



MINISTER OF STATE  
FOR  
THE ARMED FORCES

As promised,  
Mr. Stanley's  
notes for tomorrow  
(2 copies).

John Jess  
(Private  
Secretary).

5.6.86.

CONDUCT OF THE PRIME MINISTER

The Hon Member for Linlithgow's motion is concerned with three issues - Westland, the use of F111's based in the UK for the attack on terrorist targets in Libya on the night of 14-15 April, and the conduct of the Falklands conflict in 1982.

Each of these three issues have already been debated at length - some would say in relation to the Belgrano at interminable length.

As far as Westland is concerned we have had my Rt Hon Friend the former S of S for Trade and Industry's Statement on 13 January, a debate on 15 January, a further statement by my Rt Hon Friend the Prime Minister on 23 January and a further debate on the 27 January.

The use of UK based F111s against terrorist targets in Libya was the subject of a statement by my Rt Hon Friend the Prime Minister on 15 April and a full day's debate on 16 April.

The recovery of the Falklands must surely now hold the record for the largest volume of parliamentary discussion in relation to the scale of the conflict of any military action in British history.

It has been the subject of a detailed inquiry by a special constituted Committee of Privy Counsellors, under the Chairmanship of Lord Franks.

Aspects of the conflict have been studied in depth by both the Defence Select Committee and the Foreign Affairs Select Committee.

During the conflict and subsequently it has been the subject of some 30 statements and debates in this House, and it has been the subject of hundreds of Parliamentary Questions.

Neither I nor any other member of the Government makes any complaint about the process of parliamentary scrutiny of the Falklands conflict. But one thing seems quite certain. However many inquiries are held; however many Select Committee reports are produced; however many parliamentary debates take place, and however many parliamentary questions are answered the Hon Member for Linlithgow will find it impossible to accept any conclusions that are at variance with his own prejudices.

[If needed]

Nothing illustrates this more clearly than the way in which the Hon Member for Linlithgow has gone on repeating his allegations that my Rt Hon Friend the Prime Minister wanted a military solution to the Falklands conflict for domestic political reasons - and ordered the sinking of the Belgrano so as to scupper the Peruvian peace initiative.

These unsubstantiated allegations have no foundation of truth or fact whatsoever.

I am not aware of a single serious and non-partisan academic, journalist or researcher who is prepared to subscribe to the view that my Rt Hon Friend the Prime Minister either went to war for political reasons or sunk the Belgrano for political reasons.

To make such very serious accusations against the Prime Minister or against any Member of the House, without being able to substantiate them is frankly disgraceful.

It is particularly disgraceful to go on repeating them when they have been shown again and again to be wholly baseless.

I now turn to the three issues that are the subject of the hon Member's Motion.

The Westland Affair

Starting with Westland, the Hon Member's motion invites my Rt Hon Friend to explain in detail her role in the Westland affair including the disclosure of the Solicitor-General's letter of 6 January to the then Secretary of State for Defence.

My Rt Hon Friend has indeed already given a full account of her role in these matters in the Statement she made to the House on 23 January and in the speech she made to the House in the Westland debate on 27 January. Both were checked for accuracy with everyone concerned.

The Westland Affair

Starting with Westland, the Hon Member's motion invites my Rt Hon Friend to explain in detail her role in the Westland affair and the decision to leak selectively a Law Officer's letter to a Minister of the Crown.

My Rt Hon Friend has indeed already given a full account of her role in the Westland controversy in the Statement she made to the House on 23 January and in the speech she made to the House in the Westland debate on 27 January. Both were checked for accuracy with everyone concerned.]

My Rt Hon Friend has made it clear that she did not give her consent to the disclosure of the Solicitor-General's letter (Jan 27 Col 656) nor was she consulted (Jan 23 Col 456).

She has made it clear that she deeply regrets the manner in which the disclosure was made (Jan 27 Col 656) and that had she been consulted, she would have said that a different way must be found of making the relevant facts known (Jan 23 Col 450).

[And my Rt Hon Friend has also made it clear that though she was told in general terms that there had been contacts between her office and the Department of Trade and Industry, she did not know about the then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry's own role in the matter of the disclosure until the inquiry had reported (Jan 27 Col 657).]

My Rt Hon Friend has already dealt in detail with her role in the Westland affair and she has nothing further to add to what she had already said.

