

PRIME MINISTER'S DAY

The Prime Minister is working in No 10 most of the day.

SCIENCE IN INDIA EXHIBITION

At 4.00 pm the Prime Minister will open the "Science in India" exhibition at the Science Museum, in the company of Mrs Gandhi. This is followed by an Indian Government Reception at the Museum. The exhibition features representative exhibits from prehistoric tools and ceramics through the flight spare of the APPLE satellite, the orbiting version of which will be used to send the opening to Delhi for live television coverage.

PRESS NOTICES

Lord Justice Slade to be sworn of Her Majesty's most honourable Privy Council on his appointment as a Lord Justice of Appeal. The Honourable Mr Justice Mervyn Davies to be knighted on his appointment as a Justice of the High Court of Justice.

Appointment of Charles Suckling as a member of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution. Also the reappointment of Lord Nathan, Professor Robert Clark, Professor Gordon Fogg, Geoffrey Larminie, Mrs Mary Warnock.

EUROPEAN COUNCIL BRIEFING

Tomorrow at 4.15 pm in Room 25 in the FCO, BI and NF and FCO officials will brief in advance of the European Council meeting in Brussels - 29/30 March.

PUBLICATIONS

Developments in the European Communities. July-December 1981 (2.00 pm). The usual report on the UK's Presidency. No CFRs.

Public Boards 1982. (2.30 pm) CFRs 11.00 am. A list of Boards and salaries of senior members. PQ refers.

IN THE HOUSEStatement

At 3.30 pm Mr Atkins will make a Statement reporting on the EC Foreign Affairs Council in Brussels on Monday and Tuesday.

ANSWERS OF INTEREST

No 81 Written 3.30 pm. Mr John Ward to ask S/S Industry what plans he has to extend the manufacturing advisory service. (This service consults firms on management and technology. Helped 2,500 over the past 4 years. New help will widen the scope to non-engineering companies. There will be a new centre at Salford University. Also £3.7m more money.)

No 93 Written 3.30 pm. Mr Toby Jessel to ask the Chancellor when he will publish the public boards White Paper.

No 91 Written 3.30 pm. Mr Iain Mills to ask S/S Trade if he will arrange for an exhibition on home safety to be placed in the Upper Waiting Hall. (Answer will herald RoSPA exhibition to be opened by Dr Vaughan on 29 March, 3.40 pm.)

No 92 Written 4.30 pm. Mr Gerrard Neale to ask S/S Industry when he will give further details of arrangements for the second stage of the liberalisation of value added networks. (Answer will indicate that permission for beepers and answering services should now be sought from DoI and not British Telecom. This opens the field up to competition.)

CAA CHAIRMAN

An announcement could be expected soon.

EC MANDATE

We were not aware of HMG's euphoria. We regarded the latest proposal as being constructive and would be looking at it carefully. There were still some problems; we were not happy with a three year arrangement followed by a further arrangement for two years and the lack of any arrangement beyond the fifth year. In view of the special Foreign Ministers' meeting on 3 April, it was now unlikely that the Mandate would be a major dominating issue at next week's European Council. This was a fortunate outcome and would allow next week's meeting to get on with other business. Nevertheless the question of the Mandate would still be considered.

The Belgian Presidency had not announced details of the agenda but it could be expected to include economic and social matters, enlargement, the EMS, political co-operation (Poland, East-West relations, Middle East etc) and no doubt a review of the world economic scene with particular regard to the Economic Summit at Versailles.

JOHN WILKINSON'S BOOK

This was written before he was appointed PPS to John Nott. It did not reflect Government policy. We had nothing to say about it.

REAGAN VISIT

In answer to questions, we guided the Lobby to expect an announcement fairly soon on the proposal that President Reagan might address a meeting of Members of both Houses of Parliament. When the possibility of an address was leaked by the Americans, no firm decision had been taken. An address was one of a number of engagements that might be included in Reagan's programme which were floated with Reagan's Deputy Chief of Staff when he visited London on 15 February. There was always a possibility of changing the venue.

