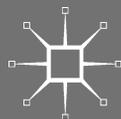




DOMENICO MARIA BRUNI

The
BRITISH
POLITICAL
PARTIES *and the*
FALKLANDS
WAR



The British Political Parties and the Falklands War

Domenico Maria Bruni

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Falklands War

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Introduction

A new book on the Falklands War? Yes and no! In this volume I focus on the crisis, and the Anglo-Argentine conflict during the spring of 1982, but I do not devote my primary attention to these matters. In the following pages, readers will not find a chronological account nor a systematic analysis of the diplomatic and military events which took place between 2 April and 14 June 1982. An ample literature now exists on these aspects of the Falklands War, including the definitive *Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, by Sir Lawrence Freedman. Instead, what has been hitherto lacking is an attempt to make a precise reconstruction of how the four principal parliamentary parties confronted and responded to the unfolding events. On these points, commentary has mainly been limited to references to the divisions within the government and the Conservative Party, without, for example, sharpening the focus on the variety of positions taken by backbenchers. The same pattern applies to the Labour Party: scholars have been almost exclusively devoted to recording the difficulties of Michael Foot in maintaining party unity, without providing pertinent details. Essentially absent in the reconstruction of those weeks have been the Liberal Party and the Social Democratic Party (SDP), with the individual exception of David Owen. I aim to fill this gap.

Chapter “[The Falklands Issue Before the War](#)” puts into historical perspective the Falklands problem, from the British standpoint, with particular reference to the parliamentary dimension. The three following chapters are dedicated respectively to the Conservative Party, the Labour

Party and the SDP–Liberal Alliance. These chapters pursue a chronological narrative thread, the approach best suited for holding together the evolution of the diplomatic and military picture with the internal political one. The final chapter sums up the material presented.

What is the point of this project of historical reconstruction? Beyond the fact that it gives the chance to focus on relevant aspects of the political and institutional life such as the balance between the legislature and the executive, or the byzantinisms of the parties internal dynamics, the Falklands War was perhaps the single international political event that had the most impact on internal British politics of the 1980s. This fact holds true despite the marginal presence of the Falklands War in public debate, both before and after spring 1982. What has imparted this eventual centrality to the 1982 War was its occurrence among a precise set of contingencies.

The first four years of the 1980s witnessed a highly particular situation in the history of British political parties. This period was a brief interval during which conditions for a new, major realignment in British politics seemed to have reached maturity. The 1970s had revealed a clear shift in the behaviour of the British electorate, with respect to the 1945–1970 period. In fact, there was a dilution of the marked polarisation that had shaped the preceding 25 years as a substantially two-party system. This development gave new electoral space to the Liberal Party, with the potential of being widened further. At the same time, this diminution of electoral polarisation was accompanied by an ideological polarisation of the two principal parties. This phenomenon opened up space at the centre of the political system. In essence, voters who no longer felt themselves tied to the old logic of fidelity to the two major parties now could be attracted by a new political proposal, capable of credibly occupying the space made free by the sliding of the Conservatives to the right and of Labour to the left. Finally, the 1970s had witnessed the maturation of a crisis of the modalities which had formed the basis for managing socio-economic conflicts in the post-World War II period. This fact brought not only the emergence of debates regarding the necessity, or non-necessity, of rethinking the relationship between state and society. It also nurtured the idea that political mediation was no longer the best way to manage such conflicts. Thus a crisis also emerged regarding a paradigm of political leadership, considered more and more as being obsolete.

Other more contingent factors, related to the individual parties, added themselves to these medium-range structural ones.

