

Mr Coles



CABINET OFFICE

A.J.C. ¹⁰/₅
h.a.

With the compliments of

Sir Michael Palliser
(Room 302, Cabinet Office)

70 Whitehall, London SW1A 2AS
Telephone 01 233

SIR ROBERT ARMSTRONG

cc Sir Antony Acland.
Mr Coles (No. 10)

THE FALKLANDS: FRENCH ATTITUDE

1. As you know, the Secretary General of the French Foreign Ministry, M. Francis Guttman, paid a brief visit to London today, at French request, and discussed the Falklands question with Sir A. Acland and myself. He was accompanied by the French Ambassador. The French were at pains to make it clear that this was a semi-private and unofficial visit designed to exchange views without commitment and informally to bring the French up to date on our thinking. We had about three quarters of an hour together in the office and then a further hour and a quarter over lunch before M. Guttman returned to Paris.
2. M. Guttman began with a very firm restatement of the French position. From the outset of the crisis the French Government had expressed their full support for Britain, for two main reasons: first, they thought it right to support a close friend and ally at a time of crisis, irrespective of whatever transient differences there might be between us in other matters; secondly, because they thought that Britain was making a stand on behalf of all democratic countries in defence of certain crucial principles. It was essential for Western democracies to make it clear that they would not tolerate acts of force of the type committed by Argentina and that if necessary acts of this kind would be met with force. M. Guttman said that that remained the position of the French Government and he did not wish us to interpret his visit to London as weakening in the slightest that French commitment. The French would continue to support us.
3. The Secretary General reverted to this position of principle on a number of occasions throughout our discussion. But for the rest he was concerned to put across two main points. First, that it was critical to continuing European support of our policy that we should make it clear that we were not concerned solely with a military solution, but that we remained ready to negotiate a long-term political settlement; and secondly, that public opinion in France and elsewhere was becoming anxious that in order to achieve our legitimate military objectives we might be indulging in a disproportionate use of force. He said several times that this was at present, he believed, an even more difficult

problem for governmental and public opinion in Italy and Germany than in France. But even in France there was a marked difference, for example, in the tone of comment in the French media today (after the sinking of the Argentine cruiser with the reported potential loss of many lives) than it had been yesterday and previously when the balance of the French press was substantially in our favour.

4. M. Guttman said that he and many others in responsible positions in the French Government understood perfectly well that once we had resolved to deploy and, if necessary, use armed force it was not possible to impose excessive constraints upon our forces in respect of the way they used it. But public opinion took a more subjective view. He thought it would understand if military action were seen to be specifically directed at the Falkland Islands, and the enforcement of a blockade of those Islands and, if need be, at their eventual recapture: but would tend to question military action that seemed to be less related to those specific objectives, particularly if that military action entailed substantial loss of life. This did not mean that there was any risk of the French Government ceasing to support Britain. But if the British Government was to continue to carry French opinion (and even more so in eg Germany, Italy, Ireland, Denmark, etc.) it was desirable not only that Britain should be seen to be using the minimum level of force required but also that we should repeat continuously our readiness to accompany military force with a willingness to negotiate. Sir A. Acland and I explained to him at some length the Government's view that the first requirement was for an Argentine withdrawal; and that there could be no question of us accepting before or during negotiation the Argentine view that sovereignty was not a matter for negotiation; with the implication that the right to self-determination was being refused to the Islanders. We said that no one in the British Government wanted to go to war with the Argentine and none would be better pleased than we if the Argentines would agree to withdraw their troops and then seek a discussion with us not subject to pre-conditions over sovereignty. Unfortunately, every effort so far, whether by Mr Haig or eg by the Peruvians, to bring this about had foundered on Argentine refusal to abandon their position over sovereignty.

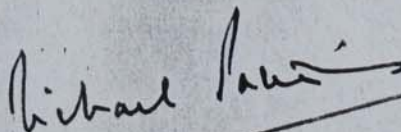
5. M. Guttman said that he was not contesting any of that. The French supported the deployment of the task force, recognised that we could not keep troops cooped up for weeks in warships in the South Atlantic in winter and accepted that within a short while we might have to try to recapture the Islands.

All of this he thought would be understood in France, where there was much admiration for British resolution. But we should not under-estimate the problems that this presented for a number of our friends, even more than for France, and it was important that Argentine intransigence should not, however unfairly, seem to be matched by an appearance of British bellicosity. There was a tendency for public opinion in France and elsewhere to suggest that the British were not too sorry to be making an example of an inferior military power. It would be tragic if we allowed the support that our conduct hitherto had so deservedly gained for us to be whittled away by giving the impression that our only concern was to evict Argentina from the Falklands, by military force if necessary, and thereafter to stand pat politically. He implied, without ever saying so specifically, that our right to sovereignty was less generally accepted than our right to stand up for the islanders and to resist military attack on them. And he said that one of the arguments used by the Argentines which had a certain impact on world opinion was that they had been trying to negotiate with us for seventeen years and had made no progress whatever. He added that virtually no one regarded this as justifying the Argentine military action against the Falklands. But it was held to underline the need for Britain to express readiness, once the Argentines had withdrawn, to negotiate seriously about the future of the islands.

6. We reminded him of repeated statements by British Ministers to the effect that, as required by Security Council Resolution 502, we were prepared to negotiate a political settlement, once the Argentines had withdrawn; and we said that there was no bellicosity in Britain; only a determination to see that the aggressor did not in any settlement simply reap the fruits of his aggression. M. Guttman said that there was no argument about that in France. But he thought we needed to make it even clearer than we had already that we were prepared in due course for a serious negotiation, without pre-conditions, about the future of the Falklands. He realised that time was getting short; the sooner that we could focus international opinion on our readiness to negotiate as well as on our military resolution, the better.

7. We said that we were confident that Ministers would continue to do this and that we would make sure that he received rapidly the text of the statements and Answers to Questions in Parliament today. We also agreed that it was particularly desirable at this time that there should be no indication whatever

to the Argentines of any weakening in European Community support for our position: and we agreed on the instructions to that effect that we would try to have sent today to the British and French Political Directors' meeting in Brussels. We also agreed on the importance of the meeting of European Community Foreign Ministers this coming weekend and on the desirability of as firm a statement as possible emerging from that in support of British policy. M. Guttman repeated the continuing support of the French Government, but his anxiety lest support in certain other Community countries might be weakening; and expressed the hope that we could continue to keep in touch informally with the French over the next few weeks. He did not press us at any stage hard about possible action by the United Nations and seemed to accept our arguments about the relative difficulty of using the UN at this stage. But he displayed some scepticism about the extent to which Mr Haig was really an effective mediator and about the possibility of continuing to operate through the United States. (But this is perhaps a fairly normal French reaction.) We said that we would, of course, be ready for any fresh contacts that they would like to have in future and that it was desirable for us to work as closely together as we could.



(Michael Palliser)

4 May 1982.