

# WE DON'T HAVE THE SHIPS BUT BY JINGO . . .

The South Georgia incident seems to have developed into a Falkland Islands crisis. It may be that the incident was planned for that precise purpose by the Argentine government. If so, the British government could be said to have played into Argentina's hands. If not, the crisis is probably quite unnecessary. But it is not yet unmanageable.

The action of the Argentine salvage men, in ignoring the British authorities at Grytviken (whose permission they had been told by the British Embassy in Buenos Aires they would require for a landing on South Georgia) and then in raising the Argentine flag, could hardly be interpreted as other than a provocation. But it did not necessarily have to be interpreted as an attempt by Argentina, as a state, to seize or colonise South Georgia.

The official Argentine role was confined to the landing of some equipment for the salvage party from an Argentine naval vessel — hardly in itself an act of aggression. Only when it became known that Britain had diverted HMS Endurance to the area did the Argentine foreign minister announce that another naval vessel, the Bahia Paraiso, had

been sent there and was standing by to protect Argentine citizens.

With hindsight it can be asked whether the British government was wise to dramatise the incident by diverting the Endurance in this way, and whether it would not have been more statesmanlike simply to ignore the rather insignificant infringement of British sovereignty represented by twelve civilians and one flag on a remote and uninhabited stretch of coastline. Their presence was hardly likely to become permanent, and if they left their flag behind them a party could always have been sent from Grytviken to replace it with the Union Jack. Such a venture would perhaps provide a welcome relief from what one imagines as the somewhat monotonous way of life of the British Antarctic Survey station.

But matters have gone beyond that point now. Argentina's rulers, beset with economic and political difficulties at home, have leapt at the chance to stage an external confrontation on an issue which unites the Argentine population — at least in the sense that there seems to be only one Argentine opinion

about the rightful sovereignty of the "Malvinas", though there are, no doubt, more than one about the degree of priority the issue deserves, and indeed the proper tactics for handling it. In Britain too, and especially on the Conservative back benches, a somewhat jingoistic note is being struck. The Government cannot afford to appear to be backing down in face of a threat to British sovereignty in the Falkland Islands; and indeed it would be wrong to give Argentina the impression that any sudden *Anschluss* would go unopposed.

The Government is rightly insisting publicly on its desire for a solution through diplomacy, while strengthening its diplomatic position by giving semi-private hints that British warships, even a nuclear-powered submarine, are on their way. It is hardly likely that the navy could spare such a vessel for permanent garrison duty in the South Atlantic, while to proclaim publicly that it was being sent would be an escalation of the crisis and make it more difficult for the Argentines to back down without losing face. But it makes very good sense to give them the idea that it is somewhere around, and could be used if they overplay their hand.