Questions to Ministers

Mr. Dick Douglas (Dunfermline): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I indicated to your office that I wished to raise a point of order on an indication in a written answer that the Ministry of Defence has given in respect of shore establishments, especially on apprentice training and artificer training.

As you will have noticed, Mr. Speaker, I had oral question No. 34 on the Order Paper today. I take the view that to make such a statement in a written answer, especially when, with great respect to the hon. Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers), a planted question is on the Order Paper, the hon. Gentleman having an oral question tabled on the same date, is a gross discourtesy to the House. Other Members who wish to protect the interests of their constituents should have been able to put questions to Ministers of the Ministry of Defence in open and public debate. This is not open government, this is subterfuge.

Mr. Speaker: I allowed the hon. Gentleman to express his point of view. He will understand that strictly he has not raised a point of order on which I can rule.

South Georgia (Incident)

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Richard Luce): I will with permission make a brief statement on developments in South Georgia, a Falkland Islands dependency.

We were informed on 20 March by the commander of the British Antarctic survey base at Grytviken on South Georgia that a party of Argentines had landed at Leith harbour nearby. The base commander informed the Argentine party that its presence was illegal as it had not obtained his prior authority for the landing. We immediately took the matter up with the Argentine authorities in Buenos Aires and the Argentine embassy in London and, following our approach, the ship and most of the personnel left on 21 March. However, the base commander has reported that a small number of men and some equipment remain. We are therefore making arrangements to ensure their early departure.

Mr. Denis Healey (Leeds, East): Is it not the case that the Argentine party planted an Argentine flag on the island? Is it not odd that the right hon. Gentleman did not refer to that element? The Minister will recall that after his talks with the Argentine representatives in New York recently the Argentine Government said that unless they obtained a satisfactory agreement they would take unilateral action. Has the right hon. Gentleman any evidence that the recent actions of these Argentine citizens was in fulfilment of that threat?

Mr. Luce: Yes, for a short period the Argentine flag was planted. It has now been removed. We are making arrangements to ensure that those who remain at Leith harbour will not do so for very much longer.

As I said when I answered questions on 3 March, the New York talks took place in a good spirit and there was a good atmosphere. The talks were not about the substance of the issue but about how we could adopt procedures to discuss the dispute in the longer term. Since then I much regret that some of the action that has been taken has not created a helpful atmosphere. In that climate I do not believe that it is sensible to discuss making further progress. If we want a peaceful solution, it is important that we should not proceed against a background of threats and provocation.

Mr. Healey: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman's last remark. However, has he any evidence that this recent action by Argentine citizens took place with the support and knowledge of the Argentine Government?

Mr. Luce: The Argentine Government claimed that they did not know of this action and that it was action taken by a commercial company. We have to note that the ship that transported the party there, although a cargo vessel, is a naval transport ship. That is something that the House will need to note.

Sir Bernard Braine (Essex, South-East): It is important for us not to over-react in such a situation, but does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important to maintain the morale of the islanders and that it is pointless to continue asserting that the islands will remain British as long as the inhabitants wish to remain there while withdrawing tangible signs of support, such as the survey vessel? Can my right hon. Friend give the House any

indication that the Government intend to give tangible support to the Falkland islanders in this time of some anxiety to them?

Mr. Luce: I know that my hon. Friend has taken a keen interest in these matters over a long period. I must tell him that the Government are committed to support and defend the islanders and their dependencies to the best of their ability. I can assure him of that.

Several Hon. Members *rose*—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I propose to call those hon. Members who have been rising in their places to ask the Minister a question.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Does the Minister realise that that is not the impression that the past actions of the Foreign Office have given? Does he think that this escapade might have been encouraged by the stance taken by the British Government over the leaseback proposals, for example? Will he make it clear that self-determination for the islanders will be the cornerstone of the Government's policy and that we shall stand by that principle?

Mr. Luce: I must make it plain once again, as I have done on several occasions, that there will be no question of any changes on the islands without the consent of the islanders. The islanders' wishes are paramount. Nor would we do anything without the consent of the House.

