

Briefing Note

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THE FALKLAND ISLANDS: THE FRANKS REPORT

The Falkland Islands Review Committee was set up on 6th July 1982. The Prime Minister announced to the House of Commons (*Hansard*, 6th July 1982, Col. 51) that following consultations with the leaders of the opposition parties the Government had decided to appoint Lord Franks as the Chairman and to include Privy Councillor representatives of the two main political parties chosen in consultation with the Leader of the Opposition. The other members of the Committee were Lords Barber and Watkinson (Conservative), Lord Lever and the Rt. Hon. Merlyn Rees (Labour), and the Rt. Hon. Sir Patrick Nairne.

The terms of reference of the Committee were: 'To review the way in which the responsibilities of Government in relation to the Falkland Islands and their dependencies were discharged in the period leading up to the Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands on 2nd April 1982, taking account of all such factors in previous years as are relevant; and to report'.

The Committee's report (Cmnd. 8787) was published on 18th January 1983, and was signed unanimously by all members of the Committee without qualification. On the same day the **Prime Minister**, in a statement in the House of Commons, summed up the key chapter of the Report which, she said, 'defines and addresses itself to two crucial questions:'

- (1) Could the Government have foreseen the invasion of 2nd April 1982?
- (2) Could the Government have prevented the invasion?

Mrs. Thatcher went on to say: 'The Committee emphasises that its report should be read as a whole. At this stage, therefore, I will do no more than quote the Committee's conclusions on these two crucial questions.

'On the first question, whether the Government could have foreseen the invasion of 2nd April, the Committee's conclusion is as follows:

"In the light of this evidence, we are satisfied that the Government did not have warning of the decision to invade. The evidence of the timing of the decision taken by the Junta shows that the Government not only did not, but could not, have had earlier warning. The invasion of the Falkland Islands on 2nd April could not have been foreseen" (Para. 266).

'On the second question, whether the Government could have prevented the invasion, the Committee's conclusion contained in the final paragraph of the Report is as follows:

"Against this background we have pointed out in this chapter where different decisions might have been taken, where fuller consideration of alternative courses of action might, in our opinion, have been advantageous, and where the machinery of Government could have been better used. But, if the British Government had acted differently in the ways we have indicated, it is impossible to judge what the impact on the Argentine Government or the implications for the course of events might have been. There is no reasonable basis for any suggestion – which would be purely hypothetical – that the invasion would have been prevented if the Government had acted in the ways indicated in our Report. Taking account of these considerations, and of all the evidence we have received, we conclude that we would not be justified in attaching any criticism or blame to the present Government for the Argentine Junta's decision to commit its act of unprovoked aggression in the invasion of the Falkland Islands on 2nd April 1982."

There are six annexes to the report, the first of which deals with ten specific assertions made against the Government which were found by the Committee to be either untrue or unsupported by evidence. One of these assertions was that Argentina had been informed by the last Labour Government of their decision to

send a task force in 1977 in view of a possible Argentine threat to the Islands. The Committee states (in paragraph 66) that it 'found no evidence that the Argentine Government ever came to know of (the task force's) existence'. This conclusion rebuts suggestions that the Labour Government had succeeded in deterring a possible Argentine attack.

The Committee considered that there were some defects in the Joint Intelligence machinery (para. 318), and recommended that the assessment machinery should be reviewed and consideration be given to the desirability of a full-time chairman being appointed to the Joint Intelligence Committee from the Cabinet Office (para. 319), rather than the Foreign Office.

Paragraphs 291-2 deal with the amount of Ministerial discussion of the Falkland Islands issue. Although the matter was not discussed at the Cabinet Overseas and Defence Committee, Lord Carrington kept the Prime Minister and his OD Committee colleagues fully informed of the progress of the dispute up to the time of the invasion by means of a series of minutes. As the Prime Minister said on 18th January, this 'was not unreasonable at the time in view of the close contact kept between ministers on that occasion. It was discussed on many occasions' (*Hansard*, 18th January 1983, Col. 177).

The report stated it was inadvisable for the Government to have announced a decision to withdraw HMS Endurance. On this matter the Prime Minister pointed out that this decision was not implemented and that HMS Endurance was in fact still on station when the Argentine invasion took place.

On the wider issue the Prime Minister observed that:

'The dilemma for both Governments was that Argentina wanted sovereignty and the Falkland Islanders, whose wishes we regarded as paramount, wanted to stay British, that was the fundamental dilemma which applied to both Governments. In the end Argentina invaded. ... we now have no option except Fortress Falklands ... if we are to continue, as I believe we should, to honour the wishes of the Falkland Islanders' (*Hansard*, Col. 178).

The Future

It may be recalled that the Prime Minister told the House of Commons on 23rd November 1982:

'There can be no question of negotiations on sovereignty for the Falkland Islands. It would be a betrayal of those who fought and died' (*Hansard*, Cols. 704-5).