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3rd June 1986

Dear Geoffrey,

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Prime Minister
You will want to be aware
that the decision to suspend
efforts to find a new
technique for detecting
mines will be
announced shortly.

MINE CLEARANCE IN THE FALKLAND ISLANDS

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I have seen your Private Secretary's letter of 9th May 1986 on this subject. I agree that we should certainly continue to keep an eye open for the emergence of new technology in this field either in the UK or with our Allies overseas but, for the reasons given in my minute of 24th April, I must make it clear that this cannot be a priority area for defence funding. And you will have seen John MacGregor's Private Secretary's letter of 16th May giving his views on the attribution of such work to Operation Corporate.

As you know, I share your view that the presentation of this decision needs very careful handling and our officials have therefore been jointly working up the necessary material for an announcement. The critical issue is the timing of such an announcement. I believe that the pressures from those with an

The Rt Hon Geoffrey Howe QC MP



interest in this matter, not least ERA Technology, who recently wrote letters to you and to David Trefgarne here, are such that we can no longer hope to delay an announcement until John Stanley's visit to the Falkland Islands at the end of July. The lack of further funding would almost inevitably become public knowledge before then, since ERA Technology would presumably see public lobbying as being in their interests.

I should very much prefer not to have to announce this decision in response to leaks and speculation and I therefore propose that we should now aim to make an announcement by means of an inspired Parliamentary Question as soon as possible after the Whitsun Recess. The Governor of the Falkland Islands would make a similar announcement to the Joint Councils and the Islanders at the same time.

I attach at Annex A the text of the proposed PQ and answer. A considerable amount of supplementary briefing material to handle media questions would of course also be necessary, both in London and the Falklands. I would also aim to inform the Chairman of the House of Commons Defence Committee, the Managing Director of ERA Technology and other interested parties of the decision on the same day as our announcement in the House.



I should be grateful to know as soon as possible that you are content with the way in which it is proposed to handle the presentation of this decision.

I am sending copies of this letter to the Prime Minister, Willie Whitelaw, John MacGregor, Paul Channon and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

Yours wes,

George

George Younger



ANNEX

FALKLAND ISLANDS MINEFIELD CLEARANCE: PARLIAMENTARY
QUESTION AND ANSWER

Question: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether a solution has been found to the problem of detecting and clearing Argentine mines in the Falklands.

Answer: Immediately after the conflict our forces in the Falkland Islands set in hand an extensive programme of identifying, marking and, to the extent possible, clearing the minefields left behind by the Argentines. It has not proved possible with existing technology to detect the whole range of mines laid by the Argentines, in particular the plastic anti-personnel mines. In order to avoid further casualties among Service personnel involved in mine clearance, work on clearing the mines was suspended in August 1983. Meanwhile, my Department instituted a programme of research to find a safe and effective means of detecting and clearing mines in the difficult terrain of the Falklands. I regret to say that, despite considerable progress in this challenging field of technology, there would still be a long way to go in terms of time and money before a practical solution could be placed in the Army's hands which would be sufficiently reliable and suitable for use in peacetime. Funding of the present research programme will therefore cease. Should there be further technological developments with an application in this field, we remain ready to consider whether they could contribute to a solution to



the problem. In the meantime, the current safety precautions will continue to be applied stringently and the Royal Engineers will keep the minefields securely fenced off and marked. There is no serious danger to the Islanders unless they enter these fenced-off areas. The Islanders' safety will thus remain carefully protected.

ARGENTINA
DEFENSE OF

FALKLANDS
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