

2025 GENERAL ELECTION

Leona Vidal

Standing for the Stanley Constituency

About Me

Born in Punta Arenas to a Falkland Island mother and Chilean father, I have lived in the Islands since I was three years old, experiencing first-hand the incredible change and progress of the last four decades. I consider myself blessed to have spent my life in this wonderful little country that has given me so much, and have been privileged to give back by serving our community in the last two Assemblies – eight years which have taught me a great deal, although I believe there is always more to learn.



I am a very ordinary 53-year-old and have worked hard to get where I am in life – a mother of two, home-owner, with a varied career (prior to the Assembly I was fortunate enough to run the museum for 14 years), but can claim no title, particular expertise nor wealth. I do not take myself too seriously, but I do take my work extremely seriously and am absolutely committed to working hard and doing my best for the Falklands. Representing our community has been the privilege of my life and I would welcome the opportunity to continue that service, with dedication, integrity, honesty and compassion.

Overview

The next four years will bring both challenges and significant opportunities for our community.

The decision to borrow to fund the capital programme was not taken lightly. It is a substantial commitment, and without it we could not address the need to replace failing infrastructure which is so critical to our future. The easiest option would have been to do nothing and to avoid making unpopular decisions – but that is to no-one's benefit. Had this work begun 20 years ago, we would have not found ourselves in the position where multiple major projects needed to be progressed concurrently and with urgency. Many of these are, thankfully, once-in-a-lifetime projects. Going forwards, maintenance and steady investment must be made to avoid the country being in this situation again.

Careful financial management will be required and there will inevitably be more difficult decisions to make. I recognise the difficulties of the cost of living situation and the challenges that many face, and aim to do all I can to see these issues addressed so that the coming years are as manageable as possible for everyone in our community.

However, there is also much to be positive about, and I do not subscribe to the narrative of catastrophe. We have an enviable quality of life and must remain ambitious for our home, resisting the urge to talk ourselves into a self-fulfilling spiral of negativity. We have so much to be grateful for and, with courage, compassion and commitment our islands and our people will continue to flourish and be a special place to live.

I believe passionately that we should be working together for the good of the Falklands as a whole. Although offering myself once again in the Stanley constituency, I believe that we must maintain a whole-community approach to building a sustainable, successful, inclusive and happy future for all. Only by truly working together will we achieve our full potential and continue to build a home in which our children, and theirs, can thrive.

Our Community

Our people must remain at the heart of all that we do and at the forefront of our minds in decision-making. Whether in Stanley or Camp, our community deserves to be well-served by strong public services, with access to opportunity and freedom to live in a safe, healthy environment. Much has been achieved in the past four years, through investment in education, health and public works in particular, but our community's needs continue to grow. I have been pleased to back increased investment in sports and heritage, alongside other societal projects; the benefits of such investments are not necessarily measured by financial or economic gain, but are seen in positive impacts to health, wellbeing and strengthened bonds across the community.

Along with much of the world, we have experienced several years of significant cost of living increases driven by global issues, including Brexit, Covid-19 and international conflict – all leading to higher costs of goods, shipping and logistical problems. Where we have levers we can pull, we should explore ways to use them to mitigate the impacts of increased cost of living and support those who are struggling. This includes electricity prices where I believe we can avoid knock-on impacts to businesses, FIG operational costs, and households; and sustainable growth of wages and pensions alongside careful use of the Social Welfare systems to support those in need. I do not agree with pushing more people into reliance on welfare; that is neither fair nor sustainable.

Our Economy

For our community to thrive we must maintain a strong economy and sustainable growth, remembering that the purpose is not just growth for growth's sake, it is growth for the benefit of the community. The last Assembly invested heavily in critical infrastructure – key economic enablers as well as essential services for our people.

For decades our fishing industry has been our principle source of revenue, in turn largely funding our services and the lifestyle we so value. The industry is inevitably vulnerable to environmental change and global markets, so cannot be taken for granted; it is important that FIG and the industry work together. We must do what we can to protect our waters and stocks, and continue to invest in fisheries science and effective management, including continuing to push for regional management agreements. Policy reviews that have been committed to and which should give more certainty to our local companies and their partners, should be completed.

