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COVID-19 and the British Overseas Territories: a comparative view

Matthew C. Benwell^a, Peter Clegg^b and Alasdair Pinkerton^c

^aSenior Lecturer, School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK;

^bAssociate Professor, Department of Health and Social Sciences, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK;

^cReader, Department of Geography, Royal Holloway, University of London, Surrey, UK

ABSTRACT

The British Overseas Territories are part of the ‘Commonwealth family’, and have characteristics such as isolation, economic vulnerability, and small populations, which have influenced how the territories have tackled COVID-19. Their direct relationship with Britain has been another important consideration. The article focuses on four of the Overseas Territories – the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, British Virgin Islands, and Pitcairn – and considers their responses to, and challenges caused by, the pandemic. Overall, the territories have effectively managed the initial period of the pandemic, but each is under significant strain and in some instances the relationship with Britain has become more difficult. Indeed, COVID has exacerbated pre-existing tensions between the territories and London.

KEYWORDS

Falkland Islands; Gibraltar; British Virgin Islands; Pitcairn; COVID-19; isolation; vulnerability

Introduction

Though not members of the Commonwealth of Nations *per se*, Britain’s 14 Overseas Territories (BOTs) are part of the broader ‘Commonwealth family’, and are particularly interesting places to study within the context of COVID-19. Many of the BOTs are defined by their relative isolation, vulnerability, small populations, and value as geo-strategic sites for the projection of military power. Unlike the independent members of the Commonwealth, the territories all have direct constitutional, political and economic links to Britain, and rely on it for their defence and foreign affairs. This liminality – being neither independent sovereign nations nor constituent parts of Britain – is a long-standing source of debate and contestation, and has been brought into starker relief during the pandemic.

Several issues animate the contemporary relationship between the OTs and Britain, including the economic and security-related challenges posed by Brexit (Benwell & Pinkerton, 2016; Clegg, 2016); strained constitutional relations, related *inter alia* to the imposition of anti-money laundering laws and social legislation enhancing LGBTQ+ rights (Yusuf & Chowdhury, 2019); as well as concerns over Britain’s responsiveness to aid and reconstruction in the aftermath of natural disasters (see Clegg, 2018; Pinkerton & Benwell, 2017). As recently as September 2020 tensions between the British-appointed

CONTACT Peter Clegg  Peter.Clegg@uwe.ac.uk

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Governor to the British Virgin Islands (BVI) and the territory's Premier risked a constitutional crisis over the Governor's decision to invite the Royal Navy to shore up the territory's maritime borders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (CNW, 2020). Underlying many of these tensions is the issue of race, with a perception among Caribbean citizens of the OTs that the British government is failing to understand or support the interests and value of them, while privileging other territories such as the Falkland Islands and Gibraltar, and the Crown Dependencies. This supports a view in the Caribbean territories, in particular, that Britain continues to act in a neo-colonial way treating the OTs as junior rather than full partners in ways that make problematic assumptions about their ability to govern and manage their own affairs.

The article focuses on four of the OTs – the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, BVI, and Pitcairn – and considers their responses to, and challenges caused by, the pandemic. The territories were chosen because of their divergent geographical locations in the South Atlantic, Mediterranean, Caribbean and southern Pacific Ocean respectively that have caused specific challenges. In addition, the four reflect different economic and social conditions, e.g., in regard to local budgetary strength, key economic sectors, and population and demographic concerns. They are also representative of the challenges being faced across the territories. Further, the selection of the four foregrounds several significant overarching themes that thread through the case studies that include: the domestic responses of the respective BOT governments and how these worked alongside, and sometimes came into conflict with, the financial, diplomatic and logistical support provided by the British government; the sense of precarity experienced in the BOTs as a result of their geographical isolation *or* anxieties over the policing of borders; concerns about economic insecurities; and the opportunities the pandemic presented to the BOTs to demonstrate their sovereign capacity. Our analysis begins with the Falkland Islands.