The Conservatives achieved electoral success in 1979, after 15 difficult years, during which they had lost four general elections out of five, and had been in power for only four years. This was in notable contrast

to the preceding 40 years. From the fall of Lloyd George's ministry in 1922, to 1964, the Tories were in power for a total of 28 years, 33 if one counts the coalition government during World War II. During this same span of time the Conservatives had won seven out of eleven elections, and in one of the other ones, that of 1923, they turned out to be the first party even though they fell short of an overall majority in the House of Commons. Thus for the Conservatives the 1964–1979 period was dominated by a double necessity. On the one hand, they needed to make a major party policy review: in the most concise terms, this became articulated as 'the conflict between progressives in the one-nation mould who believed that Conservatives should remain situated in the centre ground and those on the right who wanted to pursue a more free market strategy'.¹ The second, obvious necessity was to choose a winning leader. The equilibrium reached with Ted Heath soon showed its ephemerality from both points of view. The Selsdon agenda² did not pass the test of the government, and the aura of novelty that had surrounded its drafting made its abandonment in 1972 all the more sensational. Heath's U-turn of 1972 attained the status of a true negative myth, at least for a sector of the Conservative Party, which identified it as the primary reason for the double electoral defeat of 1974. This was the first time since 1945 that British voters had not conferred a second mandate on the incumbent administration. For a large number of Conservative MPs it was clear that Ted Heath had become a problem more than an asset for the Party. Moreover, he had shown himself to be a leader and a Prime Minister who paid little attention to relations with his own backbenchers. In February 1975, during the first ballot of the leadership election, Margaret Thatcher received votes from those who wished to move the Party to the right, from those who saw Heath as an electoral liability, and from those who felt personal hostility towards him. The deciding factor in favour of Mrs Thatcher was the fact that none of the main figures of the Shadow Cabinet wanted to throw their hat into the ring at the first ballot because of loyalty to Heath. The change of leadership did not, however, repair the ideological fractures within the Conservative Party. On the contrary,

¹T. Heppell, *The Tories: From Winston Churchill to David Cameron*, London, Bloomsbury, 2014, p. 39.

²In a meeting held at the Selsdon Park Hotel in 1970, the principal outlines for a modernisation of the Conservative Party programme were drafted; these would be brought together more definitely in the electoral manifesto of 1970.

these became all the more acute after the elections of 1979, when Mrs Thatcher was able to put her own ideas into practice. In addition, the leadership election of 1975 left a trail of heavy personal acrimonies in its wake. Far from putting a brave or polite face on the situation, Heath took the occasion to show all of his resentment and lack of esteem for his successor: this allowed Margaret Thatcher to exclude him from both the Shadow Cabinet and the Government, which in turn increased Heath's own hostility. Despite his defeat, Heath could not be considered to be out of the political arena, and his return to the backbenches permitted him a certain freedom of manoeuvre, as a troublemaker, during the years to come. Many senior MPs and grandees of the Party remained 'conspicuously uncommitted' to Margaret Thatcher.³ They held her to be inadequate to the position of Prime Minister, and for some of them she was almost an extraneous figure with respect to the Party, and in any case a danger who needed to be removed as soon as possible. On the other hand, such antipathy allowed Mrs Thatcher to continue enjoying the support of anti-establishment impulses among Conservative backbenchers, a fact which had played an important role in the leadership contest of 1975. The first years in office made her position all the more difficult. Economic policies aimed at reducing public expenditure and combatting inflation, without concern for unemployment levels, soon fuelled a constant loss of popularity. The year 1981 was when conflicts within the Conservative camp reached their height, leaving the Prime Minister under attack from several sides. The March budget and the plan for public spending cuts, debated from July through to October, not only widened the gap between Tory wets and dries, but it brought out differences even within the monetarist front of the Cabinet itself. Riots which exploded between April and July in many UK cities exposed Mrs Thatcher to attack from those who believed that the maintenance of social cohesion was one of the objectives of Conservatism. The defence review presented in the summer of 1981, with cuts to the Royal Navy, exposed her to attacks from the right wing of the Parliamentary Conservative Party (PCP). In short, after two and a half years of government, Margaret Thatcher's leadership could hardly have been defined as firm and secure. The two reshuffles of 1981 improved her position within

