



## LANDFALL AT LAST?

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My interest in the Ilois – the people of the Chagos Archipelago – goes back more than thirty years. I did not, it is true, meet them before their forcible removal from the islands where many of them were born. But I began to get to know them in Mauritius soon afterwards. What I have fought *against* during all these years is the injustice that was done to this harmless and peaceful community. The extent of that injustice was finally exposed before the High Court in the first months of this new millennium<sup>1</sup>. It was exposed again before Parliament in the debate I initiated on 9 January last year [2001]<sup>2</sup>. What I have fought *for* and continue to fight for is not only recognition of the wrong that was done but for their future – a future in which these islanders can be enabled to live in security and dignity, with the opportunities for self-advancement that other communities take for granted.

The natural presumption is that the Ilois should enjoy such a future in their own homeland. If only things were that simple! As I pointed out in last year's [2001] debate, that solution may be unrealistic, especially if it means re-creating a dependence on copra and salt fish. Indeed it would be absurd to revert to an economy whose viability was already questionable in the 1960s and to a society requiring only the manual skills of a people dependent upon a single employer for such basic supplies and social services as their isolation allowed. Rather, a fresh start requires a fresh look at how, using today's technologies, the Ilois can unlock the potential of this garland of islands and reefs to the long-term benefit of themselves and the world<sup>3</sup>.

We must all hope that the current feasibility studies<sup>4</sup> will be thorough in scope and positive in outcome. Yet this is no time for rose-tinted spectacles, whether to look at the pre-expulsion past or the post-court case future. It is one thing to imagine an economy based on advanced forms of fishery, mariculture and tourism, quite another to ensure that these activities generate a surplus for the Ilois inhabitants themselves. It is no good their going back just to become the labour force for external profit takers. It is no good going back in too small numbers to create a viable society or in numbers too great for these tiny islands to support. It is no good going back without help in developing the skills needed to build and operate a revived but authentic Chagossian society. Nor is it any good returning, unless the archipelago's ecology can withstand the activities which make it economically viable. Lastly, all concerned need to be sure that the risks associated with climatic change have been

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<sup>1</sup> Subsequent court judgements have not sustained the Chagossians' right to return.

<sup>2</sup> The right to return to the northern islands was rescinded in 2004.

<sup>3</sup> The report *Returning Home, March 2008* raised Chagossian hopes unreasonably as fully explained in *An evaluation of Returning Home*, Dr J R Turner *et al.* June 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Posford Haskoning report. *Feasibility for the resettlement of the Chagos archipelago - Phase 2B*. 4 Volumes. This report recommended against resettlement on several grounds. It covered climate change problems, soils and agriculture, fishing, seaweed farming, oyster farming and much more.

properly weighed.

I make these points not to pour cold water on the aspirations of a people too long denied their birth right. I do so because I am only too well aware of the vulnerability of the Chagos reef system. Nearly four years ago, following the publication of the World Conservation Monitoring Centre's report *Reefs at Risk* [1998], I used the Adjournment debate I won by ballot to draw to the British Government's notice the responsibilities it bears as one of the world's largest coral reef nations. In reply, the Minister commented "We must understand that, for poor coastal communities, degradation of reefs leads to loss of food security, destabilisation of the community structure and, often, migration to the urban centres, which creates increasing problems"<sup>5</sup>. The Chagos, which account for a large part of Britain's reefs have of course no urban centres to migrate to and, largely for that reason, are probably the world's most pristine. It would be a poor reward for thirty years of waiting to condemn the Ilois to the inevitable degradation of the habitat on which their sustainable existence depended.

How then to give substance to the islanders' hard-won right of access to their own homeland without the environmental consequences from which they would suffer first and most? I have no instant solution and I will be surprised if the present feasibility studies come up with one<sup>6</sup>. What they can provide is the starting point for a more informed discussion, involving the Ilois themselves, on the way ahead. I hope that chance will at last be taken.

Tam Dalyell May 2002

Tam Dalyell, a Labour Member of Parliament since 1962, is now [2002] its most senior member (Father of the House). Famous for his persistence and independence of mind, he has involved himself in issues pertaining to the Chagos since the 1960s.

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<sup>5</sup> *Reefs at Risk Revisited*, 2011 re-emphasises that most Indian Ocean reefs have deteriorated in quality since 2002, other than those of the Chagos Archipelago.

<sup>6</sup> The consultants for the referred to study were indeed unable to come up with a solution for sustainable and economic use of these remote islands.