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10 DOWNING STREET

Pine Martin

This is the Nicholas
Ridley interview about
what you were asked at
Quebec yesterday.

As you will see, it
is essentially OK.

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NICHOLAS RIDLEY - INTERVIEW ON WESTLANDS DEBATE (EXTRACT)

Transcript from: BBC Radio 4, Today, 16 January 1986

INTERVIEWER: ... Well now Mr Ridley, will the Government welcome some kind of proper enquiry conducted by a select committee?

RIDLEY: Well now let me say something first about the issue. It seemed quite surely to me we took as a Cabinet a decision that none of us would back either alternative. Mr Heseltine campaigned openly and publicly for 3 or 4 weeks for the European solution. Now he, of all people - and indeed perhaps John Smith and David Steele would see the point here, has turned round and accused somebody else of campaigning - whether he did or not, I don't know what Leon Brittan said at the meeting I wasn't there. But it is I think very well worth while pointing out - and I hope that if there is an enquiry the committee will examine this point - how it came to be that Mr Heseltine was able to feel free to lecture his colleagues about collective responsibility and how we should all say nothing about the matter at all while going round openly and publicly promoting one side in the dispute. That seems to me to be the impropriety. And I agree that it did damage the Conservative Government at the time. And I'm in a way quite glad that he now pursues his campaign from the Back Benches because it's much less damaging to the Government.

DAVID STEELE: I thought he put a very effective case yesterday and raised a lot of questions; including these new ones which John Smith's already referred to about the ambassador's telegram to Rome and cancelling interviews with the BBC. I take you have permission to appear here this morning Nicholas? It's very nice to see you.

RIDLEY: It's very nice to see you and can I just say a word about that telegram to Rome. Every week all the Embassies are circulated with a routine telegram saying what the Government's policy is on various issues. The Government's policy on this issue is that we would not back

Other side and that's all the telegram said, I've seen it. But it was Mr Heseltine who was backing the European consortium and he had every right to be rebuked by a telegram from the embassy because he was indeed breaking Government policy which was not to favour either bid.

JOHN SMITH: but that's what's gone wrong, one thing for the public and another thing in private.

RIDLEY: But surely that's very much the point. Michael Heseltine was campaigning in public. Now the only thing that would affect the outcome of the shareholders' decision would be campaigning in public. Now I don't know what Leon Brittan said at that meeting or on any other occasion. I wasn't present at any of those meetings. But let me tell you this; that if you just were an outsider, a shareholder, you got a totally neutral response from the Government and there out on a limb all by himself was Michael Heseltine screaming from the rooftops against the collective decision of the Cabinet that that neither of us would say anything So that's what needs investigating, that's what this committee - if there's going to be one - needs to look into. The gross betrayal of his loyalty to his colleagues and I think it should be most certainly investigated as to why he felt so free to do.

STEELE: That is not the impression we were left with at the end of the debate last night I must say. Surely the decision of the Cabinet was that the shareholders of Westlands should be given a choice and that therefore Michael Heseltine was charged by all means to go ahead and get together a European consortium. You call that campaigning I would call it carrying out the instructions which the Cabinet decided. And where I think there has been a failure of Cabinet government, and therefore the Prime Minister is responsible, is that having put that together the Cabinet did not then properly consider the various offers that were available and whether there should be a Government line and the whole matter was left in disarray.

RIDLEY: That's absolutely wrong you see because we couldn't effect any decision. Supposing we had chosen one or the other options. The only way to do it was to nationalise Westland and sell it back to the preferred group we wanted to buy it. Now it is implicit in Mr Heseltine's whole position that he wanted to force in some way his own solution on the shareholders. As it is the shareholders are clearly in a majority in favour of the American bid. So how on earth could we have done that?

INTERVIEWER: ... because we're all still left waiting for the answers to the questions that Mr Brittan didn't have time to answer because his speech finished. Mr Ridley, are you in a position to answer those question?

RIDLEY: I don't know which question you mean. Certainly I wouldn't answer questions other than those about which I know. I do know about the postponed Friday meeting, or the cancelled Friday meeting. But the conditions under which any such meeting were necessary were not fulfilled. The Defence Secretary then Michael Heseltine was given the chance to put a European bid together. He didn't do that and therefore there was no need to have a meeting at all. I remember standing by that week to see if there was going to be a meeting and I was relieved to find that there wasn't because I couldn't see any point in it at all. He wanted to have another in the hopes of reversing a decision which had already been taken against his wish because he was in a minority. I cannot see what's wrong with that.

INTERVIEWER: But who leaked the Mayhew letter for instance, was it somebody in Mr Brittan's department? Did Mr Britten know? These were the questions that we hope we were going to get answered.

RIDLEY: Oh I don't know. I really don't know who leaked any letter. There's leaks everyday I'm afraid. I wish I knew who did them.

INTERVIEWER: And who are we to believe about the Ligo meeting?

RIDLEY: Well I don't know what happened at the Ligo meeting nor I suspect will ever anybody ever know apart from those who were there and they are telling very different accounts of what took place. I don't see what an enquiry or a committee is going to find out about that. It's a question of what was actually said and as there's no tape recorder present it will never be known.

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DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT
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David Norgrove Esq
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copy

17 January 1986

Dear David

*DN has
seen*

JK

We spoke this morning about my Secretary of State's interview on the "Today" programme on 16 January and the line he had taken on the allegation that an E(A) meeting to discuss Westland on 13 December had been cancelled. I attach a transcript of the relevant part of the interview.

In the event, the press did not raise this issue with my Secretary of State this morning when they interviewed him on the Airports Bill. Nonetheless, he was grateful for the briefing which you provided.

I am sending a copy of the transcript to Mr Ingham who has, I understand, asked to see it.

*Yours sincerely
Jan Cunliffe*

J CUNLIFFE

Private Secretary

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EXTRACT FROM THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT'S
INTERVIEW ON THE TODAY PROGRAMME, 16 JANUARY 1986

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