Mr. James Callaghan (Cardiff, South-East): Does the right hon. Gentleman recall that he was warned that as soon as the news of the withdrawal of HMS "Endurance" became known to the Argentinians this type of escapade would be likely? Is it not a gross dereliction of duty on the part of the Government to persist in this course? Will they please give an undertaking forthwith that they will ensure that HMS "Endurance" is not withdrawn?

Mr. Luce: I take this opportunity to say again to the right hon. Gentleman—it is important that I should do so—that I give the firm assurance that we are now taking measures to ensure that those remaining on the island will not stay there any longer than is necessary. We are taking firm action on that.

HMS "Endurance" is in the area and is in a position to help if necessary. As for the future security and defence of the area, I must give a firm reassurance that it is the duty of this Government and of any British Government to defend and support the islanders to the best of their ability. The deployment of a defence force and the type of force that it should be are matters for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the incidents of the past few days are tantamount to the invasion of an independent country, whether or not the personnel were sponsored by a commercial company? Will he answer directly the question posed by the right hon. Member for Cardiff, South-East (Mr. Callaghan), the previous Prime Minister, who asked—I ask the same question from the Government Benches—whether my right hon. Friend will ensure that HMS "Endurance" or another ship similar to her remains on station in that part of the world, in the South Atlantic?

Mr. Luce: I repeat again to my hon. Friend that HMS "Endurance" is in the area. It is not for me to answer questions specifically for my right hon. Friend the

Secretary of State for Defence on the deployment of forces. I must say as strongly as I conceivably can that it is our duty as a British Government to support and defend the islanders to the best of our ability.

Mr. Healey: Surely the Government put themselves in the situation in which they decided to withdraw HMS "Endurance". The only option open to them is to ask the Australian Government to allow HMS "Invincible" to spend some time around the Falkland Islands on her way to serve with Australian Royal Navy.

Mr. Luce: I do not think that there is any gain in my repeating an assurance for the fourth time. However, I assure the House that the position concerning our responsibilities to the islanders is as I have stated.

Mr. Michael Morris (Northampton, South): My hon. Friend the Member for Essex, South-East (Sir B. Braine) mentioned tangible support; what exactly is tangible support in South Georgia and the Falkland Islands?

Mr. Luce: As I have already told the House, and as my hon. Friend knows, the Government will take and are taking firm action to deal with the situation. I can assure the House of that and that HMS "Endurance" is in the area now.

Mr. Eric Ogden (Liverpool, West Derby): Is the Minister aware that we are worried not about his intentions but about those of Ministers in other Departments? Will he check the record of this afternoon's proceedings and see that his ministerial colleagues, when asked about HMS "Endurance", said that they could not give an answer as they were awaiting a statement from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office? Does he agree that they should get together? Is the Minister suggesting that a party of 50 or 60 Argentine Steptoes on a contract paid for, organised and controlled from Edinburgh and Buenos Aires can land on British territory for a commercial operation without the knowledge of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the British Government, the Falkland Islands Government, the British Embassy in Buenos Aires or the British authorities in South Georgia? Does he believe that that is preparedness? Is the Minister suggesting that the hoisting of an Argentine flag on British territory only weeks after the Government have made significant concessions to Argentina about sovereignty is of no political significance? Will he take the point made by—

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Ogden:—my right hon. Friend about—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Mr. Ogden) must not carry on speaking once he knows that I have risen to my feet.

Mr. Luce: I know that the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Mr. Ogden) takes a great interest in the islands and has recently been there. There is no question of the British Government having made any concessions—there is no such thing as a concession that the Government have made. The practical situation is that a landing by about 60 Argentines took place last Saturday. We think that there are between six and ten left and we are taking steps to deal with them.

Mr. John Stokes (Halesowen and Stourbridge): Is the Minister aware that when I was in the Foreign Office, there used to be a cruiser on hand and when one was in trouble

(Mr. John Stokes)

one called on the cruiser and on the next day it appeared? Can the Minister give an assurance, without going into detail, which one never expects the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to do, that there will be sufficient armed forces—naval, military or air—to defend the Falkland Islands and dependencies?