Falkland Islands

The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in the Falkland Islands on 3 April 2020. The patient was a British servicemember stationed at RAF Mount Pleasant who was later transferred from the military base to the only civilian hospital on the islands, the King Edward Memorial Hospital. A health team commenced contact tracing and in the following weeks of April a total of 13 cases of COVID-19 were diagnosed. All the cases stemmed from the military base and all patients recovered (Falkland Islands Government, 2020). While several members of the civilian population in the Falklands went into self-isolation with symptoms, no cases of COVID-19 were seen initially outside of Mount Pleasant. However, in mid-November, two cases in the general population were reported (Penguin News, 2020). The threat posed to the 3000-strong civilian population of the Falkland Islands by COVID-19 is particularly serious given that about 'a sixth of the population is classed as high-risk, mainly those over 70 with underlying health conditions' (Haynes, 2020). The Falkland Islands Government (FIG) and medical staff were acutely aware of the potential impacts an outbreak could have and prepared accordingly, reorganising hospital and staffing arrangements at the hospital, as well as ensuring they had adequate supplies of medical equipment and pharmaceuticals. Members of the Falkland Islands' community were also praised by the Governor, Nigel Phillips, for their resourcefulness and voluntary work during the pandemic (MercoPress, 2020a).

The relative isolation of the Falkland Islands in the South-West Atlantic was a double-edged sword during the early months of the pandemic. On the one hand, it ensured that the Falklands remained well behind the high rates of infection witnessed in other parts of the world, including Britain. The FIG enforced strict quarantine measures on those arriving in the islands and flights between South America (Brazil and Chile, both of which experienced serious outbreaks of COVID-19) and the Falklands were cut in early April with these disruptions to airlinks set to continue into 2021 (MercoPress, 2020c). Yet, on the other hand, this isolation is a stark reminder of the precarity of life in the islands. With no flights operating to South America (aside from a repatriation flight to Punta Arenas, Chile, in late July) the only airlink to the outside world was with Britain, some 8,000 miles away. This created considerable inconvenience, especially for citizens from South American countries living in the islands. Also, in March 2020, flights between Britain and the Falklands were disrupted, 'as border closures around the world left the defence ministry planes with nowhere to stop to refuel on the long journey. That meant the Falklands were unable to send coronavirus tests to labs in the UK. It also left a group of around 20 high schoolers, who were in the UK for their final years of secondary education, stranded away from their families' (Roberts, as cited in Nugent, 2020). In these early stages of the pandemic, then, this isolation brought severe logistical challenges at a critical moment in the global outbreak of COVID-19, as well as more intimate disruptions to families.

Initially, the Falkland Islands had no capacity to conduct tests for COVID-19 meaning samples, once the airlink was re-established, had to be flown back to Britain with results taking roughly 10 days to process. In the second half of May 2020 with the help of the British Government, the Falklands secured equipment to undertake testing without the need to send samples back to Britain. Two intensive treatment units with a small medical team were deployed to the Falklands and the Royal Air Force (RAF) flew in extra supplies of oxygen and medicine (Ministry of Defence, 2020). British military engineers also adapted oxygen units from Tornado and Hercules aircraft for use as hospital-grade, life support units (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2020). Conservative MP and chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on the BOTs, Andrew Rosindell, had referred to the pandemic as a 'ticking time bomb' for the territories, stating, 'we have a duty, a responsibility, not to forget these places' (McGrath, 2020). These statements preceded the emergency logistical responses in the Falklands and elsewhere, and were a timely reminder to the British Government of its commitments to the OTs in times of crisis. However, and as we consider later in relation to the BVI, the British response has been criticised for not recognising local needs and sensibilities. Concerns that have been amplified by alleged past failures and heavy handedness in relation to Britain's response to the impact of Hurricane Irma in the BVI and Anguilla, and the political, economic and security fallout from Brexit, of which Rosindell was a supporter (Benwell & Pinkerton, 2016; Byron, 2019; Clegg, 2018; Pinkerton & Benwell, 2017).

