SIR JOHN RUSSELL’S VALEDICTORY DESPATCH

Sir John Russell to Mr. Stewart. (Received 26 August)

SUMMARY

The time-and-distance scale of the country: its concentration on the eastern fringe (paragraphs 1–3).

The demographic (paragraph 4), social (paragraph 5), agricultural (paragraph 6) and racial (paragraphs 6–7) pictures.

The economy (paragraph 9): and why is not Brazil already rich? (paragraph 10).

The political picture: a well-meaning military régime, not unsuited to Latin America (paragraphs 11–12).

Return to civil rule? (paragraph 13): but meanwhile political atrophy, with trouble bubbling underneath (paragraphs 14–16).

Reform? (paragraph 17).

The material British interest (paragraph 18): and the British political (paragraphs 19–20) and the international interest (paragraph 21).

Envoi (paragraphs 22–24).

(Confidential)

Rio de Janeiro,
22 August, 1969.

Sir,

This is to be my valedictory despatch on Brazil. But how can any passing stranger pretend to write with truth and regard about a country so vast, so varied and protean as this? How on the basis of less than three years’ acquaintance should I presume to forecast the future of Brazil? The clue, I think, is not to generalise but to try to pick the significant out of the gross.

1. At one end of the Brazilian rainbow you have stone-age Indian tribes living in the green depths of the rain-forest who still practise cannibalism and human sacrifice and who have yet (happily for them) to meet their first white man. It still takes 25 days by Booth Line from Liverpool to Manaus, the capital of Amazonas, as it did in 1890:

and there is still no access to Manaus by land. In seven-tenths of this country life is lived today almost exactly as it was on the Western frontier of America in the years immediately following the war between the States. Slavery was abolished within living memory.

2. At the other extreme of the time-scale you have São Paulo, which has just passed the 6 million mark and is now the third largest city of Latin America (also unchallengeably the ugliest). The overall density of population in Brazil is only 27 to the square mile (compared with 461 in Italy: or 689 in Japan). But 70 per cent of Brazil’s population lives on its eastern periphery: and 75 per cent of the country’s industry is concentrated in the one state of São Paulo. There are 72 cities with a population of over
100,000, all but one located East of longitude 55° West. For our purposes this is what counts—not the empty spaces of the interior but the intensive Atlantic fringe. Brazil is not in fact an undeveloped or even an under-developed country: it is a patchily developed country, like Australia, already heavily industrialised in parts, even though the greater part of its vast inland area remains untouched.

4. Demographically Brazil presents an extraordinary picture. Around 92 million today, the population is growing at the rate of 3.4 per cent per annum and will be around the 225 million mark by the year 2000. And 42 per cent of the population is under 15 years of age. The next 10 years are going to be the testing time of Brazil’s capacity to meet the technological challenge which the geometric expansion of her population will pose for her by the 1980s.

5. Is the social front keeping up? At the moment the answer is no. Although the provision of social services increases absolutely, as fast indeed as a harassed Government can plan and pay, yet relative to the galloping increase in population the gaps yawn daily wider. To its great credit the Government has this year for the first time budgeted more for education than for the armed forces: even so the percentage of the primary age-group actually in school is lower than it was 10 years ago and there are reckoned to be around 34 million illiterate of all ages. Housing is inadequate although the Federal Housing Bank has built a number of good low-rental estates and a start has at last been made on the liquidation of the “favelas”, the scandalous shanty-towns of Rio. The health service falls equally short of requirement. Brazil is one of the few countries in the world with endemic smallpox (and leprosy) and between 15 per cent and 20 per cent of all children born die in their first year.

6. Land reform has hardly been touched. Half of all the agricultural land is still in the hands of 1-6 per cent of owners: and only 5 per cent of the potential arable is actually under cultivation. There is no lack of virgin forest into which the bold pioneer may still plunge but to absorb or support leave alone emancipate the marginal peasantry and landless day labourers of the north-east more is needed than empty land. The answer must lie not in the equally empty political gesture of territorial expropriation but in massive Federal and state schemes for irrigation and aided settlement. But these are still only on paper.

7. One problem at least is on its own way to solution without benefit of planner. Within a generation or two the racial issue will have ceased to exist. By then there will be neither identifiable whites nor identifiable blacks. In the United States a drop of black blood makes a white man black: here a drop of white blood makes a black man white. (A little money does the same for him.) Fusion is the order of the day and differences are shading over fast.

8. A very few years more will also see the disappearance of the last of the forest Indians, finally overwhelmed in their unequal struggle against the white man’s greed and brutality, his guns, his lethal gifts, his exploitation, his diseases. For all the noble work of the early Jesuits, of General Rondon and the Villas Boas brothers the Brazilian Indian is fast going the sad way of his brother of the North American plains.