Falkland Islanders have always been innovative and hardworking. The funding of grants and loans, delivered through FIDC, has allowed for new enterprise and expansion, and the initiatives started in the last 18 months to allow the private sector to access finance should be completed, allowing businesses to take advantage of opportunities as they arise. Encouraging local firms to work together to bid for delivery of larger projects would have broad benefits. The opportunity exists to work with FIG to understand procurement and contracting processes which are inevitably onerous because of the use of public money. Exploring options for professional services may also help in this regard.

I look forward to the completion of the Chamber of Commerce's proposals on inward investment, and working with the Chamber on other means of private sector development in the future. To be ready to meet emerging opportunities, local businesses may well need to upskill and upscale. Maximising the benefits to the Islands' economy will almost certainly require some risk appetite and investment from the private sector, but FIG should stand ready to facilitate where possible, and continue to promote local content.

Our Environment

Every aspect of our lives is dependent upon maintaining a healthy and sustainable environment – not only our key industries such as fishing, agriculture and tourism, but also our health, our happiness and our identity as Islanders.

The challenges of climate change will continue to grow; we should do our part to reduce carbon emissions where we can and continue the move towards green energy, better waste management and good practices, while continuing to strengthen biosecurity protection and tackling invasive species. Work to improve Stanley's water catchment and supply has progressed and must continue, as should efforts to find solutions to Camp's water and land-drying issues.

There are many more aims laid out in the Environment Strategy – I would be sorry to see any of that lost. New developments should always consider the potential harm to our vulnerable wildlife, biodiversity and landscapes. Commitments to land restoration and the protection of vulnerable or important areas should be followed through. Further research and science, with partners such as SAERI and Falklands Conservation, should continue.

Camp

Camp is intrinsic to our identity and lifestyle, as well as being a key player in our economy. The rural economy is also vulnerable to external markets, population pressures and environmental challenges, and work must continue to understand how best to support our Camp community. Steps have been taken to increase access to grants through the Farm Improvement Programme, Environmental Studies Budget, FIDC and DEFRA grants, and further potential exists through the Land Recovery project and carbon and biodiversity credits – but the possible implications of such schemes must be fully understood before commitments are made which may not be deliverable.

FIMCO is an essential player in the rural economy, but this too requires capital investment and work to understand how best to fulfil its role – an unenviable position currently, which asks the organisation to be all things to all people.

Connectivity will always be vital for Camp. Telecoms options should deliver greater security and as well as opportunities for innovation, such as private investment enabled by remote working, should landowners wish it. Investments in FIGAS were much-needed and should continue as is possible, including further replacement airframes. Essential coastal shipping/ferry services need to be maintained and, when finances allow, be further developed, including the ramps and jetties improvements. The Camp road network will always need continued investment.

Housing

This remains an area of critical concern. FIG does not have sufficient housing stock, and the needs of lower-earners and families who can neither find nor afford private rental is a growing issue which needs to be dealt with.

With work underway on Phase 7 of Sapper's Hill, I welcome the plans to build more one- and two-bed terraced properties and to release plots as they become available. However, this will not fully remove pressure from system.

We must build on the housing strategy aims, including completing the FIG housing policy review. I support ending the need for first-time-buyers to bid for plots. Changes to mortgage limits were made by working with the Standard Chartered Bank, but have not kept pace with the cost of home-building, and this, alongside the withdrawal of the turn-key solution, has left many struggling to build. I would like to see FIG working with the private sector to accelerate and incentivise home-building, ideally with turn-key options, through a collaborative or co-operative scheme. Options should be progressed to soften the impacts of managing both rent and mortgage during construction.

Education & Health

These areas have seen substantial investment in the last eight years. In Health we have new and expanded services – including orthodontics for our young people, private treatment for hip and knee replacements, and greater care for our elderly and vulnerable. We must continue to invest in treatments and care, but also push for more preventative care through public health initiatives.

Education is an investment in our future. Much has been achieved from early years through to adult learning, but this journey is never done. The work on the nursery subsidy, apprenticeships and SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) should be completed to understand where changes are needed, along with the Education Ordinance update. We now offer broader options for our young people but need to work closely with the private sector to understand and meet workforce requirements. I would like to see different models explored for apprenticeships including options which further enable small businesses to take on apprentices – for example, by front-loading pay, with FIG covering the greater share in the first year.

I still have concerns about entry-level opportunities. Government requirements (both in qualifications and experience) are often unrealistic – I hope that assurances that this will be addressed are soon realised. The Management Trainee scheme has been successful and should continue as an entry route for young graduates.

