

“The decade that keeps coming back”

Argentina in the 1970s: Reflections of an Irish diplomat in Buenos Aires

*Justin Harman*¹

Abstract: The 1970s was a critical decade for Argentina which experienced a deep political, social, and economic crisis, an escalating armed conflict involving guerilla movements and reprisals by right-wing groups, and a *coup d'état* which in the words of the official Commission set up after the return of democracy in 1983 was “the most savage tragedy of Argentine history”. The decade left profound fissures which are reflected in contemporary political debate and which impact on the country's capacity to create the consensus needed to support essential structural change. The legacy of that decade was evident again in the 2023 Presidential election triggered by statements by Vice President Victoria Villaruel seen by some as excusing the excesses of the military dictatorship. Nonetheless, the 1970s was also the decade that led to the consolidation of democracy and acceptance of the inviolability of fundamental rights, the absence of which had permitted the level of State repression and violent atrocities that took place. This essay reflects the perspective of an Irish diplomat who worked in Buenos Aires over those turbulent years.

Keywords: 1970s Argentina, Perón, terrorism, Montoneros, military dictatorship, human rights, democracy.

¹Justin Harman was an Irish diplomat in Argentina in the 1970s and returned as Ambassador in 2014. He had previously served as Ambassador in Madrid, Moscow, Strasbourg, and Vienna. He lives between Ireland and Argentina and is currently Vice-President of the Asociación de Estudios Irlandeses del Sur (AEIS) and lectures at the Universidad Del Salvador in Buenos Aires.

Worldwide the 1960s was a decade of febrile social and political protest when marginalised and discriminated groups, many inspired by the civil rights movement in the US, found a voice to demand change. In Northern Ireland this was reflected in the civil rights movement to challenge anti-Catholic discrimination in employment and housing and to end the plural voting system which disenfranchised large sections of the population. Argentina, with its history of oppressive military and civilian-military regimes and prevailing patriarchal conservative culture, was impacted more than other countries, notably by the Cuban revolution and the uprisings in France in 1968. Influenced by international developments, including also the outcome of the 1968 Medellin Conference of Bishops, opposition to the Argentine military regime quickly crystallised. As pressure for change mounted, the toppling of the civilian administration of President Illia in 1966 by an oppressive regime led by Gen Onganía proved an important contributor to the calamitous decade that followed.

I arrived in Buenos Aires in 1975 which proved a critical year, when the inefficacy and powerlessness of the Peronist government became glaringly evident, with guerilla attacks by Montoneros and other leftist groups, and corresponding actions from the military and police and reprisals by right-wing extra-official groups, closely linked to the security services. These groups were acting under the control of the shadowy figure of López Rega, who held the confidence of Isabel Martínez de Perón who had succeeded her husband as President in July 1974.

I had joined the Department of Foreign Affairs in late 1974 and, following involvement in Ireland's opening Presidency of the EC Council of Ministers in the first half of 1975, was posted to the small Irish Embassy in Argentina, then Ireland's only diplomatic mission in Latin America. A 22-year-old diplomatic neophyte, I arrived to join the Ambassador who had been operating on his own for the previous 18 months. He returned to Dublin and remained there owing to illness until July the following year; I would therefore remain as the sole diplomat, including during the *coup d'état*.

The early 1970s were years of change in Ireland dominated by the 1973 oil crisis, accession to the EC which ushered in economic and social transformation (the scale of which was not appreciated at the time), and by the deepening conflict in Northern Ireland. Opinion throughout the island had been inflamed by the shootings on Bloody Sunday in Derry in December 1972, which led to the

burning of the British Embassy in Dublin, an incident I witnessed. In 1974, bombings in Dublin and Monaghan led to the deaths of 33 people with over 250 wounded.

Despite upheaval in Ireland, I was unprepared for the scale of turmoil faced by Argentina. Convulsed by rampant inflation, daily currency devaluations, labour unrest, the growing guerrilla campaign by left-wing groups was met by vicious counterattacks from the right. The Government led by the widow of General Perón was visibly enfeebled. Isabelita Perón appeared to me a waxen and frightened figure, surrounded by a host of dubious characters, when I greeted her at the end-of-year protocolary ceremony by the diplomatic corps in the *Casa Rosada*. When the *coup d'état* eventually took place 3 months later 24 March 1976 (the 7th such intervention since 1930), there was no sense it would ultimately constitute, in the words of the Sabato Commission set up by Raul Alfonsín after the return of democracy in 1983, “the most savage tragedy of Argentine history”. Bizarrely, that savagery of state violence was accompanied by claims that the regime’s actions were necessary to defend western Christian civilisation.

