

From: George Foulkes, M.P.

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HOUSE OF COMMONS  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

13th December 1984

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Rt. Hon. Margaret Thatcher MP,  
Prime Minister,  
10 Downing St,  
London SW1

Dear Prime Minister,

I am writing to you in connection with the degree of political control exercised by your Government during the Falklands conflict. Recent statements by the Secretary of State and by former members of the War Cabinet have cast serious doubt on your claim on 4th May 1982, and much repeated, that "the task force is and was under full political control." In the present nuclear age, the dangers of an absence of control are obvious.

Could I ask for your reaction to three specific points.

1) It is clear from a parliamentary answer to me on 11th December, that the course and position of the Belgrano was regularly reported to Northwood. It is possible for you to claim in hindsight that these reports from Conqueror were irrelevant, but for political control to be exercised, the War Cabinet must have known about them at the time. Yet <sup>from the PA</sup> "there is no evidence that these reports... were made known to Ministers at the time". How can something be irrelevant if you do not know what it is? Why were these reports not passed on by Northwood?

Do you not accept that as a result, the War Cabinet was taking decisions crucial to the war on the basis of information which was 24 hours out of date? Is this "the" short and clear chain of command (which) made possible quick reaction to events", mentioned in your White Paper in December 1982?

2) The 'Mandarins' committee under the chairmanship of Robert Armstrong was clearly an essential part of the mechanism of political control. It enabled the relevant Ministers to be briefed in advance of any decision they would be asked to take. Yet the Mandarins committee did not meet on the afternoon of 1st May, nor on the morning of 2nd May. And so, without any prior briefing, the War Cabinet came to a decision within 20 minutes (to enable the Belgrano to be sunk).

In your letter to me of 8th October you stated that "the changes that were made in

the Rules of Engagement took full account of diplomatic, military and legal considerations! Is this really believable in 20 minutes without prior briefing?

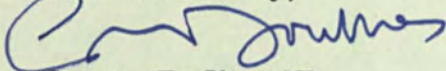
3) There seems to be some confusion as to whether all changes in the Rules of Engagement were approved by the War Cabinet. Sir John Nott stated that all alterations were submitted to the War Cabinet, but Mr Heseltine in his evidence to the Select Committee stated that "there might have been changes authorised by the Secretary of State which did not get referred to the War Cabinet". Could you please elaborate on who is right?

Much has been made of the 20 month gap before you were informed of the Belgrano's change of course. The points I have raised in this letter are different. They suggest an absence of political control during the conflict, an absence which has disturbing consequences for the conduct of present defence policy.

Were any changes made in the Governmental and military mechanisms for crisis management as a result of the Falklands experience, or do you still believe that "in every important respect the Government and military machines worked extremely well during the crisis."

I look forward to an early reply.

Yours Sincerely,



George Foulkes MP