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DJB/82/1178

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27 July 1982

Dear Whitmore

HOUSE OF COMMONS DEFENCE COMMITTEE: EVIDENCE BY SIR FRANK COOPER

... You will know that Sir Frank Cooper appeared before the HCDC to give evidence on 21 July; he thought you might like to see the attached extracts (paragraphs 48-62 and 75-76) of the draft minutes of evidence about the role played by No 10, the Cabinet Office and the FCO in the information effort during the Falklands crisis. The draft minutes have been amended in manuscript by Sir Frank.

2. I am copying this to David Wright and Andrew Burns.

*V. ...
D J Bowen*

D J BOWEN
Private Secretary



10 DOWNING STREET

The Whitmore ^{HW} 28 vii 82.

With the compliments of

This is not going to make any
appearance genuine even. He is
just plain wrong on some points.
And whatever he thought I was
doing I - and the people who
met with me - felt I or Roman
Rome was coordinating.

We shall have to seek refuge
in an acceptable definition of
coordination

(P.D.)

I'm afraid this extract reveals
all too clearly the chaos that
was the NOD.

Sept 28/7

oversimplify but at the beginning in the days before the Task Force sailed it was not only the case that there was not a plan on the shelf for the handling of information, though for the reasons you adduced there were plans, for example, for the conversion of merchant ships but no plans for the handling of information, but there was not either a chief publicity officer in the Ministry of Defence. How long had that post been vacant?

(Sir Frank Cooper) The position on that was this. We are talking about a chief public relations rather than chief publicity officer. There was an acting chief public relations officer who was acting, he was being paid for the job and he was actually in charge of public relations at that time. We had been waiting for several weeks for the arrival of Neville Taylor and the reason for this was twofold: that there was a possibility that he might have gone to another job which had then to be resolved, and that he was just finishing off some work in the DHSS, and he arrived in about the second week in April.

46. So he arrived in the second week in April and was he in charge of the handling of information in the MOD when he arrived?

(Sir Frank Cooper) No. He had a little run in period because, although he was in the Ministry of Defence at an earlier period in his career, he started off by not taking over full control of the whole of the Falkland Islands operations but having a general remit over the rest of the Ministry of Defence field. He was then put explicitly and directly in full charge on, I think, about the 18th or 19th May.

~~47. So until then Mr Macdonald was still in charge?~~

(Sir Frank Cooper) Yes.

48. What about responsibility on the official side in the Government as a whole? In annex B, paragraph 4, of your evidence

to us you say "During the Falkland Islands crisis the information effort was co-ordinated on a daily basis by the No. 10 Press Office." Could you tell us a bit more about how exactly that worked?

(Sir Frank Cooper) I have been away in Brussels, and I was slightly surprised to see that. I thought it was a slightly odd statement, quite frankly. I think what that is shorthand for is that there was a daily meeting in No. 10 under the Chief Press Officer, Bernard ^{INGHAM} England (P), of all the departments that were in any way remotely connected with what was going on. I would put that in our jargon as ^a touching hands exercise rather than a co-ordination exercise. We normally send the Chief Press Officer, sometimes the CPR, occasionally acting CPR, but it was a sort of quick exchange of the day's ^{news} views rather than a detailed co-ordination exercise.

49. So if No. 10 did not perform the co-ordinating role, who did?

(Sir Frank Cooper) I do not think there was a real need for a major co-ordinating role. There were a few meetings of the departments which were involved but in the earlier part of the whole period - I am going right back to the beginning of April, the first few weeks in April - much interest was centred on the diplomatic activity and that, of course, was led by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. We were, I think, then busily assembling and getting the Task Force on the way so that was, ~~think~~ a perfectly straightforward exercise. Throughout the period the main links were between the Foreign Office and ourselves and we are very close to the Foreign Office. We work every day of our lives very, very closely with the Foreign Office and I think very well with the Foreign Office. We have got direct communications with them. Everybody knows everybody very well. We have got tubes which can send papers in one direction and another, television which goes from one building to another, and all

the press releases that we put out were seen by the Foreign Office and were sent off by them to their posts overseas as they wished. So co-ordination is, I find, rather an odd word, altogether. I do not think you have a great co-ordination exercise.

Mr Dunn

50. Was there any occasion on which you made a statement at the Ministry of Defence/^{after}which immediately or consequently in a reasonably short period of time another statement was made by another department on the subject?

(Sir Frank Cooper) Not that I am aware of.

Mr Patten

51. I am surprised about what you say about co-ordination. Not very long ago a Minister was reported to co-ordinate the Government's information services. Is there still a Minister co-ordinating the Government's information services? Was he co-ordinating them during the Falklands crisis?

(Sir Frank Cooper) Oh, yes, he was aware of what was going on because he was briefed daily and there was a small presentation unit within the Cabinet Office which was arranging and sorting information and making it available.

52. Was the same Minister, the Leader of the House then, you are saying responsible for the co-ordination of information?

(Sir Frank Cooper) Yes.

Dr Gilbert

53. You say you were surprised that this passage appeared in your document, Sir Frank. Who put it in?

(Sir Frank Cooper) I think I am accepting responsibility for it. All I am saying is that had I been writing it myself I would not have put it in quite that way, to be quite frank.

