

## ***Looking Back: The Untold Story of Chile Democrático-GB***

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This presentation is about the story of Chile Democrático-GB, the National Organisation of the Chilean Exiles in the UK. This story remains untold and this is the first attempt to redress this void. However, this is not a theoretical or conceptual presentation and not even evaluative, it is just a descriptive narration of an exilic organisation seldom acknowledged both abroad and in Chile. The aim of this presentation is to make that experience visible. It uses archival interviews from one of my studies of the Chilean community and will start with an historical background and perspective of the conditions that made it possible for Chile Democrático to be established.

### **The British asylum system**

Before the 1970s, British contact with refugees was almost exclusively related to mass European displacement. Britain granted asylum to Poles, Hungarians, Czechoslovakians, other East Europeans and Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany and occupied territories. This was the result of World War II, the ensuing political binary opposition of Cold War politics and of a ‘western understanding of ‘refugees’” (Haddad 2008:128). Asylum seeking and international protection was strategically based on seeing refugees as persecuted victims fleeing Communism. Thus, as Haddad (2008) put it, the refugee concept was invented in Europe and for Europe and so was the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

It was not until the 1967 Protocol that the refugee concept was universalised. Yet, non-European ‘refugees’ were still kept outside European boundaries. Despite that large-scale refugee flows were generated in the 1960s and 1970s as a consequence of decolonisation in the global south, particularly in Africa, non-European refugees – with the exception of anti-Cuban revolution refugees of the early 1960s – the so called ‘new refugees’ from the global south did not have any political or ideological role in Cold War politics and so western states considered them ‘national problems’ hence outside their asylum scope.

So where do the Chilean refugees and exiles fit into this European Cold War scenario if Chileans were fleeing a right-wing dictatorship and not a Communist regime?

Some satisfactory answers lie in the fact that:

- until the early 1970s, the refugee definition had not been so problematised as it has been since the early 2000s and more so today given the so-called European ‘refugee’ or ‘migrant’ crisis.
- the number of refugees worldwide had declined from 9 million in 1970 to 2.5 million in 1975 – the precise time when Chileans were looking for asylum. 15 million refugees mainly in Africa and South Asia had been repatriated.
- UNHCR’s coffers under High Commissioner Sadruddin could respond with massive material assistance programs throughout the world and the Chilean ‘refugee problem’ was resolved by UNHCR’s recently adopted ‘quota programmes’ and by its appeals for resettlement in third countries in Europe.
- and finally, international solidarity was premised on the support to President Salvador Allende and its Popular Unity government project. Sympathetic worldwide governments and organisations with a certain degree of influence such as Amnesty International, trade unions, churches and academics, contributed enormously in the welcoming of Chilean refugees and exiles.

### **Britain by 1973**

Although the UK is signatory to both the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol, the only reference to refugees or asylum was to be found in the 1971 Immigration Act. As there was no provision for refugee status determination, Chileans could only apply for asylum. This was the more difficult given the political climate in Britain.

By the time of the Chilean military coup, Britain had a more ‘muted’ response than many other countries. The Conservative government (Edward Heath 1970-1974) had recognised the Military Junta and – as many Chileans were taking refuge in foreign embassies in Chile – the it gave instructions that no non-British subject was to be given asylum in the British embassy. In fact, no Chilean refugees were admitted into Britain until March 1974 when the Labour government (Harold Wilson 1974-1976) came into office. However, and unlike Sweden, France and Germany, Britain ended up officially resettling 3,000 Chilean refugees. This was also the result of the unacknowledged efforts of the late Right Honourable Judith Hart, the Minister of Overseas Development who in the summer of 1974 convened a meeting in the House of Commons. The task ahead was challenging but the solidarity bases were already there. In her own words:

- *‘it was an elaborate operation, involving a total reversal of government policies and demanding the cooperation of several government departments. Above all, it relied upon an information network and an informal integration of effort, in which key roles*

*were played by the voluntary organisations – from Chile Solidarity Campaign, (and later the Chile Committee for Human Rights) to Amnesty International and the World University Service, from party groups to trade unions at branch and headquarters level. It was remarkable and I think, unprecedented cooperative campaign. (in JWG 1975).<sup>1</sup>*

This event constituted the genesis of the Joint Working Group for Refugees from Chile in Britain.

The task of the JWG was to make arrangements for the reception and resettlement of refugees from Chile in the UK. In fact it was involved in fulfilling a multiplicity of additional functions such as collecting information on Chile, lobbying to promote the fastest processing of a maximum of visas possible, send its representative to Chile, and also envisage the possibilities of return. The JWG, according to Dame Judith Hart had “its problems and its successes.” Among the problems were limited funds, inadequate number of staff, facilities and English language training. The latter was a major problem, as it hindered the integration of refugees into local communities. A major part of the Joint Working Group’s work relied on local voluntary efforts. Its reception work was a complex task because Chileans came from a country without past colonial links with Britain, they were Spanish speaking and many of them had been political prisoners and this posed an extra dimension to its work. Thus, to the linguistic and cultural problems mental health issues were added.