Mr. Luce: I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Stourbridge (Mr. Stokes) and I have that common experience. I reinforce the point that we have a duty to our islanders to support and defend them. That is precisely what we shall do.

Mr. Douglas Jay (Battersea, North): Apart from HMS "Endurance", what other defence forces do we have in the area? If the Minister cannot tell us, will he arrange with his colleague from the Ministry of Defence to tell us now?

Mr. Luce: Although the details of the deployment of forces is for my right hon. Friend the Secretary for Defence, it would not be wrong for me to state that there is a garrison of British Marines on the Falkland Islands as well as HMS "Endurance".

Mr. John Blackburn (Dudley, West): Will the Minister make a covenant with the House and the nation that the matter of the sovereignty of these islands is not an agenda item for discussion with any other power?

Mr. Luce: It would not be right for me to make a covenant with anyone, but the Government are absolutely certain that we have British sovereignty over the Falkland Islands. It is equally certain, as we all know, that Argentina also claims sovereignty over the islands. It is a dispute and it would be sensible for all the parties if the dispute were resolved sensibly and peacefully. We cannot do that against a background of threats. That is utterly unacceptable to the British Government.

Sir Frederick Burden (Gillingham): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Have any defence Ministers requested permission to make a statement on the cuts in the Navy and Navy establishments? Most hon. Members I am sure, are deeply concerned that they knew nothing about those cuts until they read of them in the newspapers. The cuts are such that I am sure that most hon. Members consider that a Minister should have been present to make a statement and to be subjected to questions on the matter.

Mr. Speaker: I have received no request for a statement.

West Midlands County Council (Abolition)

3.44 pm

Mr. John Butcher (Coventry, South-West): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to abolish the West Midlands Metropolitan County Council.

My Bill is designed not as an attack on local government but as an attempt to make local government more local, to simplify its operation, to enhance the role of the district councillor, to make local government more understandable to voters and ratepayers and to help restore the respect and affection that West Midlanders once felt for their city and borough administrations.

Since 1970 an additional 500,000 people have been recruited by local authorities, but before we criticise county and district councillors we must remember that local government has been subjected to an avalanche of legislation. In the period between the enactment of the Parish Councils and Burial Authorities (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1970 and the Highways Act 1980, more than 130 statutes were processed. Each added to or amended the existing mass of legislation affecting local government, including such items as the Breeding of Dogs Act 1973, the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976 and a statutory instrument entitled Grey Squirrels (Warfarin) Order.

The most significant statute of that period was the Local Government Act 1972, which set up a two-tier structure in large conurbations. After eight years the House is now in a position to judge the efficacy of that system. I single out the West Midlands metropolitan county for abolition, not because its performance is markedly different from that of other metropolitan counties, but because its baleful effect has been felt by my constituents in Coventry, which should never have been shackled to the West Midlands. The baleful effect has also been felt by my ex-colleagues on the Birmingham city council, who, like their counterparts in Wolverhampton, Walsall, Sandwell and Solihull, would have been quite capable of running one-tier, unitary authorities, had the opportunity continued.

Since 1974, that option has been removed. Proud cities such as Coventry and Birmingham relinquished their powers on strategic planning, public transport, major highways, refuse disposal, the fire, police and probation services and trading standards.

Today, duplication and confusion make life difficult for officers and county and district councillors alike. In highways maintenance, Coventry city council maintains 439 miles under an agency agreement, but the county council maintains 12 miles of strategic roads. There is therefore duplication of depots and highway gangs, which travel 20 miles to Coventry to carry out road works. Through one particular act of administrative lunacy, adjacent street lights are now maintained by city and county work teams.

With regard to environmental health and trading standards, the county is responsible for checking the quantity of lead in ceramic glass food containers, while the district is responsible for any breakdown of the element should it result in lead poisoning. The county has responsibility for an emergency plan to deal with an outbreak of rabies, while the district is involved in dog control and dog catching.