9. In a separate and parallel economic valedictory of even date (and enormous length) I try to assess the stability of the economy which underlies this social picture. I venture there to disagree with the gloomier experts. Brazil has a national growth rate of 4.5 per cent. Inflation has been buttoned down to a calculated 20 per cent for 1969 (as against 144 per cent in 1964). This year eight times more people than ever before filed income tax returns. Brazil owns one-sixth of the world’s forests and one-third of the world’s known reserves of iron ore: and produces more hydro-electric energy than any other country in the world. Wherever I have been in the country I have felt an urgent, irresistible prosperity: to the layman like me Brazil’s future appears set irresistibly at fair.

10. Why then, you may well ask, is Brazil not already rich and prosperous?
The short answer is, because the country is damn badly run—because there are five different gauges on the railways: because Guanabara has more civil servants than New York, and Petrobras in the state of São Paulo alone employs more chemists than Shell does in the whole world: because you can buy anything from a driving licence to a High Court Judge: because the Rector of the Federal University of Rio is paid $500 a month, whilst house rents here are three times those of London and Rio’s hotels are among the world’s most expensive (also among the world’s worst run): because there are only 18,000 miles of paved highway in the country: because in 1968 the Brazilians killed 10,000 people on their roads—rather more than the total of United States casualties in Viet-Nam during the same period: because, as Peter Fleming put it, “Brazil is a sub-continent with imperfect self-control”.

11. No country’s economy can be more stable than the political base on which it rests. When President Costa e Silva succeeded President Castelo Branco in March 1967 Brazil exchanged King Stork for King Log. The exchange was to some degree put into reverse by the “revolution within a revolution” of December 1968. Today the country has a suffocatingly dull and highly authoritarian but quite effective military régime. Edmund Burke’s dictum that “An armed disciplined force is in its essence dangerous to liberty” would be thought sheer nonsense in Brazil. On the contrary an armed disciplined force is just what by common consent is needed in Brazil to restore every now and again the people’s institutions, their rights and liberties.

12. It would be as mistaken as invidious for us, safely cocooned in the snug civil democracies of Western Europe, to be shocked or reprehensive because Brazil has a military form of government. It is only 80 years since the end of the empire: and less than 150 since Dom Pedro I declared his independence of Portugal. In March of the year 1825 Simon Bolivar was writing to his friend Captain Maling: “Of all countries” he said “Latin America is perhaps the least fitted for a republican Government”. Bolivar was at heart a monarchist: perhaps in Brazil’s case at least he was not so far wrong. Brazil was undoubtedly happiest under her liberal and benevolent empire whose overthrow (by the planters and industrialists) has ever since been widely regretted. Representative Government as we conceive it in Westminster has not yet supplied a model suitably tailored to meet this country’s needs.

13. I do not believe that the military are here to stay for ever. They have been an unconscionable time about the clean-up which they promised the country in 1964; and I am quite sure that Brazil will have another military President in 1970–71. (My money would be on General Emilio Garrastazu Medici, presently commanding the 3rd Army in Porto Alegre; and for a good each-way bet the egregious Colonel Mairo Andreazza, now Minister of Transport.) But there might well be a civilian President again in 1974–75, although the names on offer are shop-soiled and sadly uninspiring. One can only hope that by then some Brazilian Aladdin will be crying new faces for old.

14. For the moment the country remains in a state of suspended political animation. Congress has been closed for the last eight months. The colonels are putting out busy talk of reconvening it this spring (your autumn) or of calling new elections, and Vice-President Aleixo has submitted a scheme of constitutional reform: but the prospects either way are viewed with general public apathy. And now, further to confound the existing administrative confusion, they are about to transfer the whole Governmental machine to Brasilia, that wantonly remote and quite unworkable monument to one man’s, President Juscelino Kubitschek’s, corrupt and ruinous vanity. This move can hardly fail to divorce the Government still further from reality.

15. The students are repressed: but their grievances have not been met and at the first opportunity they will be out again under the general banner of “Abolish in loco parentis.” The Communists are few and
ill-organised and the only thing about them that is not underground is Ché Guevara's ghost—although many of the now almost daily bank hold-ups are widely believed to be fund-raising exercises for the party, on the lines of Stalin's early activities in Tiflis. (In São Paulo it is now said to be quicker and safer to rob a bank than to try to cash a cheque in one.) The Church is split but could well polarise the Left-wing challenge to the régime. The Press is muzzled: the intellectuals exiled or disheartened: labour weak and inarticulate. The police system is deficient and violent crime spreading: Justice is slow and expensive. The army is in the main still united behind the régime, although there are dissidents amongst the politically ambitious generals and talk of subversion from radical nationalist cells in the lower middle-piece officer ranks. The expanding middle-class plods indifferently on acquiring the good material things of life. The rich continue very private-spirited. And the poor . . . ?

16. There used to be—maybe there still is—an inscription bearing the date 1767 on the mill at Hawarden, Mr. Gladstone's old Parliamentary seat in Flint, which ran: "Wheat was in this year 19/- and barley 5/- a bushel. Luxury was at a great height and charity extensive. But the poor were starving, riotous and hanged." The poor of Brazil have not quite got there yet: but it is now open to question how much longer they will be content to go on hoeing their hopeless row.

