

PRIME MINISTER

Ponting Debate: Exposure of Documents

It was agreed on Thursday that Mr. Heseltine would have to quote in the debate some internal minutes of advice from Mr. Ponting and would have to lay in the Library the documents from which he quoted. Since the Opposition would no doubt then ask for other documents which the Defence had in court, we were inclined to think that it would be best if he laid in the Library all documents which were exhibited in the trial.

From the chronology set out below you will see that some of these documents would contain references to discussions between John Stanley and John Coles. Contrary to what the Observer said today, you did not have any discussions with Mr. Stanley, but the Opposition will no doubt try to create scepticism about that.

I have considered the possibilities of limiting the range of documents which Mr. Heseltine would publish, in the interests of minimising the mischief which can be made about No. 10's role. There are four options:-

- (a) Mr. Heseltine only lays in the Library documents from which he quotes (and he could easily avoid quoting any which mention No. 10).
- (b) Mr. Heseltine lays in the Library only documents which he quotes but gives a descriptive memorandum about the rest.
- (c) Mr. Heseltine lays in the Library all the documents which were exhibited at the trial: this would include the documents marked with an asterisk on the attached chronology.

- (d) Mr. Heseltine lays in the Library all documents made available to the Defence: this would be a slightly wider category which would include Ponting's minute of 10 April quoted in the original draft of Mr. Heseltine's speech, which you saw yesterday.

Options (a) and (b) are unlikely to satisfy the Opposition, since Ponting and his lawyers know that the other documents exist and would put the Opposition up to press for their publication. So I am inclined to think that we should go for option (c) or (d), despite the mischief that this will enable people like Mr. Dalyell to make about the so-called "role of No. 10".

Agree? Or would you like to have a word with Mr. Heseltine tomorrow morning?

FERB

17 February, 1985

PONTING: CHRONOLOGY

1984

- 6 March Denzil Davies writes to Prime Minister about Belgrano on behalf of Shadow Cabinet
- 19 March Tam Dalyell writes to S/S, Defence with nine questions
- 22 March Heseltine commissions Ponting to prepare "Crown Jewels"
- 29 March Ponting submits "Crown Jewels" recommending uninformative reply to Dalyell
- 30 March Meeting at No. 10 to discuss reply to Davies at which it is agreed to reveal first date of sighting Belgrano
- 4 April Prime Minister replies to Davies
- 5 April Dalyell writes to Prime Minister asking questions on Prime Minister's letter to Davies
- 6 April John Coles writes to Ministry of Defence saying that he is inclined to advise Prime Minister not to answer Dalyell's questions but to refer him to letter to Davies
- 10 April Ponting advises within Ministry of Defence that he "would not dissent from the suggestion in the letter from John Coles". [This minute was made available to Ponting's Defence but was not exhibited in court.]
- 12 April Prime Minister replies to Dalyell as suggested by John Coles.
- Ponting advises that S/S, Defence can answer eight of the nine questions in Dalyell's letter of 19 March (contrary to his original advice of 29 March)
- 13 April ~~13~~ ^{Flag A} John Stanley dissents from Ponting's advice. He minutes that he has discussed with John Coles

/who

↑
This was not an exhibit

who agrees that Heseltine should rest on Prime Minister's reply to Davies

18 April

Heseltine replies to Dalyell's letter of 19 March as advised by Stanley, i.e. that he cannot usefully add to Prime Minister's letter of 5 April to Davies and 12 April to Dalyell

24 April

Ponting writes anonymously to Dalyell urging him to put his questions down as PQs. He finishes "You are on the right track. Keep going."

1 May

Dalyell writes again to S/S, Defence, tables four questions as PQs to Defence and one to Prime Minister

2 May

Dalyell suspended from House. PQs to Defence lapse.

9 May

* Flag B

Stanley discusses with Coles reply to Dalyell's PQ and suggests that PM replies to Dalyell with "It is not our practice to comment on military operational matters or the details of military operations"

* Flag C

Ponting advises that Stanley's reason "suggested after discussion with No. 10" for not answering Dalyell will not stand up

10 May

* Flag D

Stanley disagrees with Ponting in minute to S/S, Defence and proposes line quoted under heading of 9 May above

11 May

* Flag E

Heseltine agrees with Stanley that Dalyell's questions should not be answered but rules that his suggested reason should not be used; and that the answer should simply refer back to Prime Minister's letter of 4 April to Davies. This line is adopted in the Prime Minister's reply.



JA VC/33

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Principal Private Secretary

18 February 1985

BELGRANO DEBATE

We spoke yesterday about your Secretary of State's speech in the House of Commons today and the documents which it will be necessary to lay in the Library of the House.

I reported to the Prime Minister that the exhibits at the trial included the minutes of 9 May from the Minister of State's office to Mr. Ponting, Mr. Ponting's submission of the same date, the minute of 10 May from PS Minister of State to you and your minute of 11 May to PS Minister of State: these refer to a discussion which Mr. Stanley had had with Mr. Coles here and were the occasion of a story in The Observer yesterday.

Although these documents give some scope for mischief to those who might wish to suggest - as The Observer did yesterday - that Mr. Stanley's contact with No. 10 was with the Prime Minister herself, the Prime Minister agrees that it would be right for all the documents exhibited at the trial to be made available to the House of Commons. If it is necessary in the debate to deal with the references to Mr. Stanley's contacts with Mr. Coles, the point will need to be made that the Prime Minister was not involved in these discussions which were part of the process of consultation between Departments in preparing advice for Mr. Heseltine and the Prime Minister on replies to Mr. Dalyell.

We agreed that, in order not to extend the range of documents laid in the Library beyond those exhibited at the trial, your Secretary of State would not quote in his speech from Mr. Ponting's minute of 10 April about the reply to Mr. Dalyell's letter of 5 April to the Prime Minister.

I should be grateful if you and John Oughton could ensure that any references in your Secretary of State's speech or Mr. Stanley's speech to consultation with No. 10 are cleared with this office.

I am copying this letter to John Oughton in Mr. Stanley's Office, and Richard Hatfield (Cabinet Office).

Richard Mottram, Esq.,
Ministry of Defence.

MS