But things were not looking good for the JWG. In January 1979 it was served with an eviction notice. The Conservative government argued that the numbers of Chileans coming into Britain had dwindled and that ‘the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees put pressing demands on Britain’s capacity to absorb refugees.’<sup>2</sup> In a Cold War scenario, it was time to end the support to fleeing Chileans and Latin Americans. Despite all efforts not a single Borough or Housing Association was able to relocate the JWG. Only a few months later the Home Office finally agreed to find an alternative accommodation and to give a long term guarantee of funding. This was too little too late. In May that year the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher came into office and the future of the JWG looked grim. In November 1979, the JWG programme – now called the *Joint Working Group for Refugees From Latin America* – was informed by the Home Secretary of its closure. Despite widespread protests from a variety

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<sup>1</sup> The JWG was also composed of Christian Aid and of representatives of non-governmental agencies traditionally concerned with refugee work such as the British Council for Aid to Refugees and the Ockenden Venture.

<sup>2</sup> William Whitelaw, the Home Secretary on 29 November 1979 (in July 1987:102)

of organisations, it would finally ceased to exist in 1983 but, more importantly, not before setting itself the task of encouraging community development, to enable refugees themselves to be more self reliant.

## **Chilean refugees in Britain**

### **CAF, the Chilean Anti-Fascist Committee: 1974-1982**

As soon as Chileans arrived in exile – particularly those in partisan political leadership – they established a number of organisations in solidarity *with* Chile. As Diana Kay (1987:81) noted ‘Political life in Chile had been highly structured by party organisations so that in any attempt to reconstruct political life in exile, the parties would sooner or later had a central role to play.’ This was the case of **CAF** the Chilean Anti-fascist Committee. CAF existed in countries where large numbers of politicised Chilean exiles resided such as Italy and Germany. In Britain it was established in 1974 and it was structured around regional and local CAF committees. It was composed of the Parties of the Popular Unity and later by the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR). I won’t discuss on the politico-ideological issues behind the name of the organisation and its dynamics as this is a theme for political science discussion. What can be summarised about CAF<sup>3</sup> is that it was an elite political organisation. In the words of its second President, Hugo Maldonado, CAF was

“a coordination of political parties. We did not have militants because we were leaders (*dirigentes*) we were superstructure”

In sum, CAF was dedicated to ‘exile politics’ and I argue that exile politics is mainly a male endeavour and as such it enables men to retain their internalised ideas about masculinity and evade the victimisation they experienced under the Pinochet’s dictatorship. In this framework, CAF was exclusively dedicated to ‘solidarity *with* Chile’, Chile was primordial and as Hugo Maldonado put it:

“Solidarity was only oriented to Chile, that is, in no way could you think or imagine that you had to resolve the problems of the Chilean exile outside CAF boundaries. We were not a charity organisation, we were a political organisation and we were not concerned with the problems of the exiled community, our concern was with political solidarity with those in Chile who were the victims of the dictatorship...With Chile Democrático the pyramid turned upside down’ [*se dio vuelta la piramide*’]

Indeed, the positive role of ‘solidarity *with* Chile’ was successfully performed by CAF throughout its existence. But equally to the JWG, CAF was experiencing some internal political difficulties due to the 1979 crisis

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<sup>3</sup> There will be a more extensive discussion of CAF in a forthcoming paper.

of the Socialist Party and because the leadership realised that the dreamed return to a dictatorship-free Chile was not in the horizon. Exile was going to last and problems outside politics were mounting.

However, women had been in the shadows of 'official' exile politics yet their input was crucial. 'Domestic problems' as elite leader Carlos Altamirano called them<sup>4</sup> had already been discussed by women's groups organised outside CAF. They were living in the 'real world' of exile. The organisation *Chilean Women in Exile* was not only critical of machismo within the political parties and of Chilean men in general and their attitudes towards their women, but also conscious of problems of integration of working-class women and those associated with their children.

So, by now we have a number of insurmountable problems: the refugee regime and Britain's asylum policies described above were changing dramatically, we had a Conservative government unsympathetic to Chilean exiles,<sup>5</sup> the imminent closure of the JWG, the destabilising political problems within CAF and the *here* problems faced by families regarding integration, housing, employment, well-being, English language command, racism, and the second generation's own problems of adaptation and issues related to inter-generational problems, identity and belonging that Rosa Mas Giralt will discuss in the second panel tonight. Suffice to say here is that the 1970s and early 1980s' models of integration were still based on assimilation a controversial and inadequate model of integration for a nascent British multicultural society.

So, to paraphrase Hugo Maldonado it was time for the pyramid to turn upside down. The above described situation forced CAF's Executive Committee to call for the first general meeting of *all* Chileans in exile in the UK to take place in the GLC's<sup>6</sup> Conference Hall in London between the 20-22 August 1982 under the heading *Primer Encuentro Nacional de Refugiados*.

### **Chile Democrático: 1982-1990<sup>7</sup>**

The *Primer Encuentro* started on the 'Day of the Exiled', the 20<sup>th</sup> August.<sup>8</sup> It proved to be a positive meeting. It was the first time, after nine years of

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<sup>4</sup> At Salazar 2011:388.