If as Philip Graham notes “news is the first draft of history”, this must surely also be valid for diplomatic reporting which seeks not only to inform but to contextualise and forecast. Providing Dublin with the detail of the bewildering sequence of day-to-day incidents over that broiling austral summer made little sense, they could only be understood against the historical background, at least from the military intervention in 1930 through to the upheavals of the 1960s. The key political development was of course the birth of Peronism in the 1940s. And it was evident that much of what was occurring reflected the virtual civil war between opposing left and rightwing factions within the broad Peronist movement. I recall the caustic assessment of V.S. Naipaul which reached a wide audience in the English-speaking world². While there was no doubting the movement’s remarkable endurance and capacity to reinvent itself, the problem was one of definition; the categories used in most countries appeared inadequate. An Argentine sociologist recently noted that though Peronism “is clearly populism (the archetype according to some), it is not exactly fascism but exhibits many of its key characteristics, it is not socialism but relies on a class warfare rhetoric and advocates income and wealth redistribution. Extremists from the right

² V.S. Naipaul *The Return of Eva Peron*: “The first Peronist revolution was based on the myth of wealth, of a land waiting to be plundered. Now the wealth has gone. And Peronism is like part of the poverty. It is protest, despair, faith, machismo, magic, espiritismo, revenge. It is everything and nothing”.

and the left claim to be Perón's true heirs and still cohabit, not without conflict, in the political party he (Perón) created.”³

Through the efforts of Juan José Delaney, an intriguing exploration of Peronism by Rodolfo Walsh, the Irish Argentine journalist, writer and later radical leftwing political activist, has recently come to light.⁴ Writing in 1957, two years after the overthrow of Perón, Walsh provided a remarkably dispassionate assessment (given his later political radicalism and assassination during the dictatorship in the 1970s). He wrote: “Perón es un político. Mejor: un demagogo. Habilísimo. No ha habido en toda la historia sudamericana, que tiene grandes caudillos, quien como él supiera hipnotizar a las multitudes. Conquista el poder porque interpreta los tres o cuatro aspiraciones básicas de las masas - mejor nivel de vida, un status social más respetable, cierta intervención en el manejo de la cosa política -, porque interpreta también los resentimientos de las masas -, xenofobia, odio a los ricos u “oligarcas”-, y sobre todo porque astutamente les habla de igual a igual... El extraordinario poder que conquista Perón está edificado básicamente sobre la palabra. Él ha dado a la palabra una nueva dimensión, casi física y sensible, que nada tiene que ver con el contenido conceptual”.

Walsh says Perón governed in some respects admirably, in others like an idiot. He praises his economic policies but says: “En lo político, Perón oprime a los partidos opositores, los molesta, los persigue sin necesidad, ahoga progresivamente la libertad de prensa ...utiliza liberalmente las torturas y los encarcelamientos arbitrarios. Los dirigentes peronistas son en general mediocres, ambiciosos y obsecuentes. La maquinaria de propaganda estatal se hace asfixiante e invade las escuelas primarias. La justicia está corrompida. El saldo es desastroso.”

A key question was how and why social activism in Argentina had transformed over a few years in the late 1960s into large-scale guerilla revolutionary movements. Where did this revolutionary fervour appear from? In Argentina, guerilla groups, while not unknown, had had relatively little impact. However, economic, political, and social tensions grew in the last years of the 1960s, notably after the explosion of social and labour discontent in Cordoba, which united workers and

³ “What Kind of Populism is Peronism?” Emilio Ocampo, Universidad del CEMA, Buenos Aires, June 2020

