
AND

REPORT OF THE NATIONAL BIPARTISAN COMMISSION ON CENTRAL AMERICA

Peter Ross

It's a common observation that tourists can learn as much in their first day in a strange country as can be learnt in a week or a month. The quality of their perception has more to do with the quality of the ideological baggage they carry about with them, than with the actual assault on the senses afforded by the foreign environment in which they land themselves.

Central America has become a new mecca for the tourist of the genus 'politico'. Two accounts by such tourists have recently been published. The first, entitled Report of the National Bi-partisan Commission on Central America (more popularly known as the 'Kissinger Report') was released in January 1984. It gained wide publicity in the Western media, not only in magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, but also in most serious daily newspapers.

The second report, *Kissinger's Kingdom*? A Counter-report on Central America by Stuart Holland and Donald Anderson, two English members of parliament, was also released in early 1984. As its subtitle indicates, it is an answer to the Kissinger Report although its authors note that this was not the original intention. Rather, they had been commissioned by Neil Kinnock, leader of the British Labour Party, to undertake a fact finding mission on Central America. However, since their findings were so radically different from those of Washington's Bipartisan Commission, they could not help but write what was, in effect, a counter-report.

While the two groups were concerned with the same area of investigation and spent roughly the same time in the region (about six days), differences in rationale and organisation must be taken into account.

The Kissinger Commission was established in July 1983 as a bipartisan body to study the Central American crisis and produce a report that would gain wide support from Republicans and Democrats. The commission was composed of 12 men, ranging from university presidents and professors, through politicians and businessmen to one sole representative of labour, AFL-CIO president Lane Kirkland. The commission, quite clearly a representation of the governing class in the United States, interviewed former US presidents, secretaries of state, and other 'experts' before winging its way through Central America and producing its report in a flurry of dissension, arm-twisting and confusion.

*Kissinger's Kingdom*?, on the other hand, is the work of two Labour Party men, one of whom (Holland) is the shadow minister for Overseas Development and Co-operation, while the other (Anderson) is the shadow minister for Foreign Affairs. British Labour Party policy is already progressive in regard to the struggles of the people in the region since it pledges support "for all those radical and democratic forces currently striving to bring dictatorship and foreign domination to an end in Central America". Obviously, Holland and Anderson approached their task with a vastly different perspective from that of the Kissinger group.

How then do the two shape up? The Kissinger Report is characterised by:

1) An abysmal level of analysis which, at times, would not be acceptable from a first year university student, e.g. "Perhaps the United States should have paid some attention to Central America sooner. Perhaps, over the
years, we should have intervened less, or intervened more, or intervened differently.

2) A predilection to blame the Soviet Union and Cuba for fomenting dissent and revolution in the region without offering any proof to substantiate this claim.

3) A blurring of the truth that borders on straight out lying as, for example, ignoring the fact that the 'reform' government brought in by the 1979 coup in El Salvador had disintegrated by January 1980. Or claiming that the 'young officers' who overthrew General Lucas in Guatemala in 1982 were/are reformists, when all the evidence indicates that repression has increased from that date. Or stating that Nicaragua is characterised by poor economic performance when, in fact, its economy has been performing better than any other in the region despite the efforts of the US to destabilise it militarily and economically. Etc, etc.

4) An underlying assumption that the US should pursue a military course to resolve the crisis.

5) A poorly thought out resurrection of past US policies: notably the recommendation that a Central American Development Organisation (CADO) be established along the lines of John F. Kennedy's dismal failure, the Alliance for Progress.

6) An unquestioning belief that Central America is a US sphere of influence in which the White House has the right to decide who will, and who will not, govern.

Kissinger's Kingdom?, on the other hand, is not encumbered by the imperialist assumptions and aspirations that underpin the US project. In its overview of the Central American crisis, the historic role of the US is analysed clearly and precisely.

Some of the phrases which have been used, by left and right, at best as a kind of shorthand, at worst as self evident truths, are examined closely. The concepts of 'backyard' and 'frontyard', 'another Vietnam', 'the Balkanisation of Central America', and 'satellite country' are placed under the microscope to test their validity. It is refreshing to find the Vietnam analogy taken beyond the realm of a slogan so that the similarities and differences between the conflicts in Vietnam and El Salvador are laid bare.

Particularly telling, coming as it does from a European perspective, is the authors' portrayal of the regional conflict as being more akin to the pre-World War I crisis in the Balkans than to US involvement in Vietnam: "If anything, (the US) record in the region has been less principled, more self-interested and more repressive than that of the Austro-Hungarian regime in the Balkan countries. We are surprised that this obvious analogy escaped Henry Kissinger, granted the influence of Metternich and the Austro-Hungarian Empire on his own version of 'Realpolitik'. One would like to add the caveat that the USA in 1984 remains a powerful force and is not analogous in that sense to the failing Austro-Hungarian Empire of 1914.

