

Pinochet plays host to a grateful friend

IAN JONES

Old pals' act is welcome change of routine for ex-dictator, report
Alan Hamilton and Joanna Bale

THE setting had the look of the day-room in a superior old folks' home in the Home Counties: comfortably if blandly furnished and not a personal knick-knack to be seen.

General Augusto Pinochet hovered inside the door of his Wentworth residence, hardly daring to look to the outside world into which he is restrained from venturing beyond about three feet.

He is a big, ponderous man who leans on a stick but is otherwise surprisingly upright for 83.

A black Jaguar crunched up the drive and a vision in green emerged. Baroness Thatcher, elaborately coiffed as ever, stepped out, looking petite beside the Chilean bulk. They shook hands briefly and rather formally, although in the days of the Falklands conflict they were said to be on August and Margaret terms.

Lady Thatcher shook hands with the general's wife, Lucia. General Pinochet took his guest's arm and guided her into the sitting-room, where he and his wife sat together, an interpreter by their side. Lady Thatcher sat opposite, also with an aide. For two old buddies who once ganged up against Argentina's General Galtieri, they were being decidedly formal.

"It is an honour for me for you to be here in this very simple house," the general said through his interpreter. "It is a small house but it is full of love and gratitude to you." The baroness beamed.

"I'm glad you're comfortable here," Lady Thatcher replied. "I know how much we owe to you for your help during the Falklands campaign." She listed the help Chile had given.

Then the Thatcher gratitude gearbox moved into overdrive. "We are very much aware that it is you who brought democracy to Chile. You set up a constitution suitable for democracy. You put it into effect. Elections were held, and in accordance



Mutual support society: Baroness Thatcher at home with General Pinochet and his wife

with the result you stepped down. So we have two reasons to thank you."

It had been a brief photo-opportunity of the kind staged when heads of state exchange ornate platitudes carved by folk artists in the mountain regions of their respective countries. Between General Pinochet and Lady Thatcher, however, the exchanges seemed more sincere. They have the shared experience of democracy finishing their career.

Lady Thatcher, of course, was removed by a less democratic process: while the general heard the braying of the multitude, the baroness heard the burr of dagger blades on Tory grinding wheels.

Her visit yesterday was a happy diversion for the general. His usual routine is to rise

early, breakfast lightly, read the British and French newspapers and then surf the Internet for news of Chile.

On her return from Wentworth, Lady Thatcher stood on the steps of her offices in Belgravia and defended her old friend once again. Her cheeks flushed with excitement, she addressed the assembled journalists in her familiar imperious manner. "We should be grateful for the tremendous help he gave the British Forces at the time of the Falklands war. Without his help we would have suffered a lot more casualties."

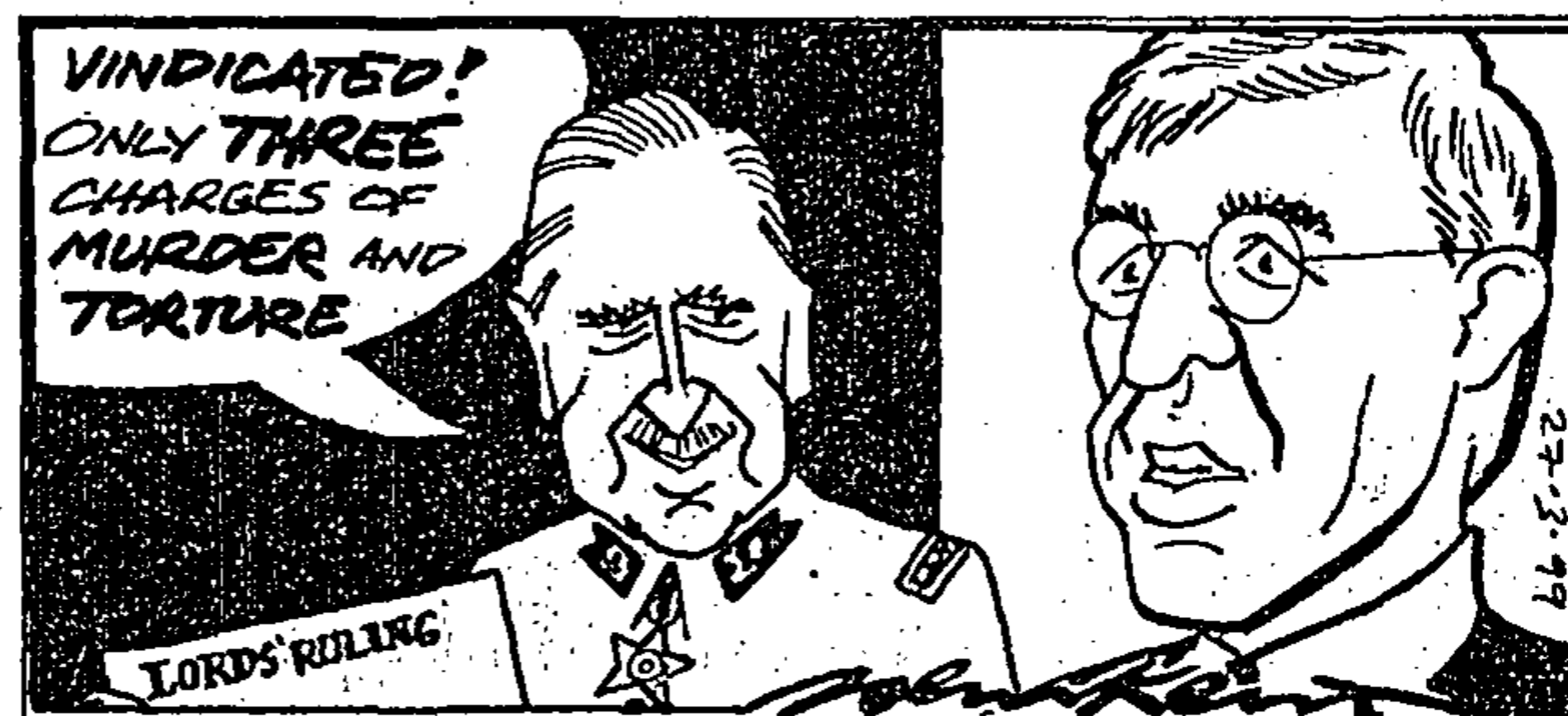
As the crowd of journalists was swelled by bemused passers-by, she went on: "General Pinochet has restored democracy in Chile and that is very important. He set up a new

constitution. He did all the organisation, and held a democratic election. He stood as a candidate. He was not elected so he stepped down, all in keeping with democracy."

She said that in the law lords' decision on the former dictator's extradition, being sought by Spain, "the overwhelming majority of cases are inadmissible in our courts. If there's any resulting jurisdiction it should be by the people of Chile in the courts of Chile."

Ignoring journalists' questions, she turned on her heel and disappeared inside. She seemed to have forgotten her husband, Sir Denis, who appeared a few minutes later and had to rap loudly on the door to be allowed in.

□ Judge Baltasar Garzón, the Spanish judge seeking the extradition of General Pinochet, said yesterday that he had proof of more than 40 cases of torture and assassination against the former dictator since 1988. The law lords ruled on Wednesday that the general was not answerable to human rights abuses before 1988, the year a UN convention on torture became part of British law.



Hamilton, Alan. "Pinochet plays host to a grateful friend." Times, 27 Mar. 1999, p. 11. The Times Digital Archive, link.gale.com%2Fapps%2Fdoc%2FIF0501297206%2FTTDA%3Fu%3Dnlibscot%26sid%3Dbookmark-TTDA. Accessed 5 Aug. 2025.