⁴ Letter No 29 “Rodolfo Walsh - Cartas a Donald A Yates 1954-1964”, edited by Juan José Delaney, Ediciones De La Flor, Buenos Aires, 2021

students. The *Cordobazo*, somewhat akin to Paris in May 1968, triggered growing political and social unrest. By 1970 Argentina had definitively entered the era of the “armed struggle” which developed quite unique features, notably its roots in nationalism, Catholic progressive action and anti-imperialism. Several Peronist revolutionary groups were active, including the *Montoneros*. Formed in the late 1960s, the historian Richard Gillespie noted the *Montoneros* “drew together radical Catholicism, nationalism, and Peronism into a populist expression of socialism a whole wealth of historical legitimacy into something that attracted civilians of diverse political denominations: Catholic militants, popular nationalists, authoritarian but populist nationalists, recruits from the traditional Left, combative Peronists ... They combined the social objectives of the Left with the strong nationalism and anti-imperialism of Peronism, a combination which explains their double orientation, which lay somewhere between legality and clandestinity”.⁵

Mostly urban-based students and young middle class professionals, the *Montoneros* identified with the populist and nationalist ideals of Peronism, and were notably influenced by the writings of William Cooke, an Irish-Argentine, who sought to model Peronism as the Argentine version of Castro's national liberation movement in Cuba.

Unlike the *Montoneros*, the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP), whose recruits were mostly from cities and universities in the interior, had a broader vision of revolution which “... was not a limited national and nationalist movement, but rather part of a pan-American struggle against imperialism. In this vein they aspired less to refurbish the nation-state than to transcend it”. To some degree, the defining difference between the groups was their attitude towards Peronism. The ERP reflected the Argentine's Left's distrust of Perón dating from his anticommunism in the 1940s, whereas the *Montoneros* embraced Perón as the person who created a unique bond with the masses. However, the *Montoneros* and ERP were by 1970 united in aiming to overthrow the military government.

Perón, in exile in Madrid, retained his popularity, although it appeared to be in decline; there was even talk of “*Peronismo sin Peron*”. Partly to counter this, he embraced the left-wing youth movements including the *Montoneros* whom he came to refer to as his “special formations”. At

⁵ Richard Gillespie “Soldados de Perón” as quoted in ‘The Argentina Reader’ (Duke University Press, 2002)

the same time, Perón widened his appeal to opposing groups and interests, and cemented his relationship with the bureaucracy of the trade unions. By 1972 when the military Government legalised Peronism, Perón had become all things to all men. Lanusse, President *de facto*, believed Peronism needed to be allowed to participate in elections in order to counter the pressure from the revolutionary Left.

However, the fissures inherent within a broad Peronist coalition quickly became evident after Perón, now 78 years old and with his health failing, took office as President for the third time in October 1973. Within months, he made plain his distrust of the Montoneros, particularly the ongoing campaign of guerilla attacks and kidnaps; he closed ranks with the main union movement (CGT), his traditional power base, dominated by loyal Peronist figures. It became evident Perón had used the Left and particularly the Montoneros as an instrument to return to power but had from the outset no intention of pursuing their political agenda.

Ingenuous in the faith they had placed in Perón, the Montoneros had been duped. On 1 May 1974 the split came into public view with a strong attack by Perón on the Montoneros, who famously withdrew their followers en masse from the *Plaza de Mayo*. Two months later Peron died of heart failure and was succeeded by his inexperienced and uniquely unqualified widow Isabelita, chosen as Vice-President in large part to maintain equilibrium among opposing factions within the Peronist coalition. Her administration was stymied from the start by a renewed economic crisis, in part the result of the oil crisis of 1973, a ban on Argentine meat exports by the EEC, an inflationary spiral, a depreciating currency and a growing payments deficit. At the same time, the festering civil war within the Peronist movement between Montoneros and forces loyal to the trade union leadership deepened with growing activism by groups attached to the AAA (Argentine Anticommunist Alliance) a shadowy grouping loyal to the Minister for Social Welfare Lopez Rega with strong links to the Federal Police service; by end-1974 the AAA was responsible for most assassinations and disappearances of leftist activists.

1975 opened with a sense of deepening crisis. In addition to the defection of the Left from the coalition, divisions opened on the Right between Lopez Rega and the trade union movement. Lopez Rega manoeuvred to nominate a new Economy Minister who in May announced a dramatic

austerity programme (the *Rodrigazo*) which provoked a general strike, the first under a Peronist Government; reluctantly, Isabelita in July forced Lopez Rega into exile, after which she absented herself for recuperation. The vacuum of power became glaringly evident; as the year progressed the government's only support came from the trade union bureaucracy, although rank and file support was haemorrhaging from the impact of the deepening economic crisis.