Finally, the pandemic brought to the fore some of the long-running economic and geopolitical insecurities facing the Falkland Islands. The islands' economy, with its heavy reliance on fisheries, agriculture and tourism, is particularly susceptible to global market shocks resulting in an uncertain short-term future. The Executive Secretary of the Falkland Islands Fishing Companies Association, James Bates, stated that, 'COVID-19 is of course a major challenge but in addition the consequences of Brexit are still unknown but potentially damaging. Also, recent increases in costs, and the political rhetoric from Argentina and their

efforts to obstruct our development have become increasingly menacing' (MercoPress, 2020b). Both concerns have been heightened after the Falklands (and the other OTs) were excluded from the UK-EU trade deal signed on 30 December 2020. The pandemic has coincided with growing diplomatic pressure from Argentina in their sovereignty dispute with Britain that has understandably not been well received in the Falklands (offers of humanitarian assistance from Buenos Aires received no response from the FIG). Indeed, the epidemiological claiming of cases of COVID-19 in the Falklands by Argentina for inclusion in its national statistics (Télam, 2020), is a troubling reminder of the unrelenting sovereignty aspirations of their near and threatening neighbour.

Gibraltar

In the nine months since recording its first confirmed case on 3 March 2020, Gibraltar reported 943 coronavirus cases (to 19 November), with 742 confirmed recoveries and three deaths (HM Government of Gibraltar, 2020a). Coronavirus' arrival in Gibraltar was attributed to a young couple returning to Gibraltar from northern Italy via Malaga Airport in southern Spain, one of whom subsequently developed symptoms and self-isolated until he had recovered. A precautionary test confirmed COVID-19 and the Gibraltar Health Authority was reported to have started the process of identifying all healthcare workers with whom the young man had been in contact, as well as launching an 'extensive process of contact tracing' (Dollimore, 2020). This seemed to be a successful first deployment of public health procedures designed to prevent and/or identify the spread of COVID-19 through the territory's 34,000 population. However, since late August cases have grown quickly. In response, Chief Minister Fabian Picardo argued that Gibraltar was being judged unfairly over the rise in cases. He said that 'If you do a more detailed dive and you look at the fact that we are doing more testing than most places per head of population, then you'll understand that we are now being very successful at identifying cases of the virus and then exercising controls in terms of imposing self-isolation, etc.' (Calder, 2020). This argument has helped persuade the British Government to retain Gibraltar on its travel corridor list of countries, territories and regions (alongside every other BOT) (Department of Transport, 2021)

The institutional connections between the Gibraltar Health Authority and the National Health Service in Britain contributed to a close mirroring of the public health response to COVID-19 in both countries, albeit with contingencies timed to respond to the particular epidemiological profile of the territory. The increase in ventilator capacity, from five at the emergence of the pandemic to 50 in late March, was judged a triumph of procurement (Cavilla, 2020). Serendipitously, Gibraltar's newly-completed oxygen production plant (commissioned to enable the territory's self-sufficiency in medical oxygen after Brexit) was used immediately (Smith, 2020). COVID-19 testing, initially only available via Britain, was by mid-May being undertaken in two new laboratory facilities. With these in place, Gibraltar had the capacity to test two percent of the national population each day, and some speculated that Gibraltar might even be the 'first country to do Covid-19 antibody tests on [the] entire population' (Thomas, 2020). If these achievements were expressions of Gibraltar's scientific and public health competencies (and growing self-sufficiency), the importance of the continuing relationship with Britain was seen with the Ministry of Defence's involvement in constructing a makeshift

'Nightingale Hospital' within the Europa Point Sports Centre, previously the main venue for the International Island Games in July 2020 (GBC, 2020).

Unlike BOTs that are isolated islands (Pitcairn, the Falkland Islands, and St Helena to name but a few), Gibraltar has a highly porous land border with Spain. On any given working day somewhere between ten and twenty thousand people cross the frontier – the vast majority travelling into Gibraltar in the morning for paid employment or for tourism, with a reverse flow in the evening as those same workers and tourists return home to their accommodation inside Spain. This is a daily migration that sustains communities and economies on either side of the border and is generally considered to be symbiotic and mutually beneficial, although it is important to note that the border was closed altogether in 1967 under General Franco, only reopening in 1986 and is still subject to occasional politically-motivated 'delays'. When, in late-March and April, Spain was confirmed as a global hot spot of COVID-19 infections, the frontier became a particular focal point of anxiety for public health practitioners in Gibraltar (ITV News, 2020).