17. Whence then will reform come? Like Promotion in Psalm 75, neither from the east nor from the west: and certainly not from the south. Reform can only come from inside, by some sort of spontaneous combustion: but in my book it will have to wait until the colonels are satisfied that the objectives of their revolution are firmly secured. Only then will they allow a return to normal civil processes—the withdrawal of the armed forces from political (also juridical and administrative) life, the end of rule by decree, the restoration of habeas corpus and direct popular elections in the place of the rigged collegiate shadow of democracy which is all that we presently have. Only then will the cycle of political and constitutional life, growth and change resume.

18. Well and good. Excellency, your hard-headed post-Duncan reader may here impatiently observe: but what's in it for us, Jack? In my economic valedictory I deal at length with Anglo-Brazilian trade. In 1966 we sold £10 million worth of stuff to Brazil, this year it will be around £50 million: in 1965 the balance of trade ran 3 to 1 in Brazil's favour, last year it just tipped in ours: and we have presently some £200 million worth of capital export business signed up or in the pipeline. I only quote these three statistics again here to illustrate the satisfactory material side of our many faceted come-back to this country.

19. The United Kingdom is fortunate in having no direct political issues with Brazil. Our last serious clash was the Christie incident of 1863, when Brazil broke off relations in justified protest at the Royal Navy's high-handed actions in the Bay of Guanabara. Since then we have survived two world wars, conflicts of shipping policy, the expropriation of public utilities, foot-and-mouth disease, even football. But over the last half-century we effectively lost contact with this country and the Brazilians were much saddened by our neglect. They are correspondingly cheered now by the evidence of our renewed interest. The belated return of our exporters has been warmly welcomed and our Industrial Exhibition in São Paulo in March of this year was a very great success. Everywhere now you can hear people saying: At last, the British are back! (The completion of the bridge across Guanabara Bay from Rio to Niteroi in 1972 will be the acid test.) But if we are to retain a place of real importance and influence here we must, I submit, take steps to demonstrate our interest in wider and less purely selfish fields than that of exports. Who, after all, loves his ironmonger?

20. The State visit of last November was ideally timed and gave a tremendous fillip to this process of bringing Britain back into Brazil. But the process demands continuing and active attention. We must
show—and keep on showing—that we value the Brazilians’ friendship: we must invite their co-operation, seek their opinions, generally in fact treat them as the “major Power of the second order” that they now are. We can do this by a modest outlay in the small change of diplomacy—visits, invitations, messages, congratulations, fashion shows, sporting events, exchanges, orchestras, scholarships, joint exercises of various sorts, consultation on issues of common interest, presentations to learned bodies, a Parliamentary delegation from time to time, joint industrial or financial ventures, feasibility studies, project surveys, consultancies, investment when that again becomes possible—in brief a constant show of attention, confidence and interest. At this end I have been stoutly supported by an enthusiastic and admirable staff: at the London end I hope that your office, Sir, will continue to give the lead to other Departments and so help maintain the tempo of the ball which we have now at last got rolling again.

21. On the international stage Brazil plays a constructive and creditable part. We cannot reasonably expect the Brazilian Government to step out of the South American line on such issues as Portuguese colonial policy, the Falklands or Gibraltar, yet where they are free to exercise a critical choice they will usually be found on the side of the angels. Witness their most effective support for us in the Middle East crisis at the United Nations in the summer of 1967: also the laudably bold and independent line which they have taken in the Venezuela/Guyana business. Even though no longer a member of the Security Council Brazil still has and always will have a leading voice in the South American group in New York. Her international support is well worth cultivating.

22. But now my sands are running out and I must wind up my Brazilian ledger. How does the account stand today as compared with three years ago? Materially the country has galloped ahead: politically it has gone backwards. The flat-earth hard-line colonels have arrested the spiritual development of what is potentially a brilliant country of liberal creative instincts and the most lively intellectual capacity. I like to hope that the check is only temporary.

23. But if the Government of Brazil has hardened, I think that I must have mellowed a little in the same interval. No longer, as in my First Impressions despatch, do I feel moved to caustic comment on the shortcomings of the Brazilian character. The Brazilians are still a tremendously second-rate people: but it is equally obvious that they are on their way to a first-rate future. Maybe I have yielded something to Rio’s tropical insidious charm: maybe I have just learnt to soften my dour northern standards, to see things a little less primly in this warm forgiving climate. I like to believe that the more indulgent eye gets the truer perspective.

24. The day after tomorrow my family and I sail for Spain. We may not leave deep roots in Brazil: but we have been very happy here in this great house, probably the finest and certainly the last to be built on this noble scale by Her Majesty’s Government for our Embassies abroad. We have had abounding kindness and generosity from Brazilians in every walk of life. They are open-hearted, hospitable and endearing people. And it is warming to leave Rio in the knowledge that we the British are at last on our way back to our old place in the Brazilian sunshine.

I have, &c.

JOHN RUSSELL.