

Jenkins rolls a jowl at the Falklands

Still no sign of the eventual outcome in the South Atlantic: but there was some movement yesterday on the home front. It took the form of Mr Roy Jenkins.

The movement was initially confined to those rather distinguished jowls of his. They began to roll about the moment Mrs Thatcher arrived for Prime Minister's question time. While she answered other Members, the rest of Mr Jenkins began to move importantly in his seat below the gangway facing her.

He consulted some notes. He advanced to the edge of his seat with some deliberation. It was clear that he was going to put a question. This was in itself an event of a certain significance. Nothing had so far been heard from him in this crisis. Since it arose, he had all but disappeared from the public gaze.

This absence was all the more marked because in the days immediately before the Argentine action he was the subject of all our attention. He had won Hillhead. He had taken his seat. He has put a notably incomprehensible, but no doubt distinguished, maiden question to the Prime Minister about micro-chips. All things seemed possible for him. But within days Dr David Owen had seized the SDP controls and was roaring away on the subject of submarines, frigates, and vertical take-off.

Dr Owen is at home with such matters. Mr Jenkins is not. Like Switzerland, he is prosperous, comfortable, civilized and almost entirely landlocked. His only previous contact with the high seas has been in various good fish restaurants.

Instead of the vertical, he prefers the horizontal take-off: the unhurried rise to shake a few hands in a shopping precinct after an afternoon nap at a by-election.

In addition to all these disqualifications for the times in which we at present live, one suspects that he is almost certainly a Carringtonian at heart: a man of the world who believes that the Falklands are a far away country of which we now know too much. So it is an appalling situation in which he finds himself so soon after his triumphant return. None the less, being officially registered as a statesman,

he just had to put up a show sooner or later. So yesterday he rose.

There was a murmur of expectation on both sides of the House, much of it slightly ironic. They all knew that Mr Jenkins was not really the man for the hour.

"Will the Right Hon Lady, in view of the strong all-party support which the Government has rightly received during the past two-and-half weeks," he began, "bear in mind that she will be expected to take future, I hope and believe, unrushed decisions..."

At this point, as well as the statesman's emphasis on the word "unrushed", he made one of the two famous hand movements he deploys to illustrate anything. One is a turn of the wrist with half-closed palm as if he is unscrewing a light bulb. The other is a darting, fish-like movement of the whole hand. Yesterday we got the darting, fish-like movement.

"...unrushed decisions in an equally non-party way. This demands more than merely asking the Paymaster General (Mr Cecil Parkinson), who is chairman of the Conservative Party, to a meeting of senior ministers last night. Will she seriously consider the proposal made by the hon Member for Cardiff?"

Whereupon, he sat down. And that was his grand design? Apparently so. But where did he stand on the blockade, the use of air and sea power, the UN, peace, war? And who was this Member for Cardiff? Furthermore, what was his proposal?

At first it was thought to be a reference to the Member for Cardiff, South East, Mr James Callaghan. But he has made no such proposal. Later research revealed that Mr Jenkins was referring to the Liberal, Mr Howella. He is the Member for Cardigan. Near enough. Same Principality.

And his proposal? All-party consultations, apparently. That, then, was the Jenkins strategy to deal with Galtieri: tea at number ten. "I must confess, I had expected a more fundamental point from the Right hon Gentleman", Mrs Thatcher told him.

But we still do not know Mrs Thatcher's intentions. In a few days, the Jenkins All-Party Tea Force may look the less risky plan. By then it may be too late.