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A VERY POWERFUL ROYAL NAVAL FLEET, INCLUDING THE CARRIERS INVINCIBLE AND PERSEUS, THE ASSAULT SHIP FEARLESS AND A FLEET OF DESTROYERS AND FRIGATES, ARMED WITH ANTI SURFACE AND ANTI AIR MISSILES, TOGETHER WITH AIR-CRAFT SUPPORT IS BEING SAILED EARLY NEXT WEEK. A STRONG FORCE OF ROYAL MARINE COMMANDOS AND A LARGE NUMBER OF SEA BARRIERS, ANTI SUBMARINE AND TROOP CARRYING HELICOPTERS WILL BE EMBARKED

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2 April 82

File

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A VERY POWERFUL ROYAL NAVAL FLEET FORCE, INCLUDING THE CANTONABLE INVINCIBLE AND PERMAN, THE ASSAULT SHIP Fearless AND A FLEET OF DESTROYERS AND FRIGATES, ARMED WITH ANTI SURFACE AND ANTI AIR MISSILES, TOGETHER WITH AIR-CRAFT SUPPORT TO BEING SAILED EARLY NEXT WEEK. A STRONG FORCE OF ROYAL MARINE COMMANDOS AND A LARGE NUMBER OF SEA BARRIERS, ANTI SUBMARINE AND TROOP CARRYING HELICOPTERS WILL BE EMBARKED

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John the member
to mark the passages
which lead to the difficulties.

Mr Speaker - Two main criticisms of the Government have emerged in this debate; briefly the first is that our changes to the naval programme [(including our decision on the Trident programme)] have contributed in some way, as yet unspecified, to this crisis, and secondly that the suddenness of the events which developed 14 days ago have caught us militarily unprepared.

No
M

I shall deal with each of these criticisms in turn.

The pledge of the right hon Gentleman the Member for Deptford yesterday that we could count on the support of the official Opposition appears to have been an early casualty of political opportunity (I will not call it opportunism), nonetheless the Government welcomed his cautious but shortlived support in what is undoubtedly a serious crisis for the whole country.

The guarantee of political integrity granted to the Falkland Islanders by successive Governments has been breached by a flagrant act of territorial aggression - and in the face of a determined diplomatic effort to solve the problem peacefully without any sabre rattling whatsoever on the British Government side.

Such a result to a peaceful resolution of a long-standing dispute, stretching over at least 15 years under both Governments, might have been expected to appeal to the right hon Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition who normally supports a process of negotiation, as opposed to military confrontation; and even if I may say so sometimes a process of unilateral renunciation as a means of persuasion with totalitarian regimes.

Before I do so however I would like to refer briefly to the speeches of the two right hon Gentlemen opposite.

The pledge of the right hon Gentleman the Member for Deptford yesterday that we could count on the support of the official Opposition appears to have been an early casualty of political opportunity (I will not call it opportunism); nonetheless the Government welcomed his cautious but shortlived support in what is undoubtedly a serious crisis for the whole country.

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But apparently his views, no doubt genuinely held, do not override his more primitive political instincts which are, of course, directed to causing the maximum embarrassment to a Conservative Government.

There was no foundation whatsoever.

In the confusion which was bound to exist over the several hours of the invasion I am sure the Government was right not to provide information to the public about the situation which was uncorroborated from any official source.

✓ John do you wish to
guard this section after Henderson's
speech & explanation this morning?

I cannot be so generous to the right hon Gentleman the Member for Devonport who yesterday accused the Government on radio of deliberately withholding information from the House of Commons. That was an unwarranted charge to which there was no foundation whatsoever.

In the confusion which was bound to exist over the several hours of the invasion I am sure the Government was right not to provide information to the House about the situation which was uncorroborated from any official source.

... of aircraft - and it possesses no bombing or other
port facilities of any consequence at all.

... the United Kingdom has the ability to sustain a major
naval force - and sustain it for a period of time at
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Navy's capability has been degraded by this Government is
flagrant and patently untrue.

... we have that capability as will certainly be evident
and it amounts to a formidable force which no other nation
in the world possesses outside the United States and the
Soviet Union.

You may be interested in the
aspect of combat all via Ascension
with a fleet refueling - e.g. Harriers

I would not seek to hide from Parliament the formidable problems associated with a crisis more than 8,000 miles away by sea - at the furthest distance from the United Kingdom that it is almost possible to be.