Somewhat defying historical precedent, the frontier has not become a site of geopolitical tension during the course of the pandemic so far, in fact quite the opposite. The Gibraltar and Spanish governments have worked closely and collaboratively to ensure that border-dependent communities in Gibraltar and southern Spain have been minimally inconvenienced by COVID-19 contingencies and international travel restrictions. Gibraltar's Chief Minister, Picardo, revealed in a tweet that Spain and Gibraltar were 'working together' and 'keeping border fluidity whilst respecting the State of Emergency in Spain and restrictions in #Gibraltar' (Picardo, 2020). Even during the tightest periods of lockdown, the frontier remained open for anyone with a work contract to cross, although Gibraltar's hotels (empty through loss of tourism) helped minimise border crossings by providing accommodation to construction workers, while the University of Gibraltar's halls of residence were opened up to non-resident healthcare professionals (Montegriffo, 2020). The Government of Gibraltar's *Unlock the Rock* (2020) plan for post-lockdown recovery (published in May 2020) offers an important insight into the particular challenges of balancing pandemic- and geopolitical- risk in a precarious environment such as Gibraltar. As the report states, 'The greatest threat to Gibraltar of a return of large numbers of persons infected with COVID-19 will be from arrivals from outside Gibraltar. It is unrealistic, however, to pretend that Gibraltar can operate as an island, without cross-frontier workers or without human arrivals from the UK' (HM Government of Gibraltar, 2020b). A message that has been reinforced by the post-Brexit efforts to keep the border open between Gibraltar and Spain.

British Virgin Islands

The first cases of COVID-19 in the BVI were recorded on 25 March, with several further cases in April and early May, with one death on 19 April. Then from early May to early August there were no further recorded cases; however, in late August and early September there was a spike. The initial efforts to contain the virus were successful. The BVI followed measures taken elsewhere in the Caribbean: control of movement into the country, control of gatherings, and then control of movement within the country (Murphy et al., 2020). Over the summer internal controls were relaxed, but were tightened again for a few weeks in late August when cases rose. The suspected source

of the new outbreak was human smuggling between the BVI and the neighbouring US Virgin Islands that was at the time experiencing a second COVID-19 outbreak.

The BVI's response to the pandemic has been shaped by worsening relations with Britain and its Governor. One area of contention was the package of measures to support the economy. The BVI's important tourism industry was particularly hard hit with hotels, yacht charter companies, restaurants and other tourism related industries being impacted with mass layoffs or cuts to salaries (Wheatley, 2020). Early on the opposition called on the Government led by Premier Andrew Fahie to enact a comprehensive economic stimulus package but it was delayed until the end of May (Ahmed, 2020b). An important reason for the delay was a dispute between the Government and Governor Gus Jaspert over the so called 'Protocols for Effective Financial Management', which had been agreed in 2012. The protocols have been long a source of dispute in the BVI and in other Caribbean BOTs, which limit the amount of borrowing governments can undertake, and if the limit is breached Britain can increase its control of the territories' financial affairs. Fahie argued that the protocols were 'overly restrictive', and were delaying the government's economic response to the crisis; Jaspert responded by defending the protocols saying the government had 'considerable headroom' (Ahmed, 2020a). Later, he stated, 'I have not seen any evidence to indicate that [the Protocols] hamper the government's ability to bring forward an economic package for the people' (Kampa, 2020). Nevertheless, the government was concerned about its limited room for manoeuvre. As was argued, 'the government cannot completely deplete its Reserve Fund of about US\$80 million, some of which must be retained for contingencies . . . It is also not prudent for the government to pursue a level of borrowing and financial support from the Social Security Board that would ultimately compromise the long-term solvency of the fund' (Wheatley, 2020). It would like Britain to 'demonstrate flexibility on a higher debt threshold for the VI on a permanent basis, particularly given the recent substantial increase in borrowing and debt by governments to rescue their economies from the damage inflicted by the coronavirus, including the UK' (Wheatley, 2020). In 2019 the BVI had a low debt-to-GDP ratio of 18%. When the BVI Government released its stimulus package, which included an unemployment fund; business grants; funds to support the National Health Insurance programme; and allocations for key industries, it also included a cut in the budget for the Governor's Office (The House of Assembly of the Virgin Islands, 2020).