The unfolding tragedy deepened in October, the month before my arrival, with a startling attack by the Montoneros on a military base in the northern province of Formosa. I recall being struck by the role played by a young Montonero, Roberto Mayol, a conscript who opened the barracks doors to allow the guerillas to enter. The attack ended with the death of ten young local conscripts, ten Montoneros and various others. Mayol, immediately shot by the conscripts, was a Jesuit-educated son of a prominent family in Santa Fé; his evolution from progressive Catholic action (he was a strong admirer of Camilo Torres, the Colombian priest turned revolutionary) to Montoneros combatant exemplified the radicalisation of sections of the young middle class.

The Formosa attack was interpreted as an overt declaration of war by the Montoneros and as the single most important incident which triggered the decision by the military to take power. Nonetheless, questions remain as to why that decision was taken given that in the wake of the attack, they had received virtual *carte blanche* to use any means to defeat subversion. Signed by the interim Peronist President Luder, and supported by the cabinet and approved by Congress, the decrees "ordered military and security operations to *annihilate* the actions of subversive terrorism throughout the national territory". Videla later argued these decrees expressly created a 'licence to kill'; he maintained the term 'annihilate' had a specific meaning within the military code and had been inserted deliberately to allow the armed forces to 'disappear' opponents; this interpretation was later contested by the Peronists who were in government at the time, and the latter interpretation was confirmed by the courts during the 1985 trials of the Junta. Those trials are the subject of the 2022 award-winning film '*Argentina 1985*' directed by Santiago Mitre.

In any event, the military now had the powers that they had been seeking.⁶ In an interview shortly before his death Videla claimed the decision to intervene had been taken when Isabelita refused to stand aside; when the interim Peronist President Luder (who apparently might have been acceptable to the military) refused to take her place; and in response to pressures building up among junior ranks within the military.



Justin Harman (right) on 3 March 1976 with the Chiefs of the Armed Forces (Videla, Massera, and Agosti), the Minister of Defence and the military Mayor of Buenos Aires, at a commemoration of Admiral William Brown, founder of the Argentine Navy. Attendance at the ceremony by the heads of each of the armed forces was portrayed as a deliberate demonstration of unity. It later emerged that the decision to topple the civilian Government of Isabela Perón on 24 March, three weeks later, had already been taken.

I would add the hubris that existed within the armed forces that they were uniquely qualified, despite the absence of a mandate or obvious qualifications, to manage the affairs of the country. I was taken aback at the arrogant assumption that simply by virtue of being in uniform they could

⁶ The US Ambassador Robert Hill reported on 10 October that the decrees “gave the military the authority to take on the anti-subversive battle and to take the necessary measures to annihilate the subversives.... The armed forces have now the authority that have been seeking for some time to take on the fight against the terrorists, which up until now has been handled (or not handled) by the Federal Police”.

manage complex issues across the public administration, over the heads of professionally trained civilians. The debacle left behind in 1983 demonstrated their abject failure.

Over that southern summer the question asked was not whether there would be military intervention, but when? Few whom I met believed that there was an alternative, including within the Irish Argentine community. I expressed surprise since it was less than three years since the military had returned to barracks; Perón had been elected in 1973 with a majority of over 60%. I was repeatedly told no civilian government had the capacity or credibility to restore order. There appeared a resigned civil consensus on the inevitability of military intervention. Weeks before the coup, I participated in an elaborate naval ceremony on the anniversary of the death of its founder Admiral William Brown. Unusually, it was attended by the Chiefs of the Army, Navy and Air Force and depicted as a deliberate demonstration of unity. What was not known was that the decision to topple Isabelita Perón had already been taken, with a plan that included systemic repression of human rights targeted not only at subversives but at wide sections of the political opposition and civilian population.



Justin Harman (left) at an event in Government House (Casa Rosada) attended by all diplomatic missions in Buenos Aires shortly following the military intervention on 24 March 1976. Right to left: Brig Orlando Ramón Agosti, head of the Air Force; Adm Emilio Massera, head of the Navy; Gen Jorge Rafael Videla, head of the Army and de facto President.