<sup>5</sup> With the new Immigration Law a number of visas already granted to Latin Americans had been refused in June 1979 and threats of deportation of Latin Americans were becoming common. By December 1979 the Conservative government was already deporting Chilean and Latin American asylum seekers.

<sup>6</sup> The Greater London Council (GLC) was London's governing body between 1965 and 1986.

<sup>7</sup> This part of my presentation has a caveat. I will only deal with the period 1982-1990 as I returned to Chile in March 1992 and my research and knowledge of this organisation ends there.

exile in Great Britain, that delegates, militants, sympathisers, non-militants, women and youth were welcomed, it was CAF's democratic opening. Although there were local committees of a different kind in existence, this time Chilean exiles gathered under one roof and interchanged experiences, opinions, ideas and criticisms in a much wider forum. In total, 289 official and what CAF termed *fraternal* delegates from different local committees and beyond discussed and deliberated about the future organisation, its structure and its mission.

This was an achievement. The pending one – according to CAF's *Informe Central* - was to extend solidarity towards exile and its problems. This aspect was thoroughly discussed by the respective commissions as established by the *Convocatoria*, but particularly by women.

During the meeting the Constitution (*Estatutos de Chile Democrático-G.B.*) was approved. 'The name of the National Committee of Chilean exiles in Great Britain will be *Chile Democrático-Gran Bretaña* (Art. 1).<sup>9</sup> 'It would be the organisation that would represent the *totality*<sup>10</sup> of Chilean exiles living in Great Britain' (Art. 2) and 'The Committee will define a policy of solidarity and welfare to be implemented at national, regional and local level in this country'. This constituted the much-needed solidarity *with exile*:

To follow the steps of the JWG the new organisation established normative and regulatory functions. These were delineated in a sophisticated organisational structure; central objectives; rules and regulations; membership; local committees; area national committees; National Assembly; National Executive and finally, the National Congress the 'supreme organic instance of the community of Chilean exiles living in Great Britain that decides, revokes and resolves everything concerning our policy of solidarity, committees' organisation welfare policy etc.' (CAF 1982:71).<sup>11</sup> This elaborated organic structure was the *opus* of highly politicised exiles with long trajectories of leadership, political practice, background and experience that spanned even before the Popular Unity.

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<sup>8</sup> In June 1980, during the *Pimeras Jornadas por el Derecho a Vivir en la Patria* in Santiago, Chile, the Pro-Return Committee declared the 20<sup>th</sup> August as the Day of the Exiled. This was done in conjunction with Chile Democrático-Roma. This date is highly symbolic. It was the anniversary of the birth of Bernardo O'Higgins, the Father of the *Patria*, who himself was a 'famous refugee (see Ibarra 1987). In the exilic narrative he was the first *desterrado* (deterritorialised) of Chile as an independent nation. The *Día del Exiliado* was celebrated by the Chilean diaspora in more than fifty countries around the world as well as in the *interior* by the Pro-Return Committee. This *Day* continued to be used by the democratic government (1990-1994) when dealing with returnees.

<sup>9</sup> The 'Great Britain' served to differentiate it from its sister organisation with the same name in Italy.

<sup>10</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>11</sup> Six pages are dedicated to the detailed information about the Constitution (66-71)

Chile Democrático's new mission would be achieved through the work of specific commissions and preliminary discussions took place at that August meeting in eight pre-established commissions:

1. Welfare Commission (*Comisión de Bienestar*)
2. Sport and Recreation Commission (*Comisión Deportes y Recreación*)
3. Cultural Commission (*Comisión Cultural*)
4. Trade Union Commission (*Comisión Sindical*)
5. Youth Commission (*Comisión Juvenil*)
6. Women's Commission (*Comisión Mujeres*)
7. Pro-Return Commission (*Comisión Campaña por el Derecho a Vivir en la Patria*)
8. Disappeared Political Prisoners Commission (*Comisión Presos Políticos Desaparecidos*)

These commissions materialised soon after that foundational meeting.

Undoubtedly, welfare was a key issue. Faced with the imminent closure of the JWG, this was the most pressing task. Considering the adverse political and welfare environment, the Chilean exiled community had to fend for itself. Having established a robust agency, the future task was to attract funding and resources for the organisation itself and its different commissions and the Welfare Commission was key in this respect. This commission had to supplant the functions that JWG would leave uncovered. These were: documentation and immigration, benefits, housing, legal advice, mental health issues which according to social worker Rita Contreras *were serious*, employment, care and return. This would be a mammoth task for the Welfare Commission. For this purpose it would require two full time workers and a pool of Chilean voluntary staff particularly as interpreters because up to now exiles' children had been playing this role for their parents and siblings (Araya et al 1981).

To conclude: A Chilean community organisation had been established. Sociologically speaking Chile Democrático-GB, was an autonomous refugee-community organisation dealing with political, social, economic, educational and cultural issues that the Indoamerican Refugee and Migrant Organisation (IRMO) as its successor is magnificently dealing with.