Relations between the BVI Government and the Governor deteriorated further after a falling out over securing the territory's border. The government refused the UK's offer of help to patrol the borders in the early days of the pandemic. But then the Governor overruled Fahie and his ministers, and invited a British Royal Navy vessel, HMS Medway, to help secure the borders using his powers in the BVI Constitution. He defended his position, saying 'As your governor, it is my constitutional responsibility to protect the people of BVI and ensure the security of these islands (CNW, 2020; Waldinger, 2020a). In reply Fahie criticised the decision: 'Yet again, [the] governor has deliberately made public statements that serve to undermine the relationship between the BVI public and their democratically elected government through dangerously misleading misinformation'. He also described the situation as 'the tyranny that is unfolding through Governor Jaspert on behalf of the British Empire' (Waldinger, 2020b). Relations soured further when on 18 January 2021 the Governor instituted an independent judge-led inquiry into allegations of

political corruption, misuse of taxpayers' money (including the misappropriation of COVID-relief funds), and a climate of fear in the BVI (Wintour, 2021).

Pitcairn

So far Pitcairn remains free of COVID-19, in large part due to its isolation in the Pacific Ocean. As Filho et al. (2020, p. 3) argued, 'Remoteness, isolation, and inaccessibility have thus far allowed several island states [in the Pacific] to escape infection'. However, the risks are acute. Due to Pitcairn's very small and ageing population, of 40, even one case would pose an existential threat to the community. First detailed discussions of COVID-19 took place on 10 March when the Medical Officer attended the Pitcairn Island Council (PIC) and outlined the nature of the virus and some key measures that the island should take to protect itself (PIC (Pitcairn Island Council), 2020a). One of the first measures was the Council's decision not to allow a cruise ship to land, nor any islanders to board (PIC, 2020b, p. 2). The decision went against the views of many, who in a community questionnaire, suggested that all shipping schedules should continue as normal (PIC, 2020b, p. 1). Soon after the Council decided to ban all short-stay visitors and local traders and officials from boarding vessels (PIC, 2020c).

At the end of March, the Council met again and decided that neither home isolation nor social distancing measures were needed. Also, the meeting discussed who was entitled to travel on the support ship. It was agreed that all permanent Pitcairn residents, essential contracted staff and their partners would be permitted to travel between Pitcairn and New Zealand providing they adhered to all rules and protocols (PIC, 2020d). However, the decision caused disquiet amongst Pitcairners who questioned whether islanders should be allowed to return home during this period. Also, there was discussion about whether non-local contracted staff holding key roles, such as the doctor and teacher, should be sent home (PIC, 2020e, p. 2). The fear (of a very limited number) of outsiders was quite different to the approach taken by Gibraltar.

One important outstanding issue that required a response was what would happen if a Pitcairn resident became ill with COVID-19. It was hoped that a medivac pathway could be established. On 7 April Mayor Charlene Warren-Peu discussed Pitcairn's need for a reliable pathway with Baroness Sugg, the Minister for the BOTs. Subsequently, the British Embassy in Paris advised that French Polynesia responded favourably to the request, and that Pitcairn residents had the right to enter Tahiti; however, this was not a viable option as flights between Mangareva and Tahiti had been suspended (PIC, 2020f). In June it was decided that New Zealand would become Pitcairn's approved medical pathway (PIC, 2020i). Pitcairn's response to COVID-19 was further refined in May. The Medical Officer stated at a Special Council Meeting on 21 May that 'Pitcairn has zero capacity to manage a mild or severe case of the disease. If the virus were to reach Pitcairn, the risk and number of potential deaths has greatly increased [compared to previous information]' (PIC, 2020g, p. 1). The Medical Officer also remarked that Public Health England 'agree that greater emphasis has to go into keeping Pitcairn free of the virus' (PIC, 2020g, p. 2). However, a little later when advice was provided that social distancing measures for residents should again be considered the Island Council declined to give its support (PIC, 2020h, p. 6).