Individual chapters of Kissinger's Kingdom? are devoted to El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua. Of these, those dealing with El Salvador and Nicaragua are excellent introductions for those who know little of the area or for those who wish to bring themselves up to date. The Nicaraguan chapter in particular is quite full, covering such subjects as democracy, elections, pluralism, trade unions, censorship, minorities, social welfare, the economy, peace negotiations, and destabilisation. The problems and policies of the Sandinista government are discussed in a commonsense fashion that relies substructurally on the authors' commitment to social democracy and pluralism. While these types of argument might not please every marxist, they are certainly an effective response to the crude dualism (right versus wrong, freedom versus communism) which pervades the Kissinger report and White House foreign policy statements.

But it is the chapter on Honduras which is most valuable in terms of giving information. In part, this is due to the paucity of news on this country which has only recently been catapulted into the world's press by the US policy of transforming it into a military base and, in part, to the authors' ability to concentrate on the key issues.

The hypocrisy of the US government in advocating land reform in El Salvador now that the FMLN threatens to overthrow the capitalist structure itself, but not land reform for Honduras where ownership is possibly even more concentrated, is underlined. So, too, is the appalling condition of the people. Honduras is not only one of the poorest countries in Central America; it is one of the poorest in the world.

Holland and Anderson give a thumbnail sketch of the economic
dependence of Honduras on the world market, and of its failure to develop a viable national manufacturing sector. The inability to direct national and international capital into the manufacturing sector, and the problems related to graft and corruption are also sketched in. The current economic crisis (a foreign debt of US$1.65 billion, a recurring balance of payments deficit and growing fiscal deficit) are traced back to the structural and political deficiencies that have, for so long characterised Honduras, and also to the present world depression which has seen the prices of primary exports plummet on the world market.

The authors outline the nature of the present government which, on the US analysis, is a democracy but which is more accurately described as a civilian-military cabal in which the military have the upper hand. The evidence for the growing power of the military over the government and the judiciary is presented, as also is the government's increasingly repressive response to the social unrest generated by the inequalities of the system, the economic crisis and the growing militarisation. Simply having to play host to over 5,000 US marines engaged in apparently endless war games has destabilised the economy further by creating artificial shortages, driving up prices and augmenting uneven regional development.

The executive power, which follows the dictates of the army which follows the orders of Washington, has, by its Emergency Economic Law, assumed complete control of the economy so that economic legislation is no longer presented to Congress. Public spending, particularly on health and welfare, has been slashed, overseas investment encouraged and wages frozen. Holland and Anderson point out that such measures, even assuming that the US comes good with its promises of massive aid, will not solve the structural problems of the economy. Moreover, foreign investors are wary of putting money into such a volatile region.

The two British members of parliament see the inequalities and structural deformations in the region as emanating from the dominance the developed world has over the third world, a view quite at variance with that of the Kissinger Report which expressly paints the crisis as one more example of East-West conflict in which the Soviet Union is seeking to establish a strategic and military base in the back yard of the United States. Whether Kissinger and his fellow commissioners seriously believe that this is so is open to doubt since the evidence they muster is pathetically weak.

Be that as it may, the two reports use their respective interpretations as the rationale for the strategies they advance to solve the problems. The Kissinger report opts for huge dollops of aid (US$8 billion over five years), much of it military to defeat the communist threat. The British report is extremely critical of their approach, arguing that it will neither be successful in stopping the bloodshed, nor useful in reorienting the economies. Rather, they base their economic and political strategy on the recommendations advanced by the conference of North Americans, Central Americans and Europeans held at the Hague in June 1983. Unfortunately, Kissinger's Kingdom? does not elaborate sufficiently on the proposed "new model of development" which includes a strengthened public sector, redistribution of wealth and income, improved welfare services including housing, the encouragement of cooperative activity and the diversification of exports. It sounds, in fact, very much like the new Nicaragua.

Nor does the British report really get its teeth into the proposed economic model of the Kissinger Report which bases itself on the encouragement of local businessmen. Holland and Anderson do, however, attack the concept of 'conditionality' which the US attaches to its aid, i.e. that recipient countries must ally themselves with the interests of the United States — surely a new form of national suicide.

At this time, too, the recommendations of Holland and Anderson have no chance of being accepted. Even in government, the British Labour Party could only pressure, and not direct, the US to change its ways in Central America. Moreover, to redress the imbalance of power between North and South, more is needed than pious words from the North. Ultimately, only the power of the people in the underdeveloped nations will overcome the inequalities within their societies and between themselves and the developed countries. Still, the proposals advanced by the British shadow ministers are certainly worthwhile as a basis on which to develop strategy.

Kissinger's Kingdom? packs a lot of information and analysis into its 73 pages. It's recommended reading for the newcomer to the Central American crisis and, indeed, to anyone interested in the developing debate around the global inequalities and structural deformations generated by the growth of capitalism. The book will shortly be available from the AMFSU, 136 Chalners Street, Surry Hills 2010, and from PND, PO Box A243, Sydney South 2000.

Apparently, the US State Department is none too proud of the Kissinger Commission's Report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America. It's not for sale in Australia. You can read it, however, at the reference library at the US Consulate in Sydney.

Peter Ross is a student of Latin American affairs and an activist in Latin American solidarity groups.