Given the level of public anticipation, the coup on 24 March was initially anti-climactic. There was a determined effort to maintain an appearance of 'normality', although this semblance of ordinary life lasted only a few short weeks. The days and weeks after the coup provided few clues as to what was happening. An eerie silence prevailed, broken by word-of-mouth reports of insidious incidents where victims "disappeared" without trace. Families and friends seeking information were stonewalled. Embassies were surrounded to prevent political refugees from seeking protection or asylum and families from seeking consular assistance.

What became clear was that the self-styled "Process of National Reorganisation" was not only an intervention to defeat subversive groups after which there would be a return to barracks; it would involve an authoritarian attempt to change society by force, from the top down; Videla referred to "the final closing of one historical cycle and the beginning of another".

Word began to filter through of disappearances, and the first signs emerged of systemic state repression. Within days of the intervention, I reported to Dublin that an 'efficient, well planned and, as far as was known, bloodless coup' had been carried out in an atmosphere of complete calm among the general population'; 'meticulous' organisation had, within a few hours of having assumed power, ensured that care-taker ministers had been appointed, the military governors for the provinces had been named, the Union and Employer organisations had been taken over and their funds frozen, the majority of the most prominent supporters of Mrs Perón's administration had been arrested and the Embassies in Buenos Aires had been approached as to recognition of the Junta.'

The actions by the Irish and other Embassies have been extensively analysed by the late Prof Dermot Keogh⁷, based on diplomatic archives. I reported to Dublin that "on available evidence, the new Junta had behaved in marked contrast to the actions of previous dictatorships by stating that it would not take action against 'specific social groups' (ie Peronism)". While I cautioned that

⁷ Dermot Keogh: "Ireland and Argentina in the Twentieth Century: Diaspora, diplomacy, dictatorship, catholic mission and the Falklands crisis", Cork University Press, 2022. The Spanish edition "Irlanda y la Argentina del siglo XX: Diplomacia, diáspora, Iglesia Católica, derechos humanos y la guerra de Malvinas" was published in November 2021 by USAL Press in Buenos Aires.

it would be necessary to wait to see whether this was in fact the policy, I reflected a shared perception among diplomatic and other contacts in those early days that the Junta was (as I reported) “within the school of thought of ex-President Lanusse, who led the way back to constitutional rule in 1973, and who was convinced of the necessity for the Armed Forces to remain outside the political arena.” While it did not initially appear ‘a Pinochet-type regime,’ I warned there would however remain “disquiet, until the names of all those arrested had been made public’ and the military were ‘seen to act as effectively against the right-wing terrorist groups which have operated in the country over the past 15 months as against those of the left.’” I warned that, irrespective of what had happened following the previous six military interventions in Argentine politics, historical parallels were not necessarily a reliable guide to what would transpire.

The late Prof Keogh quoted others who shared that interpretation. The U.S. Ambassador, Robert Hill, told Washington on 29 March that the coup was ‘the best executed and most civilised coup in Argentine history. ... Argentina’s best interests, and ours, lie in the success of the moderate govt. now led by General [Jorge Rafaél] Videla.’ Jorge Luís Borges (whom I frequently saw walking with Maria Kodama to their apartment building situated close to the offices of the Embassy) had lunch with Videla after the *coup d’etat* and thanked him ‘for what he had done for the *patria*, having saved it from chaos, from the abject state we were in, and, above all, from idiocy.’ He said Argentina had ‘a government of soldiers, of gentlemen, of decent people.’ Later, Borges, as did many other Argentines and foreign observers, changed his view of the civilian military government. The editor of *The Buenos Aires Herald*, Bob Cox, later arrested and imprisoned, and forced into exile, was initially positive in his reaction, believing the civilian military government would bring stability. Prof Keogh quotes the Provincial of the Irish Argentine Pallottine congregation, Alfredo Leaden that “on the whole it has been a pacific changeover. Let’s hope it keeps that way.”⁸

⁸ This turned out to be tragically mistaken. On 4 July 1976 the same Provincial and four other members of the Pallottine congregation (some of whom I knew) were assassinated in St Patrick’s Church in Buenos Aires; it later became known that, despite denials, the attack had been carried out by a group working with or for the security forces. I recall the numb horror when news of the attack reached me as I was visiting the farm of an Irish Argentine family in the Province of Buenos Aires. I returned immediately and visited the Church, and later attended the funerals. Without doubt, this was the most shocking individual incident during my posting; it had a lasting impact and continues to haunt the Irish Argentine community.