Not only is the distance up to 25 steaming days away by sea but there are no land based sources of support from which to draw supplies. Ascension is the nearest British possession in the South Atlantic to the area involved but it is also nearly 4,000 miles away from the Falkland Islands - beyond the range of aircraft - and it possesses no berthing or other port facilities of any consequence at all.

If the United Kingdom has the ability to mount a major naval task force - and sustain it for a period of time at such an enormous distance - then the charge that the Royal Navy's capability has been downgraded by this Government is flagrant and patently untrue.

We have that capability as will certainly be evident and it amounts to a formidable force which no other nation in the world possesses outside the United States and the Soviet Union.

Moreover the same capability and readiness can be equally applied to the Royal Air Force. Hercules aircraft have been active over the past 36 hours prepositioning military equipment and personnel for trans-shipment to naval vessels. Loads have included weapons, helicopters and other tactical equipment.

If it be the case to use the hon Gentleman's phrase that we have

our capability or other equally absurd hyperbole which has come from some commentators recently - how is it that from next Monday, at only a few days notice, the Royal Navy will put to sea, in wartime order, with war combat stocks and weapons, a very powerful Royal Naval task force, including the carriers INVINCIBLE and HERMES, the Assault Ship FEARLESS and a number of destroyers and frigates, armed with anti-surface and anti-air missiles, together with af-loat support. A strong force of Royal Marine Commandos and a large number of Sea Harriers, anti-submarine and troop carrying helicopters will also be embarked.

I would suggest that no other country in the world
could react so fast and splendidly. ?? (think this
may involve a noisy reaction)

If we were so unprepared as hon Gentlemen suggested
how is it too that the task force will sail next week with
civilian vessels in the group - under the command of
Officers of the Royal Naval Reserve - to supplement the
directly naval vessels which will be left free to carry
the maximum number of aircraft and other combat equipment
needed. I can tell the House that these naval forces
will sail independently and ^{2 vols} ~~render~~ under pre-arranged
orders in mid-Atlantic.

Nothing in the recent defence review will prevent
us retaining such a capability in future years. Indeed
the White Paper specifically ~~alluded~~ ^{alluded} to the need to keep
our carrier capability for out of area emergencies,
together with the associated surface forces necessary. And
in the late 1980s and 1990s that capability will be performed
by HMS ILLUSTRIOUS now on sea trials and HMS ARK ROYAL now
building. But if I can comment in referring to our future
task force capability the very size of it and the concentration
of the supporting escorts for the carrier group underlines the
quite separate problems associated with concentrating such a large
force of surface ships against the threat from the Soviet Navy; a
quite different problem from the task now facing us which could
be to make an opposed landing of amphibious forces against a
substantial land-based force.

Indeed the decision, however politically difficult, to shift the balance somewhat between our surface and submarine capabilities has been the right one for a major Atlantic conflict.

And indeed if we were to have embarked some SSNs, Hunter Killer nuclear submarines on this particular mission, and I am not prepared to confirm that we have done so - they would constitute the most single powerful threat to the Argentinians as much to the Soviets as any Navy in the world possesses.

The right hon gentleman

*Foot
don't!*

accuses us of having destroyed the balance between the conventional Navy by proposed naval strategic nuclear capability. Coming from him, this is very ripe indeed.

Excluding Trident altogether the specifically conventional naval programme will be receiving no less than £ more than when the right hon Gentleman left office - that is more than £½ billion more in real terms than in 1978/9.

Good, we're on
a banner this time

Indeed the conventional naval programme less Trident this year and next is taking a higher percentage share of the total defence budget than in 1978/79 - and even at the peak of Trident expenditure our long term costings assume that expenditure on the naval target heading will be higher in real terms than in May 1979.

Who are the Labour Party to lecture us about the Royal Navy?

My concern has been not to so concentrate our limited resources on such a great number of ship platforms and dockyard facilities that we cannot enhance the Royal Navy's weapons. It is as a result of the decision to phase out older ships and curtail support that this Government has been able to take decision to buy both the lightweight and heavyweight torpedoes - two programmes which together add up to £2 billion - and also proceed with other weapon enhancements like the Sea Wolf improvements, Sea Eagle and the new satellite communication system.

Are these
priority relevant
to the issue 5-day?

I come then to the other major criticism which I expect has been echoed on both sides of the House, namely that we should have reacted earlier with the despatch either covertly or overtly of some surface ships.

I must mention in passing for those who have remarked in the past about the deterrent value of ENDURANCE, that in spite of her valueable role in the past few weeks she has not and could not have had an ability to deter or resist the naval assault on the Falkland Islands.

