

Choosing Cooperation or Conflict

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Worthing Herald and Littlehampton Gazette Article

10th December 2020

Four candles in a wreath are at the centre of our table. Each week in Advent one more is lit. We advance towards the nativity at Christmas, day by day for those enjoying an Advent calendar.

It was not all fun in the Holy Land two thousand years ago. A young couple were travelling; there was no room in the inn. On Advent Sunday just over forty years ago in El Salvador, the country named after Christ Jesus, I was in the packed cathedral listening to the hour-long sermon by Archbishop Oscar Romero.

For most of the time he preached conventionally; fifteen minutes were for his summary of the news of the week. He had celebrated with a country priest, he mentioned the British MPs and the Peer who had come with Julian Filochowski of the Catholic Institute of International Relations CIIR to recognise the need for his dedication to human rights. We nominated him for the Nobel prize for Peace. He died for his efforts.

CIIR led by Mildred Neville used me, the non-Catholic non-socialist. They were rightly dedicated to equality within countries around the world, including in Southern Rhodesia's painful transition to becoming Zimbabwe. One refugee from Ian Smith shared our home. Later he became a refugee again in South Africa when President Mugabe behaved unbelievably badly.

Conflict and cooperation are in my mind, especially prompted by the card I cherish from the Falkland Islands Government with a cheerful photograph: "We three Kings" of King Penguins at Volunteer Point in the south Atlantic.

The cover photograph shows four Zimbabwean deminers, mine clearers, singing traditional Christmas songs at the Whalebone Arch in Stanley. Last month, 38 years after the Conflict following the Argentinian dictator's unprovoked invasion, the Islands were declared mine free. UK Armed forces mapped, fenced and cleared mine fields between 1982 and 2009. Since then, deminers predominantly from Zimbabwe cleared mines for eleven years. Honour their skills and bravery.

Resources and lives were lost in the Southern Rhodesian conflict. Cooperation would have been better than last ditch resistance by a minority of descendants of white settlers reluctant to accept that skin colour should neither grant nor deny the opportunity to vote.

On the Falklands, the defeat of Galtieri led to Argentina moving towards democracy, the system of risking and accepting defeat. Losses to the invaders and the costs to the United Kingdom were substantial. The world should be grateful that the Great British effort and our sacrifices were successful, significantly with the backing of the nation and of most people in the major political parties.

I was present at the emergency Saturday assembly of the House of Commons. Speeches by the former Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan and by former cabinet minister Douglas Jay would have prompted Margaret Thatcher to try to turf out the invaders, if she had not already determined to do so.

Do not look on opposition representatives as pacifists; do not see the right-win as war mongers. Parliament can make wrong decisions. We may have done so over Iraq.

I think we were wrong backing down over President Assad in Syria. The consequences now receive little coverage. We do not read of the numbers killed nor of the millions of refugees nor of the political impacts around the region.

My memory of the events then was that Conservative rebels calculated that Labour votes would lead to approval of effective action; Labour leadership thought the government coalition would win the vote if the official opposition abstained. Neither was right.