How should those initial assessments, including my own, be interpreted today? Firstly, they need to be seen against the background of the scale of violence, economic disorder, political powerlessness, and sense of incipient civil war that had prevailed prior to the coup. A widely held assumption was that this coup would follow the lines of previous interventions which, by and large, had not been accompanied by systematic repression, although violence did erupt not least in the coup in 1955 which toppled Peron. Most whom I met however did not believe (or chose not to believe) the military capable of such widespread and methodic violation of human rights. Indeed, even when there was incontrovertible evidence of the disappearances, it was not uncommon to be met with the response “por algo será” or “algo habrán hecho” (i.e. it would not have happened without a reason).

A significant factor was Videla himself, viewed by many as reluctant to intervene and a moderate force within the military. I noted to Dublin that he had committed to a return to democratic government within three years and that while he appeared “personally opposed to the use of such methods [state terror], he is apparently powerless to stop them” because ‘hard-liners’ were determined to take ‘a tougher stance’ against “subversives and various left-wing political activists.’ I reported that while ‘dissatisfaction with his moderate approach clearly does exist, ...there is as yet no firm indication his position is in danger’ and that ‘individual military participation’ was suspected in the activities of such groups as the AAA, noting there had been public surprise that its activities had not stopped after the coup. That was explained perhaps because it did not exist ‘as a fully-fledged organisation with headquarters, etc., but rather is composed of individual groups who take “private action” against “leftists”, and then simply ascribe it to the organisation’. I concluded at that point that the armed forces were responsible for the disappearances and the killings. I told Dublin that “... the most frightening aspects of the current situation are the indications that active members of the Armed Forces are participating in these right-wing terrorist groups”.



*Justin Harman (third right) with members of the Irish Argentine community in 1976 including John Scanlan, former editor of *The Southern Cross* and founder of St Brendan's College in Buenos Aires; Willy Ford, President of the Federation of Irish Argentine Societies; and Fr Alfredo Leaden, an Irish Pallottine who was assassinated with four other members of the congregation on 4 July 1976 by members of the military.*

The late Prof Keogh noted that US Ambassador Hill reported his conviction that Videla was 'strong enough to keep the hardliners in check and impose a moderate approach.' Prior to the coup, he had reported that there had been a fear that 'hard-line commanders in the field might exceed their orders and arbitrarily shoot or arrest any labour leaders, Peronist, or leftist they did not like: 'This did not happen,' he reported, adding: 'Thus, for now, Videla's moderate policies seem safe.'

How had this impression of Videla as a moderate emerged, and what impact did it have in diluting western criticism of the military regime and its human rights violations? Was there evidence to support the suggestion that he risked being toppled by hard(er)-line elements? Certainly, Videla

came across as an austere and ascetic figure, a regular attendant at Mass, and without apparent personal political ambitions or trace of fanaticism. He appeared to many a welcome contrast to some of the dubious cast of characters around him, not least Massera, the head of the Navy. His alleged 'moderate' stance, and the belief that western criticism of the regime should be toned down lest it contribute to his being toppled and replaced by a hard-liner, was a staple element of diplomatic interpretation.



Seán O'hEadeáin, Irish Ambassador, speaking at a St Patrick's Day event at the Hurling Club in Buenos Aires in 1978

Did this constitute effective news management by the regime? One interpretation is that the military understood there would be less tolerance towards the regime after the November 1976 election of Jimmy Carter and that it was decided to present Videla as a moderate and a bulwark against more extremist forces. One analyst has suggested diplomats in Buenos Aires were

deliberately misled.⁹ Certainly, any suggestion of his being a moderate on human rights was not borne out by Videla himself, who, shortly before his death, provided a coldblooded defence of the Junta. He maintained the military had taken power with one basic consensus: “A large group of persons had to be eliminated ... and they could not be either processed judicially or shot. The dilemma was how to do this without society becoming aware. There was no other solution: we were in agreement this was the price that had to be paid to win the war against subversion”.