Although Pitcairn receives most of its budget from the British government, COVID-19 is having an impact on the economy, particularly from the loss of cruise ship visitors.

As a consequence, Britain's Department for International Development provided a debt support package for on-island permanent residents, worth NZ\$171,000. The Council added a further NZ\$4000 from its discretionary fund, which meant each adult resident would receive NZ\$555.55 per month until March 2021. However, the Administrator made clear that due to COVID-19 less money would be made available to Pitcairn going forward, and so for instance, the cost of the shipping service would have to be reviewed (PIC, 2020i). COVID has exacerbated both Pitcairn's own vulnerability and the British government's willingness to maintain the same level of financial support as it has previously. The small and ageing population, the extremely narrow economic base, the legacy of child sex abuse convictions, the suspicion of outsiders, and the loss of crucial EU funds as a result of Brexit are putting at risk the territory's viability.

COVID-19 in context

The impact of COVID-19 on the BOTs has come at a difficult time in their relations with Britain, perhaps the most difficult since the late 1990s. Several events and issues have damaged trust and respect. The decision of Britain to leave the EU was significant, as none of the territories were in favour, although of course only Gibraltarians had a vote. The EU provided important benefits to the OTs, including in relation to trade access, bilateral and regional aid, and policy engagement in Brussels (Clegg, 2016). The OTs are not confident that Britain will make good the losses. Then there were criticisms of Britain's response to Hurricane Irma, which badly affected Anguilla and the BVI, including that loans offered for reconstruction had strings attached (Pinkerton & Benwell, 2017). A BVI legislator likened the requirements to 'economic slavery' (Silva, 2018). In addition, the decision of the British Parliament to force the Caribbean OTs, but not the Crown Dependencies, to introduce stronger anti-money laundering laws caused further disquiet. Also, a controversial House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee report that called for changes in areas such as same-sex marriage and reforming local OT citizenship was published in 2019 (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2019). Finally, and most recently, the decision of the Governor of the Cayman Islands to impose civil partnerships against the will of local politicians, and the suggestion that refugees entering Britain could be relocated 4000 miles to Ascension Island has raised alarm in the OTs about the lack of understanding and heavy-handedness by Britain. So, these broader strains in the OT–Britain relationship have shaped responses and reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic; most particularly in the BVI and the other Caribbean OTs. However, even where cooperation has been effective in Gibraltar, the Falklands, and to an extent Pitcairn, the events of the last few years will not be easily forgotten or forgiven.

Conclusion

Fortunately, at least for now, the four territories have controlled the spread of COVID-19, with the Falkland Islands having only a dozen cases in the resident population and Pitcairn no cases at all. Each territory has undertaken its role in a measured way to stem the spread, although the economic costs of the lockdown have been significant. Britain has afforded some assistance to all four territories, but there have been tensions, particularly with the BVI, and it does appear that Britain has taken a more benevolent attitude

to the Falkland Islands and Gibraltar than to their more troublesome brethren in the Caribbean. There is a feeling, rightly or wrongly, in the BVI and other Caribbean OTs that skin colour does make a difference in how they are treated. As a result, there are increasing calls to look again at the constitutional relationship, including in the BVI and Bermuda; while the Cayman Islands has recently secured several amendments to its constitution (Connolly, 2020). Isolation is also an important theme. In some respects, it has had a beneficial effect, but key transportation links have been disrupted making it more difficult to organise medical treatment and the return of residents. In addition, geo-political concerns have been highlighted, but in contrasting ways. Gibraltar and Spain have worked well together, but relations between the Falkland Islands and Argentina remain frozen. Also, fear of ‘the other’ or those with suspected COVID-19 has been a theme in BVI and Pitcairn. Efforts have been made to limit the reach of these views, but they are clearly detrimental and will damage both monitoring and economic recovery efforts. In many respects, but perhaps not surprisingly, the pandemic has reinforced the strengths and weaknesses of the economic models being followed by the territories, the geo-strategic approaches they are taking, and their ties with Britain.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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