

Crisis puts Cabinet unity under strain

By Julian Haviland, Political Editor

The growing strains within the Conservative Party caused by the prolongation of the Falklands crisis were on public display during yesterday's debate in the Commons, with senior Conservative backbenchers asserting in private the Cabinet is divided and the first signs of separate factions forming behind the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary.

Not for the first time since she took office, Mrs Margaret Thatcher is seen by her admirers and her opponents, both inside and outside the Conservative Party, as being at odds with the majority of her Cabinet.

In fact, although the potential for disagreement, once the Cabinet is faced with firm proposals for a settlement, is undeniable, the evidence is that so far senior ministers still see eye to eye.

The most eloquent of the Prime Minister's champions yesterday was Mr Enoch Powell, who indirectly but unmistakably invited Mr Pym to resign or Mrs Thatcher to dismiss him to "restore the unity of the Government" and its clarity of purpose.

Mr Edward Heath, speaking for the first time on the Falklands in the Commons, offered the Prime Minister his whole-hearted support. But his weight was behind Mr Pym, who should not be moved by cries of "sell-out", he advised.

The Conservative right, alert for every hint in Mr Pym's speech that the Government might be weakening, found inconsistencies: the Foreign Secretary talked of "matching" withdrawals by Argentine and British forces; the Prime Minister talked of Argentina withdrawing first.

At a private meeting later of the 1922 Committee of Conservative backbenchers, Mr Julian Amery said he was very disturbed by Mr Pym's speech. The Government was clearly divided. Britain had made all the concessions. The

Government, he said, had great popularity in the country because of its tough stand but this would collapse if the task force was withdrawn without achieving Britain's objectives.

Mr Amery and others on the right were loudly supported by 30 or 40 of the MPs present.

Mr Eldon Griffiths said there must be no question of Argentine and British forces withdrawing at the same time; nor must there be a multinational group in interim control which excluded Britain and included unfriendly nations. He was worried that the Foreign Office might risk the unity of the party so as to secure the widest possible support from the Commons as a whole.

Mr Michael McNair-Wilson was worried that Mr Pym had made no reference to restoring British administration.

Mr Jonathan Aitken said he thanked God that that Peruvian compromise, which the Government had been ready to accept, had been rejected by Argentina, because the party would have been split down the middle.

Mr Kenneth Warren said the Prime Minister had been superb "but we must restate our original purpose very clearly. We are in danger of forgetting what it is".

But Mr Michael Mates was applauded for a speech in strong support of Mr Pym, the man who had never let the party down, he said, as chief whip, in Northern Ireland, over devolution, and above all as Secretary of State for Defence. The party must not split.

Mr Patrick Cormack appealed to his colleagues not to weaken Mr Pym's hand, but not to demoralize the troops.

"We won't get back to the status quo", he said, "but should make a stand in refusing any Argentine participation in the administration". They should not forget that Britain had wider interests at stake in the area.

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