With the benefit of information now available, no disagreement existed within the armed forces on the price to be paid to win the war against subversion. Any suggestion that Videla was a moderate on human rights was therefore mistaken. On the other hand, rival factions clearly did exist. One authoritative historian argues there were three groups who were divided on the longer-term political future. The faction led by Massera of the Navy echoed the nationalist military populism of the past, favouring a new ‘Peronism without Perón’ “that would supersede Peronism but use similar populist measures, and pose a barrier to the revival of the Left”. A second faction (led by Generals Suarez Masón and Menéndez) were heirs to the extreme anti-Peronist groups (“gorilas”) of the late-1950s and supported indefinite military dictatorship and an unrelenting war on Peronism. The third faction, led by Videla and Gen Roberto Viola who succeeded him as Army Chief of Staff in 1978, believed economic recovery would allow for eventual political liberalisation.¹⁰

The disappearance and torture of Pat Rice was a defining event in this period. That episode is comprehensively recounted by Prof Keogh in his volume on Ireland and Argentina in the XXth Century. News of his abduction in October 1976 in the company of a young catechist, Fatima Cabrera was deeply alarming to us in the Embassy. Our urgent appeals for information fell on deaf ears. Fortunately, after I provided an alert to a wire agency contact in Buenos Aires, a news item published in the Times in London provoked an admission that he was being held in official

⁹ The US Ambassador reported to Washington in June 1976, quoting Israeli sources in Buenos Aires, that the military had taken the decision to eliminate subversion and terrorism and to silence and terrorise any potential opposition long before the coup. The only question remaining was how to do this with least exposure to the external criticism which had isolated the Pinochet regime in Chile. The government gave the green light to the security forces to face the internal security threats with whatever response considered appropriate, but always leaving the government in a position of ‘possible deniability’ of responsibility.

¹⁰ David Rock “Argentina 1516-1987 From Spanish colonisation to Alfonsín” University of California Press, 1987

custody. When we finally met him, roughshod attempts to improve his appearance could not disguise the ruthless psychological and physical ill treatment that he had suffered. He was severely disoriented but, at the same time, conveyed a calm dignity. Until his release my very frequent visits formed the basis of a friendship that lasted for the rest of his life.



*Justin Harman (4th right) with the Irish Ambassador at the Embassy
St Patrick's Day reception with members of the Irish team which attended the
World Hockey Championships in Buenos Aires in March 1978*

Following his recovery and eventual return to Argentina, Pat Rice engaged in the fight for human rights, notably the rights of the disappeared. He had an acute understanding of the importance of effective international action. Never one to say, “task completed”, he saw human rights as a mosaic that involves much more than governments signing treaties or issuing declarations. While always vigilant, he was proud of the priority given to human rights by the democratic Governments of Argentina, and the continuation of the trials of those who committed human rights violations.

I am a personal witness to the enduring effort by Argentina to bring the people guilty of those crimes to justice. In 2019, 43 years after the event, I gave evidence in a trial (which led to convictions) of various individuals involved in the torture of both Pat Rice and Fatima Cabrera.

It was in those fraught conditions that I also met Monsignor Kevin Mullen who arrived in 1976 to the Apostolic Nunciature (succeeding another Irishman, Mgr Patrick Coveney). Over those turbulent years, Kevin Mullen forcefully and skilfully used his position to defend the rights of the growing number of persons who “disappeared”. He understood the special influence that the Nunciature could bring to bear and provided a vital contact for many of the families of the disappeared, relentlessly pursuing the authorities for information and release from the hundreds of clandestine detention centres set up throughout the country.

Despite a threat to his life, Kevin Mullen did not fear for himself and despite the deteriorating situation did not refrain from speaking out against the human rights violations, as he showed in a courageous homily which he delivered in Buenos Aires on St Patrick's Day 1977. Bob Cox, former editor of the Buenos Aires Herald, rightly remarked in a message to Pope Francis that he was an outstanding example of bravery and decency who saved lives by pressing the authorities to account for those forcibly abducted. I have cooperated with Jerome Mullen, for whom the loss of his brother has been the source of much pain, in investigating the circumstances of his untimely death in Havana in 1983 and in the preparation of a book on his life.¹¹

The decade of the 1970s definitively ended with the election of Raul Alfonsín, leader of the Radical party, in the wake of economic collapse and abject defeat in the 1982 war in the Malvinas/Falklands and the return of the discredited military to barracks. Alfonsín's victory in a fully free election was a landmark event given that the country had experienced what had been at most a conditional democracy for much of the preceding decades. Even the administrations of civilian Presidents lacked legitimacy given the proscription of Peronism and *de facto* military tutelage. Inevitably, the return of free elections, on the back of a mobilisation of society which was united on the principle of democracy but without practice in its functioning and the required give-and-take in decision making and allocation of resources, would not be without difficulties.

