and West Falkland, among other places. I was impressed by the enthusiasm of the next generation when I visited the Falklands Community School. And everywhere that I went, I was struck by the warmth, industry, generosity and cautious optimism of the Falklands people.

I came back from my visit convinced that the Falklands has a bright future. Which is not to say that challenges do not lie ahead – particularly as significant changes are afoot. MLAs have become professional full-time politicians – a development that presents challenges as well as opportunities, as the diplomats in my Department might say when I'm not in the room. The Falklands also have a new Governor. Colin Roberts brings a wealth of experience to the role and will be a tremendous asset to the Falklands Government.

Economically, the Islanders continue to realise their potential – with growing internationally recognised expertise in areas such as organic farming, ecotourism and fisheries - some of which I was able to see for myself. The arrival of the impressive Noble Energy temporary dock in Stanley a few weeks ago, and the recent contract signed by US and UK companies for further exploratory drilling next year, remind us that hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation offer exciting possibilities for the future of the Falklands and the wider region.

With the indefatigable spirit and tenacity of its community, the Falkland Islands are thriving in a global market. What they lack in size they more than make up for in ambition and drive. And I have a message for the Islanders today: the UK Government will help you to realise your ambitions. From the start of this month, all businesses in the Overseas Territories have access to UK Trade and Investment services and our global network of embassies and high commissions, who will now support your economic as well as your diplomatic efforts.

But there is another change afoot in the Falklands, which is perhaps the most profound of all. And that lies in the people. Since 1833, when permanent British administration of the Islands was established during the government of Earl Grey, people have arrived from over fifty countries to form a thriving, dynamic and multicultural community .

Just over a year ago, this community sent a powerful and unified message to the world about their determination to steer their own future. There can now be absolutely no doubt about their views, which are shared far more widely than just by those of British descent.

Indeed, we can now see a renewed sense of confidence and pride in their identity as Falkland Islanders. Efforts by the Government of Argentina to bully and coerce this community have not only failed, but have proved counter-productive. The Islanders have had to overcome potentially damaging measures by Argentina aimed at undermining their economic livelihood. They have also come to expect and live with inappropriate stunts even in areas which should be free from politics, such as the Argentine football team posing with a banner claiming the Islands are Argentine. All of this only goes to reinforce the Islanders' sense of unity, identity and purpose.

So let us all instead listen to their message: the Falkland Islanders will not surrender their home; they will not compromise their human rights; and they will not give up their political freedoms. And the British Government remains committed to defending the Islanders and their right of self determination with the minimum force that is necessary, for as long as is needed.

32 years ago, in the face of an illegal and unprovoked attack, British soldiers sacrificed themselves to liberate the Islands from foreign occupation and restore this right. We remember with gratitude and sorrow the 255 British servicemen and three Islanders who lost their lives. We will never forget them and I was honoured to be able to pay my respects at the beautifully maintained British cemetery at San Carlos.

But we remember too the Argentine fallen, sent to their deaths by a military regime, and the pain of those families whose sons, brothers and fathers never returned. I found it personally very sad, visiting the Argentine cemetery in Darwin in the driving rain, to see the graves of so many young men, unidentified and "known only unto God". That is why we and the Falkland Islands Government remain sympathetic to any request from Argentina to collaborate in an effort to identify their fallen. We have been consistently clear with the Government of Argentina that, if this is the wish of all the families, then the proper thing is for the Argentine Government to formally approach us and the Falkland Islands Government to establish a process for making this happen. Regrettably, despite what is sometimes reported – or mis-reported - in the Argentine media, we have still had no such approach from the Government in Buenos Aires. Our offer remains open. These matters should speak to our common humanity and not be the plaything of politics.

More broadly, of course, we want to see a mutually beneficial relationship with Argentina in the years ahead. Whilst we cannot and will not compromise on the principle of self-determination, differences between us should not preclude a more productive relationship, as neighbours in the South Atlantic. It is in the region's interests, as well as our own interests, to strive for harmonious, respectful and collaborative relations between all three parties.

The late Sir Denis Thatcher once commented of his wife, that "The Falklands marked her soul and mine." Today, I am pleased to say that the Falklands Islands make a lasting impression on the soul of anyone who visits for an entirely different reason. I was deeply affected by my short visit there – by the proud and indomitable spirit of the Islanders, as well as by the warmth of the reception I was given. I encourage all of those in this room who have not visited the Islands to do so and you will be assured of a similarly warm welcome.

And so, let us raise our glasses to the Islanders and wish them, a prosperous, secure and self-governing future.