



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

17th May 1982

Dear Prime Minister,

You will recall that on a number of occasions last week I asked for an assurance that you would present to the House of Commons the terms for a settlement of the Falklands dispute which may emerge from the United Nations discussions in New York before the Government make any decision to embark upon a major military escalation. You have replied by referring to any government's normal right to take decisions and face the consequences in the House. I fully understand that constitutional claim. But there are some special features of the present situation which I must bring to your attention urgently, and which require, in my judgement, that you should respond to my request.

The fullest statement of the terms on which the British Government has been prepared to accept a cease-fire and progress towards a settlement was given by the Foreign Secretary in the House on 7th May. These were the so-called Peruvian terms which, had they been accepted by the Argentine Government, could, according to the Foreign Secretary, have produced a cease-fire at 5 o'clock that day.

During the debate last Thursday, the Foreign Secretary discussed the fresh approach being attempted at the United Nations. He was not able to define these terms in detail then, and nor has he been able to do so since; but the inference to be drawn from what he said was that the Argentine

Government may have been prepared to move on what the Foreign Secretary described as our two fundamental requirements; the withdrawal of the whole Argentine invasion force from the islands and the understanding that the outcome of long-term negotiations could not be prejudged in advance.

I make no complaint on the score that the Foreign Secretary could not supply more details last week; indeed some privacy and discretion in the diplomatic exchanges are to be welcomed if they can contribute to the desired peaceful outcome. But since the House of Commons had so little exact evidence at its disposal when last the matter was debated, it would be intolerable if the move were made from the diplomatic field to full-scale military operations without the House having the chance to judge for itself what was the nature of the diplomatic settlement available. Indeed, such a development would be even more intolerable if the eventual proposed peace terms were to be presented to both parties as a reasonable fulfilment of Resolution 502 by the United Nations Secretary General. We in the Labour Party have insisted from the start on United Nations involvement. We will not in any circumstances depart from that insistence. It is indispensable in Britain's own interest.

So I must make my request once again. Throughout the whole of this crisis the Labour Party has given the fullest support to the demand that Resolution 502 of the Security Council should be fulfilled. But the judgement about the way in which such a national commitment should be carried forward cannot be left to the Cabinet, less still to some inner Cabinet, and less still again to some raucous group of Conservative backbenchers. It should be made, and must be made, by the House of Commons as a whole.

The time for such deliberations could surely be made available. Such an arrangement might involve an undertaking on your part that there would be no escalation of the conflict for, say, a further 36 or 48 hours after the negotiations had come to an end. This need not be a disadvantage for the taskforce. Indeed, the Secretary of State for Defence has already made it clear that those aboard the taskforce ships are better able to stand the delay than are the Argentinians on the Falkland Islands.

Your constitutional claim that the Cabinet should take the decision in the manner you have previously described is not so plausible as you claim. On previous occasions in recent times when Britain has taken decision to embark on full-scale military operations - say, in 1939 or in 1951, in the Korean dispute - the cause of the rupture in diplomatic exchanges was clear beyond doubt or dispute. Members of the House of Commons had no wish to demand further information. This is not the case now. When the appropriate time comes, before any major military escalation, we in the Labour Party wish to debate the terms available, and I ask now for an absolute assurance that this opportunity will be afforded.

I must underline to you how strongly I hold this view. This is why I write in this formal manner. The lives of many people may be at stake, British lives, Argentine lives, the lives of the Falklanders themselves. The British House of Commons has the right and the duty to judge such matters on behalf of the nation.

Michael Foot

Am issuing the letter to the press MICHAEL FOOT.

Rt. Hon. Margaret Thatcher. MP
House of Commons.