Let me deal then with this point in two parts. First should we have despatched earlier than we did a naval task force and secondly should we have deployed covertly some frigates as in 1977.

With the wisdom of hindsight the despatch of a large surface task force - sufficient to deter or destroy the Argentine Navy might certainly have given pause to the Argentinians; although since the incident on South Georgia began just 14 days ago such a task force would not yet have reached the Falkland Islands waters to perform its task.

It is ~~impossible~~^{ssible} to know what psychological impact such a force might have had on Argentinian intentions but certainly in deterrence terms had it been successful it would have had to remain perhaps indefinitely in Falkland waters at huge cost and in detriment to other tasks.

But as my right hon Friend the Prime Minister said in opening this debate we were throughout seeking a peaceful solution through the United Nations and by other means and such an act would have seemed ~~incredibly~~ provocative probably precipitating the very incident we were intent to avoid.

The other option would have been the deployment of a small force insufficient to resist the Argentinian Navy as in 1977. — BUT IT DID THEN!!

May I comment first on this particular proposal that there seems to be some difference between the then Prime Minister and his Foreign Secretary on the events in 1977 - although I am bound to remind them both that tough as they sound today they did nothing to remove the Argentinians landing at South Thule unlike our action on South Georgia.

R L A Martyn
has already weakened
the comparison between

In Hansard Column 168 of the 30th March the right hon Gentleman the Member for Cardiff South East said that this force "became known . . . and a diplomatic solution followed", whereas the right hon Gentleman the Member for Devonport said yesterday on the radio that it was done "in total secrecy" but he added that it gave him confidence in his negotiations whatever that might mean.

I do not know whose memory serves him right but I find the argument somewhat puzzling. Presumably to deter the presence of this force must have been known. If so to have sent it then it would have precisely the same objections to the despatch of a larger force - without it having the ability to succeed. ~~Though I mentioned previously that~~ **If** covert, which I believe it was, it could not have deterred in any event if its presence was not known and even if it had been revealed the size of the force concerned could hardly have ^{provided} ~~prevented~~ more than the function of a trip wire against the strength of the Argentinian Navy, providing the role of forcing the Argentinians into an act of hostilities, something which could equally well be performed by the Marine detachment at Port Stanley or by ENDURANCE if on station.

*Presently the Argentinian
Navy RPA knew*

~~Finally~~
One is bound to draw the conclusion that the presence of a few unknown frigates had absolutely nothing to do with the successful resolution of the 1977 dispute. It was settled because the Argentinians did not at that time possess the resolve to permit an act of hostility against the British Government.

The right hon Gentlemen were lucky, not wise or prescient at all.

The military problems are formidable but they are not insurmountable because of the professionalism, the preparedness and the quality of our forces which remain unique in the free world.

I do not believe the claim that the new Labour Party with its known and well-advertised anti-defence bias and its commitment to hugely reduce defence spending is in a position to lecture us about our conventional defences.

Mr Speaker - I conclude by saying this. The Government does not pretend that the position is anything but grave. The resolution of the problem will undoubtedly be all the more difficult since the occupation. We must continue to find a diplomatic answer through the good wishes of our friends.

But if that fails and it will probably do so, we have no choice but to press forward with our plans, retaining secrecy where necessary and flexibility to act as circumstances then demand.

The military problems are formidable but they are not insoluble because of the professionalism, the preparedness and the quality of our defences which for their size are unique in the free world.

I do not believe the claim that the new Labour Party with its known and well-advertised anti-defence bias and its commitment to hugely reduce defence spending is in a position to lecture us about our conventional defences.

I wd. not Base
Trident on the
argument. Now
the risks so far

The cancellation of Trident costing around £100M in the current year may be £700M at the peak, would not begin to compensate for the proposed reduction in defence expenditure by the Labour Party which on our reduction to the European NATO average would reduce annual defence expenditure by £3.5 billion a year, a massive degradation of our defensive capabilities leaving entirely aside the nuclear issue.

Nor am I confident from simple observation that the right hon Gentleman the Member for Devonport is a more adroit negotiator or acknowledged statesman than my noble Friend the present Foreign Secretary.

I accept - as we must - that yesterday's events were traumatic in the extreme. The Government has no option than to respond to them with the determination and resolve and if necessary by force of arms.

It must do so if it has to without the support of the Opposition Parties but I believe that in a crisis of such proportion, in spite of genuinely held opinions of how in retrospect the events of the last two weeks might have been handled differently. We can at least now give unanimous backing to our Armed Services in the difficult task they are being asked to perform.