We need to be able to attract our college and university leavers back home at the time that is right for them. I would like to see more initiatives like the Management Trainee Scheme, but access to affordable housing options, and the ability to work in their desired field (so often an issue in small communities) are also major factors to be addressed.

Telecommunications

The last two years have seen an enormous effort to progress with telecoms and the much-desired freedom-of-choice is now available, albeit at a significant cost. Greater choices should offer up widespread opportunities, alongside the lifestyle benefits and improved safety, especially for Camp. The ‘Future Telecoms’ project is also well underway and must be a high priority for the next government. I would not support putting the Islands back under exclusive monopoly provision.

Access to high-speed, lower-cost and more reliable telecoms services offers enormous potential, as well as security risks which need to be understood by individuals and businesses. The world is changing rapidly and I would like to see the Technology Working Group remodelled so that it can drive islands-wide innovation.

Hydrocarbons

As a priority area for the last Assembly, progressing this project has consumed enormous effort across the Civil Service. It has been vital to ensure that appropriate systems, policies and legislation are prepared. Enabling an industry which will change the future of the Falklands must continue to be taken very seriously – it is a game-changing opportunity, but one that comes with impacts, both positive and negative. If sanction is achieved, even more work will follow, which must include the creation of a well-modelled Sovereign Wealth Fund to provide for future generations. We must avoid creating greater income inequality and other societal issues, and work with companies to ensure that all benefit from any such development, and that our environment is protected in every way possible.

Government & the Capital Programme

Although FIG is by far the largest employer in the Islands, it should be remembered that the Falklands is – in population-terms – a village, providing all the services, amenities, infrastructure, laws etc that a modern country requires. Much of the work that FIG undertakes happens out of the public view, but is crucial to our success as a nation.

Areas of greatest growth in recent years have been in health, education and PWD. Work that is underway to maximise FIG effectiveness should continue, but with caution and an understanding of the realities and risks of reduced service delivery. New technologies do offer opportunities and should be explored with imagination and careful investment – for example, online learning, telemedicine, remote working and possible digitisation of some FIG processes.

Critical infrastructure required massive investment after decades of benign neglect - in not only major projects (port, power station, renewables, roads, waste, housing, sports centre etc), but also many smaller, but far from insignificant, works – starting the long overdue replacement of FIG packaways, new water tanks, quarry upgrades, hospital repairs, FICS space optimisation, Camp ramps and jetties etc. Not to tackle these would have piled further pressure on aged and deteriorating public services. The commitment of small teams in keeping facilities such as the Power Station operating deserves praise, but they should never have been put in this situation, and must not be again.

Project overruns have been a serious issue. Steps taken to change project management and contracting processes, as well as strengthening PWD's capital team, should bring significant benefits and avoid late-stage cost increases. The capital programme would benefit from greater transparency and options should be considered.

International Diplomacy

In a rapidly-changing global political landscape, one aspect which remains unaltered is the Argentine position on the Falklands. We must not fear Argentina, but be willing to face them down and challenge their propaganda wherever it rears its head. We cannot be complacent when it comes to our international affairs and, perhaps now more than ever, need to ensure that the Falklands' reality and our strategic value is understood. Maintaining strong cross-party support in the UK is vital, as is developing new relationships. Nothing is more important than maintaining and building support for our self-determination. I believe passionately in the value of young Islanders engaging with our international diplomacy efforts, and in the merits of Team Falklands competing overseas – this 'soft' diplomacy has great worth.

Conclusion

This is a lengthy manifesto, for which I apologise – but much is underway and more must be done in the coming years, and this document doesn't cover everything... I know better than to promise to deliver all the changes that I wish to see – an Assembly is made up of eight individuals, with differing views and priorities – and both finance and capacity will constrain many worthy initiatives. However, should you choose to re-elect me, I do promise to continue to give the role my all, to consider decisions with integrity and an open mind, exercising both realism and empathy, and always with our community and future generations at the forefront of my mind.

If there is a theme to this manifesto, it is that our home is a better and more successful place when we are working together. Regardless of the outcome of this election, I hope this holds true.

If you have questions, concerns or comments please feel free to contact me on 54753, by email on leonabob72@gmail.com or on FaceBook Messenger, or to simply stop for a chat.