

PRIME MINISTER

Falkland Islands

Mr. Luce's brief statement led to some tough questioning from both sides of the House.

Denis Healey wanted confirmed that an Argentine flag had been raised, and sought more information about the state of discussions with the Argentine Government. He wanted to know whether the landing had occurred with the support or knowledge of that Government. Mr. Luce reported that the Argentines had denied this, but he pointed out that the vessel was a naval transport, albeit on hire for civilian purposes.

Bernard Braine warned against over-reaction, but stressed the need to ensure the morale of the Falkland islanders, which could not be achieved by the withdrawal of the tangible support represented by HMS Endurance. Alan Beith wanted a renewed Government statement that self-determination was the corner-stone of British policy. Mr. Callaghan reminded Mr. Luce that he had been warned about the risk of this kind of activity. He sought an immediate statement that Endurance would not be withdrawn. Nicholas Winterton described the action as tantamount to an invasion. He sought an assurance that Endurance or a similar vessel would remain on station. Mr. Healey rose a third time to suggest that, with the Endurance withdrawal settled, the Government's only remaining option was to persuade the Australians to allow Invincible to make a detour around the Falkland Islands en route for its new life. Eric Ogden, who had recently visited the Falklands, argued passionately that MOD and FCO Ministers played a game with the House in evading questions. John Blackburn sought "a covenant with the House and the country that sovereignty would not be an agenda item for discussion with any foreign power". Michael Morris, John Stokes and Douglas Jay joined in on similar lines.

In response to all this, Mr. Luce confirmed that the wishes of the islanders would be paramount; that nothing would be done without the consent of the House; and that it was Britain's duty

to defend and support the islanders to the best of our ability, although the detailed dispositions were matters for Defence Ministers. He did later confirm that we had a marine garrison in addition to HMS Endurance. He also reported that we were taking firm action to ensure that those who remained on South Georgia would leave, and that Endurance was in a position to assist with this. In reply to Mr. Blackburn's call for a covenant, Mr. Luce reiterated that we were convinced of our sovereignty but that Argentine claimed sovereignty. There had to be discussions, but there could not be sensible discussion against a background of threats.

MAP

23 March 1982

SOUTH GEORGIA

TO BE CHECKED
AGAINST DELIVERY

Mr Speaker,

I will with / ^{permission} make a brief statement on developments in South Georgia, a Falkland Islands Dependency.

We were informed on 20 March by the Commander of the British Antarctic Survey Base at Grytviken on South Georgia that a party of Argentines had made a landing at Leith Harbour nearby. The Base Commander informed the Argentine party that their presence was illegal as they had not obtained his prior authority for the landing. We immediately took the matter up with the Argentine authorities in Buenos Aires and the Argentine Embassy in London and, following our approach, the ship and most of the personnel left on 21 March. However, the Base Commander has reported that a small number of men and some equipment remain. We are therefore making arrangements to ensure their early departure.