



File

10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

13 February, 1985

Dear Mr. Owen

Thank you for your letter of 13 February.

The main points you make in the letter are essentially a reiteration of those made in your previous letter of 25 September. They amount to the proposition that the Government has tried systematically to mislead the House about the sinking of the General Belgrano and has failed to set the record straight. I sent you a very full reply to your allegations on 8 October and, in response to a subsequent letter from you, on 16 November. Moreover, I have published, on 29 October, an extremely detailed account of events leading up to and following the sinking of the Belgrano. I enclose a copy of the relevant section of the Official Report. In these circumstances, I do not accept your assertion that a further statement from me of the kind you propose is needed.

You also refer to discussions between myself and Sir Clive Whitmore. The Defence Secretary called on me on Friday, 30 March to discuss the reply which I sent to Denzil Davies on 4 April and brought with him his Permanent Secretary, Sir Clive Whitmore to that meeting. My discussions on that subject were with the responsible Secretary of State.

On the prosecution of Mr. Ponting, I am grateful for your acceptance of my assurance that I was not involved in the decision taken by the Law Officers. I attach a copy of a letter which I have sent to Mr. Kinnock today setting out once again the circumstances leading to the decision taken by the Law Officers. As you will see, that letter covers all the particular points you raise on this matter.

Yours sincerely

Roger Thatcher

The Rt. Hon. David Owen, MP

THE RT HON DR DAVID OWEN MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

13 February 1985

The Rt Hon Mrs Margaret Thatcher MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London SW1

Dear Mrs Thatcher,

I am amazed to hear that at present you do not intend to open the debate on Monday in order to explain fully to the House of Commons the circumstances surrounding the misleading statements which you and your Ministers have, on a number of specific occasions, given to the House of Commons and why you do not appear to think it necessary as the Head of the Civil Service to explain and justify the involvement of the machinery of Government and individual civil servants from the level of Sir Clive Whitmore - Permanent Under Secretary of State at the Ministry of Defence - downwards in the systematic attempt to mislead, not only individual Members of Parliament but the Select Committee established by the House of Commons to investigate all aspects of this sorry affair.

On 11 September 1984, in a speech at Buxton, I said:

"The Government should issue a White Paper immediately correcting the record. This they unwisely did not do after the war was over - when they issued on 14 December Cmnd 8758 which contained wrong information about the Belgrano. To put the full facts before the country and the world will not bring discredit, it will restore honour.

In particular, they should correct any mis-statements made to the House of Commons and they should answer any follow-up questions put to them by the Select Committee, with the accepted proviso that some intelligence information may not be able to be published.

If this was done promptly and quickly this whole episode could be set aside. There is no party political advantage here."

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I re-iterated this view in a letter to you on 13 September. You subsequently admitted to me in correspondence on 8 October that "Ministers were not informed at the time of the precise course of the Belgrano when she was sunk. Indeed this information did not come to Ministers' attention until the end of November 1982 when all the details were eventually considered to deal with Parliamentary Questions".

Mr Heseltine was not appointed Secretary of State for Defence until January 1983. Since Sir John Nott has retired from the House of Commons it is only yourself who is in a position to explain to the House of Commons why the White Paper, "The Falklands Campaign; the Lessons" continued to carry inaccurate statements and known to be so by Ministers.

The House of Commons deserves a personal explanation from yourself as to why:

- you did not take the opportunity to correct the record in a Written Answer in Hansard on 13 December, 1982 (Col 11)
- you did not take the opportunity to correct the record in a Written Answer in Hansard on 16 December, 1982 (Col 200 and 201)
- you did not take the opportunity to correct the record in a Written Answer in Hansard on 20 December, 1982 (Col 353)

The House of Commons also needs to hear from you as to what discussions you had with Sir Clive Whitmore over the letter that was drafted by Sir Clive Whitmore in the presence of Mr Ponting and which you sent to Mr Denzil Davies on 4 April 1984 and which was published in Hansard on 13 April 1984.

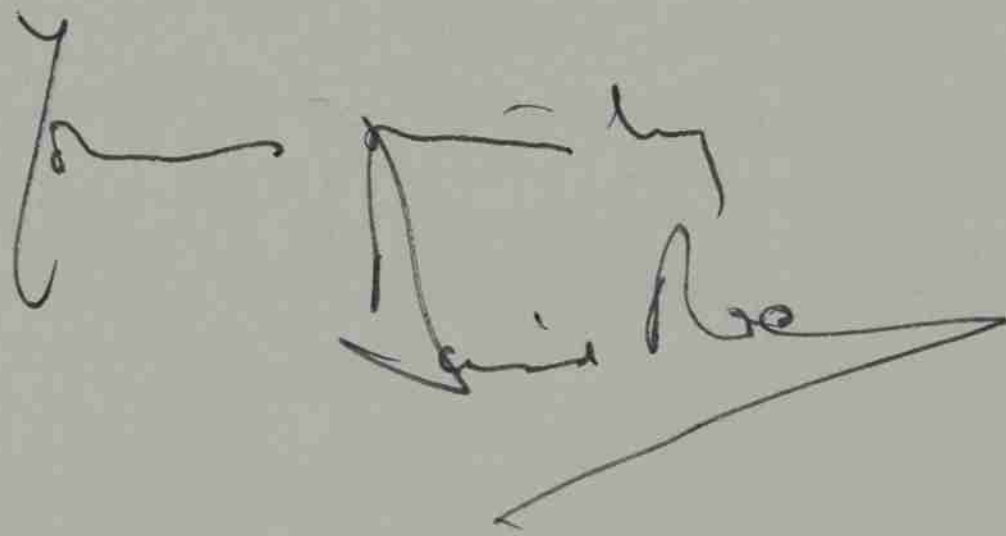
You also gave no explanation, when I raised this matter in the House yesterday, as to why in an Oral Answer on 21 February 1984 you still tried to pretend to the House of Commons that all the facts had been given to the House and that they supported the Government's case, when Ministers knew - and had known since November 1982 - that the facts were incorrect.

In relation to what was said in the House yesterday, it is surely time that we re-establish as early as is humanly possible, that misleading statements given to the House of Commons are corrected personally at the earliest opportunity when found to be incorrect and because of that all important convention Members of Parliament accept the truth of each other's statements. I do not therefore seek to challenge the assurance that you as Prime Minister were not involved in the decision to prosecute but I do think that you owe it again to the House of Commons to elaborate further on your statement in Col 162 of 12 February, that Ministers had no role whatsoever in the prosecution.

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We do need to know what the role of Mr Heseltine and Mr Stanley was in bringing the matter to the attention of the Director of Public Prosecutions and to the Solicitor General. What consultations they had, if any, with other Ministers, since from the information that was given in court it does appear that Ministers had a role in the prosecution even though the actual decision as to whether to prosecute was taken by the Solicitor General and the Attorney General. We also need to know, if you were not consulted personally, to what extent your office was informed and whether or not they informed you as well about whether to refer the case to the DPP.

I am sure against this background you will be prepared to recognise that a debate on Monday in which you did not take part would be one which would devalue the House of Commons.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Owen', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

David Owen