³J. Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher*, vol. 1, *The Grocer's Daughter*, London, Jonathan Cape, 2000, p. 317.

the Cabinet, but did not resolve the entirety of her problems. Tensions within the PCP did not explode into open rebellion, but dissatisfaction was palpable, and there was talk of MPs ready to switch to the ranks of the SDP. At the end of November 1981, 25 MPs warned the Chief Whip, Michael Jopling, that they would have voted against the Government if it were to present new economic measures in line with the former ones. Jopling himself defined the situation as ‘very serious’.⁴ Certainly, the first months of 1982 started showing a slightly reversed trend, both in terms of economic indicators and of the popularity of the Government. But was this trend destined to last?

Conflict was no less rife among Labour. Sitting on the opposition benches spared them the burden of handling a complicated economic situation, but it also deprived them of the restraints that the application of power usually places on violent explosions of internal disputes. In keeping with the fine tradition of the European Left, factionalism was also a constant trait of the British Labour Party, and proportionately higher than that traditionally found among Conservatives. Everything revolved around the question of how to remove, or at least reduce, the inequalities created by the capitalist system, and specifically the role entrusted to the state, and with what precise means. If the 1950s and 1960s had seen the affirmation of a revisionist approach, aimed at taking from Keynesianism the suitable instruments for going beyond the idea that only public ownership could resolve the distortions of the capitalist system, the 1970s brought back into prominence, within the Party, words like ‘nationalisation’ and ‘planning’. The discussion also brought with it a number of differences regarding another question at the heart of the British political debate at that time, and a particularly sensitive one for the Labour Party: that of the necessity, or non-necessity, of modifying the legislative framework for industrial relations. At least partially connected to divisions over economic policies were disputes concerning the adhesion of Great Britain to the European Common Market. Another divisive theme was defence, specifically the future of the British nuclear deterrent. To sum up, by the middle of the 1970s there was not a single major political issue about which Labour were not profoundly divided. Proceeding from the

⁴See C. Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorized Biography*, vol. 1, *Not for Turning*, London, Penguin, 2014, p. 651.

ideological-programmatic level to that of power dynamics within the Party, the scenario favoured a new protagonist's role for the leftwingers. They were able to benefit from a radicalisation of the Party rank and file that permitted them to gain more and more clout, both in the Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) and in the National Executive Committee (NEC). At the same time, there existed a counter-trend toward a greater moderation of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) in overall terms. For this reason, a crucial aspect of the conflict among the various Labour factions of the 1970s, and the first years of the 1980s, concerned the theme of party governance. The mandatory reselection for Labour MPs, the entrusting of the writing of the party manifesto only to the NEC, and the change of rules for the election of the party leader—which removed this procedure from the exclusive control of the PLP and instead entrusted it to the rank and file too—were the three goals pursued by the Left. The strategic objective was to reconfigure the weight of the Right and of the Centre through a reduction of the autonomy of the PLP, thus favouring a shift of power from the establishment to the membership. In this milieu, the contest within the Labour Party was somewhat similar to that being played out in the Conservative camp. In both cases, the confrontation between differing ideological and programmatic positions assumed the features of an anti-establishment conflict. For the Conservatives, however, the challenge launched by the Right was played out essentially within the Parliamentary Party, while Labour's left wing sought to enact a clear opposition between party structure and the Parliamentary Party. When in March 1976 Harold Wilson, who for better or worse had managed to keep all these tensions within some constraints, resigned from the position of Prime Minister and leader of the Labour Party, the knots and tangles became all too evident. It was only after the departure from Downing Street of Wilson's successor, Jim Callaghan, that the struggle erupted violently. Callaghan had been elected leader with the votes of the Center and the Right of the PLP. In 1976, to address the crisis of the pound sterling, his government was constrained to request a conspicuously large loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The compensatory move was the stiffening of Labour's deflationary economic policy, and of cuts to public spending, already partially adopted by Wilson's government in 1975. At the centre of all these developments was the obvious presence of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the right-winger (in Labour terms) Denis Healey, who had

