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SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

HMS ENDURANCE

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⑧ You wrote to me on the 22nd January about HMS ENDURANCE. I quite understand the points you make. As you know I thought long and hard about taking the very difficult decision that we could not afford to retain ENDURANCE in the Defence programme. I have subsequently had extensive discussions with interested MPs and Peers. It is a strong lobby, with a fair case, but no more difficult to resist than many others which confront us almost daily.

2. My own feeling is that our position will be just about sustainable politically provided that we do not sell the ship to a South American country. As you know I am currently considering her future following her paying-off. There are essentially three options: an early sale to an acceptable buyer; placing the ship in reserve pending sale or scrapping; and scrapping the ship on her return in the spring. Brazil is the only country to have expressed positive interest in purchasing ENDURANCE although Australia has made tentative enquiries about acquiring her as an ice patrol vessel. She cannot, as you know, be operated economically as a commercial vessel - and we have offered her to the British Antarctic Survey without success.

3. As to keeping the ship in reserve we can defer a decision on this for a few months before measures have to be taken to keep her in a saleable condition. Thereafter preservation would be expensive - up to £150K a year. Clearly there would be no sense in paying these costs indefinitely in the absence of any possibility of a sale or of her return to service. Keeping her in reserve might in any case keep the political controversy alive, since it would suggest we were having second thoughts. On the other hand, it might allow the controversy to cool down with time.



4. So far as the Falklands are concerned I think we are on reasonable ground, in that, as you know, we shall be keeping the Royal Marines garrison there at its present strength. Indeed, we are planning to rebuild their present camp, although for budgetary reasons this has had to be deferred until the end of next year. RN Ships will of course continue to visit periodically, although less frequently than HMS ENDURANCE.

5. In all the circumstances I cannot agree to run on HMS ENDURANCE and add yet another commitment to those I have had to take on since the formulation of my White Paper programme. You are aware of the case of Gibraltar and I will also have to contribute more than I had planned to the costs of civil hydrography. I think there would be considerable depth of feeling in the Royal Navy if further inroads had to be made in the Naval programme in order to make room for ENDURANCE which, quite frankly, is a low priority in defence terms. There is a difference here between this and my hope that I may be able to run on INTREPID and FEARLESS. These ships have a major defence role and provide a capability for carrying tanks, guns, and other logistic support for our forces in an operational setting. They would considerably enhance our Royal Marine amphibious capability for operations both within NATO and out of area, and are ideal for training in peacetime.

6. I know that your own budget is stretched and that there is no prospect of you agreeing to take on the funding of ENDURANCE. Nor do I see any significant prospect of gaining the agreement of our colleagues to the provision of new money although this is exactly the kind of case which OD should consider sympathetically. Unless you disagree with this assessment or you think that we can jointly approach colleagues without further new burdens being placed on the restricted Defence budget, I am afraid that I see no alternative than to sticking to our earlier decision and riding out the political controversy.

J.W.