



10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

11 August 1980

The Prime Minister has asked me to thank you for your letter of 16 July.

Mrs. Thatcher was very sorry to learn that you saw her response to the Alexander Kielland disaster as unsympathetic to the families of the British men who lost their lives. I can assure you that she certainly had no such intention: she wrote as a mark of respect to the Prime Minister of Norway as head of the Government within whose jurisdiction the tragedy occurred. In writing to her Norwegian colleague, Mrs. Thatcher, as well as conveying sympathy and concern about the tragedy, offered all possible assistance to the Norwegian Authorities in the search and rescue operation and in the subsequent inquiry.

On the day following the disaster the sentiments of the Prime Minister and all her Government were expressed by the Secretary of State for Energy in the House of Commons. He paid tribute to the men who worked in the North Sea, in often appalling weather conditions, and invited the House to join him and the Government in conveying deepest feelings of regret and sympathy to the relatives of all those who had tragically lost their lives. These sentiments were echoed by all sides of the House.

The Minister of State for Energy, Mr. Hamish Gray, asked that his personal sympathy be extended to you when he replied on 12 June to a letter he had received from Mr. Anthony Grant, MP, about the sad loss of your son. I understand that in a subsequent letter the Minister told Mr. Alan Haselhurst, MP, that the Norwegians intend to right the rig if possible and have asked companies to consider how it could be done. Plans for the operation have subsequently been drawn up and contractors selected. Mr. Gray will be keeping you informed of further developments through Mr. Haselhurst.

M. A. PATTISON

T. Purcell, Esq.

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Disasters
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I am sorry that it has not been possible to right the up-turned rig before now but responsibility for this operation rests with the Norwegian authorities. Diving safety considerations made it impossible for the rig to be searched in its present inverted state and there has been an understandable delay because of the difficult and dangerous nature of the operation. However, plans for righting the rig have now been drawn up and contractors selected and I hope that it will not be too long before the operation can be carried out successfully.

MAP

Mrs Joan Dowson

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M Pattison Esq
Private Secretary to the
Prime Minister
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Type M
MAS

7 August 1980

Dear Mike,

Thank you for your letter of 30 July to Denis Walker commenting on his of the same date, which enclosed a draft Private Secretary reply to Mr T Purcell, whose son was killed in the Alexander Kielland disaster.

His draft reply did not deal specifically with Mr Purcell's concern over the delay in recovering his son's body from the up-turned rig because he did not think that this was the purpose of Mr Purcell's letter.

Mr Purcell, through Alan Haselhurst MP, and Mr Purcell's sister, through Anthony Grant MP, have already written to the Secretary of State for Energy about progress on the recovery of missing bodies. Both received full replies from the Minister of State indicating that the task of righting the rig was one of formidable technical difficulty, requiring careful planning. They were informed that the Norwegians had commissioned feasibility studies but would probably not be in a position to begin the actual operation until September. The Minister undertook to keep Mr Purcell informed, through his MP, of further developments.

It is true that there has been a lack of hard information from the Norwegians about their intentions with regard to righting the up-turned structure. However I think this is understandable because of the difficult and dangerous nature of the operation. Today's Financial Times reports that contractors have now been selected, although righting the rig will take some time yet.

I attach a revised draft reply which refers to the fact that the Norwegians progress on righting the rig and searching for Mr Purcell's son's body has already been covered in correspondence between the Minister of State and Mr Purcell's MP. I also attach for your information the background note which I believe might have been omitted from Denis Walker's earlier letter.

Yours,
Geoff

G S DART
Private Secretary

THE ALEXANDER KIELLAND DISASTER - BACKGROUND NOTE

The Alexander Kielland semi-submersible installation capsized on 27 March 1980. 123 men (including 24 UK nationals) died and 89 survived. Some bodies, including those of UK nationals, have not yet been recovered. They may still be inside the up-turned rig which lies in harbour.

2. Following the disaster the notification of next of kin and all personal and private aspects of the men's deaths, such as repatriation of their bodies, was undertaken by the victims direct employers, who alone held details of addresses, etc.

3. The British Embassy in Oslo ensured that Death or "Missing presumed dead" certificates were issued for all UK nationals killed. In answer to specific inquiries, they have also provided information about the follow-up in Norway to the disaster.

4. MPs correspondence, answered by Department of Energy Ministers, indicated general dissatisfaction about the uncertainties and lack of information about the Norwegians' plans to right the up-turned rig, and particularly to search for missing bodies. However this operation will be difficult and dangerous, and careful planning is essential. Feasibility studies are being carried out but it is unlikely that the rig will be righted before September.* Diving safety considerations make it impossible for the rig to be searched in its present inverted state.

5. Our Oslo Embassy understand that Phillips Petroleum of Norway (for whom the rig was working at the time) have accepted in principle that compensation should be paid to the dependents, but that no firm offers have yet been made.

Department of Energy

29 July 1980

* These have now been completed and two contractors selected for the operation - Dynamic Marine of Portsmouth will be working with Nicoværket A/S Norge.



B/K

Disaster

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

30 July 1980

B/K 6.8.80

Thank you for your letter of 30 July, with which you enclosed a draft Private Secretary reply to Mr. Purcell, whose son was killed in the Alexander Kielland disaster.

Whilst your draft deals adequately with the question of the Prime Minister's immediate response to the tragedy, it makes no reference whatsoever to Mr. Purcell's concern that bodies have still not been recovered and that there is no evidence of any serious effort on the part of the British Government to pursue this. You told me on the telephone earlier that we appear to be having some difficulty with the Norwegians on this front, and it may be that we do not have a very good story to tell. But that will not allow us to get away without mentioning the subject at all. Could you please have another look at this.

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|| B/K

map

Denis Walker, Esq.,
Department of the Environment.

Energy

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