Callaghan's steady support. After the electoral defeat of 1979, the Left could easily argue that the cause was the abandonment of the traditional Labour political platform. From this point of view, the Winter of Discontent was the logical litmus test of this interpretation. To keep the choice of a new leader from happening in the poisonous post-election climate, thus favouring the Left, Callaghan did not resign right away, and remained in charge for a few more months. The result was the opposite of the one desired. Sensibilities became all the more exacerbated, and the Left succeeded in imposing the adoption both of salient policies (nationalisation, exit from the European Community, unilateralism) and of two of their proposals for the modification of the procedures of party governance. In fact, the Annual Conference of September–October 1980 approved the mandatory reselections of MPs, and a new method for electing the leader. The definition of the latter, however, was postponed until an ad hoc conference was held at Wembley the following January. To enable the election of his successor to occur before the implementation of the new rules, and to increase the possibility of Healey's victory, Callaghan resigned in November. Once again, his calculations were shown to be erroneous. The left-wing Michael Foot was elected leader. Healey had to content himself with the deputy leadership. The new leadership structure disappointed both the right and left wings of the party. Using the occasion of the Wembley conference, Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Shirley Williams and William Rodgers launched the formation of a new Social Democratic Party. In the course of 1981, 20 other Labour MPs and one Conservative would join them. Tony Benn assumed the role of principal internal opponent, continuing to exploit deftly the contrasting positions of the NEC and PLP. In fact, if Foot shared the policies of Labour's left, he differed from them in regard to themes of party governance, beginning with the principle of the absolute independence of the PLP. Foot's election, in short, did not deny Benn the possibility of casting himself as the champion of the battle against the Party's parliamentary establishment. The key moment of the conflict occurred between March and September 1981, with the electoral campaign for the deputy leadership, opposing Benn against Healey. These were 'six months of civil war'⁵ within the Labour Party, which concluded with the reconfirmation of Healey, by

⁵A. Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2001, p. 194.

a handful of votes. Benn did in fact obtain 49.6% of the vote, derived mainly from the constituencies and union delegates. In contrast, the vast majority of the PLP voted for Healey. The deputy leadership contest of 1981 marked a crucial passage: it crystallised the dichotomy between the PLP and party membership, and ordained Benn as the anti-establishment leader. The episode represented the high point of the challenge to Party leadership launched by the left wing, though this 'was not evident at the time'.⁶ It left a heavy burden of personal bitterness and profound diffidence, destined to poison the internal life of the Labour Party through to the electoral defeat of 1983.

One of the major consequences of the internal struggles of the Labour Party was the birth of the SDP. The Wembley conference of January 1981 was the occasion, but it certainly was not the cause. The hypothesis of a realignment of British politics had been debated for some time, ever since the change in electoral behaviour that emerged during the 1970s and the accompanying radicalisation of the principal parties. In addition, a unity of viewpoints was lacking among the members of the Gang of Four on the specific theme of the election of the party leader. For example, Jenkins remained favourable to the more traditional system, by which the party leader had to be elected by the MPs he was destined to lead. Owen instead had become a supporter of the 'one member, one vote' system. Beyond these differences, however, the point was that the January 1981 conference provided 'the clearest signal yet of the way in which the party was moving'⁷ and of the strong improbability of a short-medium term reversal of trends. On 25 January 1981, the day after the Wembley Conference, the Gang of Four issued the so-called Limehouse Declaration, with which it laid the base for the Council for Social Democracy. It called MPs and members of civil society to rally around a political platform centred on reconciling social equality and a market economy, on the redefinition of the role and powers of the trade unions, on the rejection of unilateralism, and on strong Europeanism. The official launch of the new SDP happened on 26 March. The Gang of Four had already been joined by 11 other

⁶M. Pugh, *Speak for Britain! A New History of the Labour Party*, London, Vintage, 2011, p. 365.