Use of UK-Based F111s

Turning now to the use of the UK-based F111s on the night of 14-15 April, the Hon Member has asked for the evidence as to why these aircraft represented the safest means of achieving particular objectives with the lowest possible risk both of civilian casualties in Libya and of casualties among United States personnel.

Since the hon Member tabled his motion, my Rt Hon Friend the Prime Minister has answered his oral Question on this very point in the House on Tuesday of this week, June 3.

For the convenience of the House, I repeat what my Rt Hon Friend said:

"The F111 aircraft based in the United Kingdom provided the best equipped means of carrying out the United States operation against specific terrorist targets in Libya with the lowest possible risk of Libyan civilian and United States Service casualties. As the United States has indicated, the F111 possesses advanced avionics and other capabilities which made it particularly suitable for such a mission."

[If Dalyell repeats his supplementary:

"Will the Prime Minister name the senior American or Americans who told her that the F111s were more precise than the carrier-based aircraft?"

The Prime Minister's answer was (on Tuesday)

"That was the advice we received both from across the Atlantic and from home" (Col 731)]

and (on Thursday) that she had no intention of naming individuals.

The Hon Member will I hope appreciate the constraints on our detailing in public the operational performance characteristics of in-service US military aircraft.

I can however tell him that the US authorities have said that F111 aircraft have unique capabilities for conducting a high payload low-level mission at night delivering precision guided munitions, and that they attached particular importance to the F111s' Forward Looking Infra Red system combined with its relatively high attack speed.

There is nothing further that I can add to what my Rt Hon Friend has already said.

Falklands War

I now come to the Hon Member's last subject, namely his request for answers to the nine questions addressed to my Rt Hon Friend the Prime Minister as printed in the Minutes of Proceedings of the Foreign Affairs Committee of 16 January 1985 on page 57.

The Motion implies that these 9 questions have already been put to my Rt Hon Friend but have not been answered. This is not the case.

In fact, the Committee itself decided not to put eight of the nine questions to my Rt Hon Friend. Only one of the original questions was put to her, in a modified form, by my Hon Friend the Member for Stroud on 26 March 1985. The Prime Minister replied on 16 April. As I am sure the Hon Member for Linlithgow knows, this exchange can be found in Appendix 15 to the Committee's Report.

It is perhaps a reflection of the relative unimportance attached not only by the Committee as a whole but by individual Hon Members as well that none of these 9 questions has been the subject of a Parliamentary Question since this report was published nearly a year ago.

What I believe is of much greater significance than these 9 questions, and what I believe the House should focus on, are the main conclusions of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee.

It is self-evident from the Committee's report that they considered the events surrounding the 1st-2nd May 1982 in the greatest depth and were given access to the relevant papers, including some of the highest sensitivity. The Committee concluded the attack on the Belgrano was authorised for legitimate military reasons, and not out of political design.

In particular, the Committee concluded, at para 4.11, on the basis of formal evidence and other information which was available, that there is no factual evidence to cast doubt on official British claims that the Argentine fleet had orders to mount a co-ordinated attack on the Task Force and that it would have been unreasonable to have reached any conclusion other than that the "Belgrano" formed part of that co-ordinated attack.

[We welcome the Committee's statement] that it is satisfied that the public explanations given to the Committee on the nature of the threat, which the "Belgrano" and her escorts were perceived to have posed, accurately conform with the assessments then available (paragraph 4.28); and that there is no evidence now that a withdrawal would have been intended to achieve anything other than a short-term tactical advantage (paragraph 4.29(iii)).

And we entirely agree with the Committee's remarks (at paragraph 4.29(iv)) that the paramount obligation of the War Cabinet was to protect the Task Force and that, in the light of the information available, it would have been a dereliction of duty for it to have taken any course of action other than to authorise a change in the Rules of Engagement to permit an attack on the "Belgrano".

The issues surrounding the sinking of the Belgrano were fully debated on 18 February 1985. At the end of that debate, the House overwhelmingly endorsed by a vote of 351 to nil the motion that the sinking of the General Belgrano was a necessary and legitimate action in the Falklands campaign; and agrees that the protection of our Armed Forces must be the prime consideration in deterring how far matters involving national security and the conduct of military operations can be disclosed.

Nothing that has been said today warrants altering the view the House took by a decisive majority on 18 February last year, and nothing whatever that has been said today justifies the disgraceful scurrilous and wholly unjustified way that the Hon Member for Linlithgow has tried to impugn the motives and the conduct of my Rt Hon Friend the Prime Minister without whose resolve, leadership and moral courage the Falkland Islands would never have been recovered.