By Councillor Mike Summers – Falkland Islands Legislative Assembly

The issues of Argentina, defence and security and self-determination always play an important, if not overly explicit part in Falklands elections. Whilst the Argentines never did own the Falklands as they claim, and there was no indigenous population to expel as they claim, they continue to assert an anachronistic and entirely unjustified claim to sovereignty in international fora.

Every candidate will make a statement about self-determination, and the extent of their commitment to defending the rights of the Falkland Islanders to determine their own political future in accordance with UN doctrine. In most people's minds support for the right to self-determination is synonymous with calling on the UK to maintain its defence commitment, and in the absence of any known or rumoured threat to reduce defence commitment; it is not an issue on which candidates will spend much time. Candidates do however regularly welcome the role of the defence contingent here and express gratitude for its presence.

The defence profile has been pretty steady for some time, based on a philosophy and policy of credible deterrence. Whilst technologies may change and be updated, and manpower levels may vary between uniformed personnel and civilian contractors, the defence plan for the Falklands remains credible and properly resourced.

The only major loss in recent years was the withdrawal of the Chinook some time ago now in the early days of Afghanistan when it was required for redeployment. That heavy lift capability has not been replaced (however we have been assured that the withdrawal is temporary), providing significant logistical challenges to Commanders, but they are challenges that are met in various other ways.

More recently the changes have been significant upgrades. In 2007 the old Castle Class patrol vessels (Leeds and Dumbarton) which had been the constant presence in seaborne capability since 1982, were replaced by the new HMS Clyde on lease from Vosper Thorneycroft. Faster, more reliable, lower manning levels, but enhanced capability, the new permanent patrol vessel is the physical embodiment of consistent HM Government commitments to self-determination for the people of the Falkland Islands, and all its overseas territories. It is supplemented regularly by a Type 42 Frigate shared with the West Africa and Caribbean patrols.

And last month saw the arrival of the new Typhoon to replace the ageing Tornado. The Tornado (which itself replaced the Phantom in the Falklands) has been a constant source of reassurance to the population, and much loved for its low flying and constant presence around the Islands. But if the Clyde was a clear message of commitment, the Typhoon is an even clearer sign of that commitment, and enables HM forces to retain a very clear and purposeful presence in its territory in the SW Atlantic.

The relationship between the MoD/ FCO and Falkland Islands Governments is a crucial one, requiring regular and extensive consultation to provide the regular reassurance required for Falkland Islanders in the face of constant and ever more intimidating Argentine pressure. Its activities are most regularly confined to economic subversion – banning commercial charter flights from overflying its territory from third countries, banning European countries fishing in the Falklands under license from doing business in Argentina, also banning companies involved in the exploration for hydrocarbons from doing business in Argentina, and regularly obstructing scientists and tourism marketing officials from attending international conferences. Argentina also refuses to engage with International partners in the setting up of a SW Atlantic regional fisheries management agreement to protect migratory stocks from over exploitation on the high seas – a piece of ecological irresponsibility so crass it beggars belief.

In these circumstances the RAF operated airbridge between the UK and the Falklands via Ascension Island is critical. The service has been provided by commercial charter aircraft for some years, since the dedication of the Tristar fleet to Iraq and Afghanistan. This service has the potential to be the only air access between the Falklands and the outside world if the Argentines were to obstruct the weekly Lan Chile flight from Punta Arenas, as they occasionally threaten to do.

Whilst that would provide short term difficulties for us, the additional traffic on the airbridge would likely enable the development of a commercial N-S air route in due course.

Islands residents pay full fare for access to the airbridge, as do people from the other Atlantic territories of Ascension Island and St Helena. In recent months the application of Treasury rules prompted by the NAO report on the Overseas Territories, has heralded attempts to very substantially increase airbridge fares, a move firmly resisted from here and St Helena. Whilst we accept it is not the role of MoD to support OT development, the continued economic development of the Falkland Islands requires the airbridge for tourism, fisheries and hydrocarbons development, as well as other business and social purposes, and the continued co-operation and multi department consultation to keep it affordable, are critical.

Nevertheless the Falklands economy continues to grow, and we remain economically self-sufficient, save for the cost of defence, as we have done for two decades now.

New interest surrounds the exploration for hydrocarbons, with the arrival in February of a rig to drill at least six new exploration wells in Falklands licensed tranches. This brings with it new economic opportunities for the Falklands and for British and European businesses, but also brings new security issues too. The Falkland Islands Government and its licensed operators will be responsible for all routine rig security requirements. It is firmly hoped that this is all that is required to maintain a peaceful commercial operation; however we remain constantly vigilant and in regular consultation with the MoD and FCO to ensure that legitimate commercial interests are properly protected.

Whilst the commitment of HMG to the defence of the Falkland Islands right to choose its own political future is clear, these issues all remain on the minds of candidates and citizens alike, but they do not become explicit election issues. Any change to the commitment or the defence

posture would very quickly elevate them to the top of the list.