54. My question stands.

(Sir Frank Cooper) I take full responsibility for it and I think I was putting a gloss on it. What I would have said had I been writing that was that there were daily meetings chaired by the No. 10 Press Office. But "co-ordination" gives a sense of direction, a sense of somebody sorting things out etc., etc., and though it is true there were occasions when this was necessary and there were discussions between Ministers on occasion whether something should or should not happen, there was not time to co-ordinate in the sense of having orderly meetings. I think it is terribly important to understand this, that the news really did not start to come in from the Falkland Islands till the afternoon and evening, and the real work of the day took place between about 4 o'clock in the afternoon and 10 o'clock at night because of the difference in the timescale in that the Falkland Islands were four hours behind London time. So there was not any news in the morning of any kind virtually.

55. I do not think anyone on the Committee is actually accusing you of co-ordinating anything. We are obliged for that disavowal. Nevertheless, was this document of yours not cleared with No. 10 before it was sent to the Committee?

(Sir Frank Cooper) Which document?

56. The Ministry of Defence memorandum, House of Commons Defence Committee?

(Sir Frank Cooper) I think it was seen by various other government departments but we are responsible for it.

57. That is an interesting concept you are beginning to raise. Are you suggesting other departments might have dissented from some elements in it?

(Sir Frank Cooper) I am not suggesting that at all.

58. Should we infer that you are content that all other government departments would subscribe wholeheartedly to the contents of this submission from the Ministry of Defence?

(Sir Frank Cooper) I think the submission to the Committee is from the Ministry of Defence.

59. I understand that very well but I repeat my question: are you confident that all other arms of government would subscribe to what is in this document?

(Sir Frank Cooper) I am pretty confident, yes. They might have individual glosses to put on it but I am quite clear that they would. In fact, it was seen by No. 10 and by the Foreign Office as well.

Chairman

60. I wonder why they did not delete it then?

(Sir Frank Cooper) I am terribly sorry, I said I was actually away in Brussels on Monday and Tuesday.

61. I am just wondering, if No. 10 saw it, why they did not delete it when it says they were co-ordinating? It is rather surprising.

(Sir Frank Cooper) I am not sure, though I suspect we put these words in ourselves and I think they might have been better phrased.

Mr Patten

62. Sir Frank, you draft beautifully. How would you have phrased it? What would you have said instead of "co-ordination"?

(Sir Frank Cooper) ~~I~~ think I would simply have said, during the Falkland Islands crisis there was a daily meeting of press officers in No. 10 so that everyone was in touch with what was happening. I do not think I would go any further than that, and ~~I think~~ that is the truth, quite frankly.

vote expenditure it would fall upon between yourselves and the FCO and, as it eventually turned out, the contingency fund?

(Sir Frank Cooper) I cannot recall a single instance of that kind and I would be amazed if there ever was one. The arrangements we had with the FCO were very straightforward in that we passed the information to them by whatever were the quickest means. We were in contact with them 24 hours a day, seven days a week, throughout and they then passed the information on to their post overseas. I think we did get a couple of complaints that we had not passed information on quickly enough to our people in the UN. I do recall those and we remedied those very quickly indeed. But there was no - I cannot remember a single case of an aggressive argument between ourselves and the FCO throughout in this area. ^{The} departments are very used to working together and they work very well together.

Mr Mates

75. Can we go back to the question of the co-ordination of information and couple that in perhaps with the requirement for censorship because one hears many conflicting stories such as from The Times this morning the frustration of a journalist who alleged that at times his stories were virtually withheld to the stories one heard that stuff was coming back from the task force with the agreement of the commanders there and was then being held at Northwood and not disseminated there for other reasons, to the arguments that one has heard, some for political, some for military, some for public information, reasons, that arguments between No. 10 and the MOD, Northwood and the Foreign Office on what should or should not be released had quite often led to a lot of muddle. When you had passed through those first traumatic days it must have been clear that all was not entirely well with the information set-up so what were you doing in that lull that there was that you described to us to try and get it right and

was the end result nevertheless proper co-ordination so that the various muddles which have now been criticised did not recur?

(Sir Frank Cooper) I do not think what you describe as muddles really came out of the lack of co-ordination quite frankly.

76. We did on occasion have Ministry of Defence denying something that had come out of somewhere else and this has happened over several things when information was coming in as hard as being reported on the BBC or ITV that was then denied by the Ministry of Defence and confirmed in the morning. That does not put you in a very good shape. Either you did not know when you made the denial or you were making the denial for some other reason, knowing that the BBC or ITV got it right. This appeared to the general public to be some area of muddle.

(Sir Frank Cooper) I cannot recall a particular instance of the kind you are mentioning.

77. Let us go back to the moment of invasion. That was being denied until six o'clock about.

(Sir Frank Cooper) Yes, because the confirmation that it had taken place did not actually come in until rather late in the day. There is no doubt about that. Could I just try and pick some of the points up that you are making? It is certainly true that on a number of occasions we released ^{from} Government items of information that had been stopped in the task force. Let us pick up a case which was mentioned this morning, namely the Harriers' flying accident. That actually we would have preferred to have kept totally silent about, quite frankly, because - solely because - of operational reasons. We had a very limited stock of Harriers at that time down in the South Atlantic. It was terribly important not to give away the fact that two of those had an accident and

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