¹¹ Jerome Mullen “The pain of a brother's loss: the life and death of a Vatican diplomat Monsignor Kevin Mullen 1939-1983”.

The scale of public debt inherited from the inept economic management of the military regime proved a significant obstacle. These factors ultimately led to the failure of Alfonsín's administration, premature elections and his early departure from office in 1989. After the euphoria of the return of democracy subsided, Alfonsín had fought a losing battle to forge agreement with populist-oriented unions and an authoritarian military on the terms of a liberal democracy. Although not much remarked upon, his victory in 1983 nonetheless showed for the first time that in a free election it was possible for a non-Peronist candidate to win, thereby refuting the much-touted assessment that Peronism was Argentina's only viable Government. The Argentine historian Luis Alberto Romero concludes that a "combination of championing the idea of civil society along with a naive idea of the ease with which desires could be translated into reality was the result of a certain facile mentality, a 'greenhorn democracy'".¹² [Note: I returned to the Embassy briefly in mid-1989 and was present at the transfer of power to the incoming President Carlos Menem who went on to abandon orthodox Peronist policy in favour of a fiscally conservative market-oriented economic programme which, while defeating hyper-inflation, was accompanied by significant levels of corruption. Menem was heavily criticised for pardoning many of those involved in human rights abuses during the military dictatorship. These pardons were overturned following the victory in 2003 of another Peronist President, Nestor Kirchner.]

The 1970s has been described as the decade that "keeps coming back". One writer has asked why those years evoke such interest among Argentines, what are the attractions of a period which "aroused passionate confrontations which gave rise to collective dreams, and which even today provoke admiration and enthusiasm but which nonetheless ended being consumed in blood, failure and frustration? While that period is history, it is history that is alive as both reflection and apparent origin of divisions that permeate contemporary Argentine politics".¹³

The 1970s left profound fissures which are reflected in contemporary political debate. This was evident during the 2023 Presidential election triggered by statements by Victoria Villaruel, elected

¹² A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century, by Luis Alberto Romero, Pennsylvania State University 2002.

¹³ Ceferino Reato "Los 70, la década que siempre vuelve" Sudamericana Buenos Aires, 2020

as Vice President with Javier Milei, in which she was interpreted as seeking to excuse excesses committed during the military dictatorship.¹⁴

Continued social and economic decline, with an estimated 40% of the population now living in poverty, has led some to question the practical achievements of democracy. It is asked whether the current fractured and partisan political culture, itself in part a legacy of the 1970s – although some argue that the divisions date from the 19th century¹⁵ – is capable of creating a national consensus to support essential structural change. It is difficult to formulate a clear answer. One point is however evident. The Argentina of 2024 has been transformed from the country to which I arrived in the 1970s. There is an acceptance of the inviolability of individual fundamental rights which was absent in the 1970s and which permitted the violent atrocities of that decade. Any possibility of a recourse to military intervention – so frequently resorted to in the last century albeit on many occasions with significant civilian input and encouragement – has been banished. Democracy has been consolidated. The experience of Argentina in the 1970s is surely proof of the essential truth of Churchill's aphorism that “democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others”.

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¹⁴ Villaruel, a political activist since the early 2000s, has challenged "the official history" of contemporary Argentina which she maintains focuses on state terrorism during the dictatorship but ignores the actions and victims of guerilla groups between 1973 and 1976 when the country had a democratic government. She has sought to highlight the civilian victims of terrorist groups in this period. During a TV debate prior to the 2023 election, she denied the existence of 30,000 missing persons and appeared to defend a former military officer convicted of crimes against humanity. Her statements were criticised by human rights groups and politicians from across the political divide.

¹⁵ “The Invention of Argentina”, Nicolas Shumway, University of California Press 1991. Shumway argues that 20th century divisions in Argentine society can be traced directly to the first disagreements among 19th century intellectuals who held radically different concepts of what Argentina should be all about.

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