⁷I. Crewe and A. King, *SDP: The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 76.

Labour MPs, and one Conservative MP. Beyond the definition of the programme, the organisation of the Party, and the recruiting of membership, the crucial question for the new party was that of inserting itself into a political system conditioned by the first-past-the-post voting procedure. Breaking the mould of British politics was an objective that could be pursued only through collaboration with other political forces. It was clear that the path of the Social Democrats crossed with that of the Liberals.

After particularly difficult years between the end of the war and the late 1960s, the 1970s marked a revival of the Liberal Party. In the two elections of 1974 the Liberals gained 19.3 and 18.3% of the votes, a tally that decreased to 13.8% in the 1979 election. The excellent electoral performance, however, was matched by only a handful of parliamentary seats: 14, 13 and 11, respectively. The 1970s thus gave Liberals the confirmation, on the one hand, of an electoral space which allowed them to return as a major third party, and on the other hand, of the necessity of finding a suitable strategy for transforming this consensus into an effective political force. This was the objective toward which David Steel worked after his election as leader of the Liberal Party in 1976. The Lib-Lab Pact of 1977 was a first, largely unfruitful attempt. In this context, the movements within the Labour Party between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s were followed with great attention by Steel. A split among Labour, and a realignment of the Left, would have given the Liberals an important opportunity. As much as he could, Steel sought to favour the birth of the new SDP. In fact a week after the Limehouse Declaration, he called for a Liberal and Social Democratic Alliance. In February 1981, the two parliamentary groups set up a joint consultative committee to coordinate their actions in the House of Commons. In June the two parties formally expressed their intention to formalize an Alliance.

The birth of the Alliance was accompanied by great enthusiasm and belief in its possibilities, despite the resistance of one part of the liberal base, the doubts of some MPs of both parties, and some evident programmatic differences among its components. To these concerns were added a pair of especially thorny practical questions. One: how could a fair allocation of parliamentary seats between the two parties at the time of general elections be realised? Two: who would be the leader, and thus the aspiring Prime Minister, of the Alliance? The solution of the first problem brought with it the creation of a joint committee,

with the task of subdividing, in equitable fashion, all the constituencies of England, Scotland and Wales between the two parties, on the basis of the probability of actually winning them. Negotiations were complex and sometimes bitter, and they were drawn out between August 1981 and September 1982. The identification of the leader of the Alliance also provoked rivalry among the allies. For the majority of the Liberals, the leader had to be Steel. For the Social Democrats, the choice would have to be the leader of the SDP; but in 1981 the leader of the SDP had yet to be elected. For his part, Steel did not hide his preference for Jenkins, considering him the credible choice, for his having held major governmental positions in the past. In 1981, however, Jenkins—besides his not being the leader of his party—was not even an MP. In short, the problem remained, and its solution was postponed until after the leadership election of the SDP, scheduled for July 1982. In any case, and notwithstanding all these problems, during the months following the launch of the Alliance a certain optimism prevailed, favoured by the polls and several electoral successes. In the first by-election contested by the Alliance, on 16 July 1981 at Warrington, Jenkins obtained an excellent second place. In the three following ones, in Croydon North West (22 October 1981), Crosby (26 November 1981) and Glasgow Hillhead (25 March 1982), the Alliance candidates emerged victorious. The standing of the parties in Gallup polls confirmed this winning trend. In March 1981 the Liberals and Social Democrats started making substantial gains and the polls showed them in second place behind Labour. In early October ‘the real breakthrough came’: the Alliance ‘moved into first place in the polls, staying there either on their own or tied with Labour (once) for the whole of the next six months’.⁸ According to Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, party support in the mean of the national poll of polls for the first quarter of 1982 showed 34.8% for the Alliance, 31.9% for Labour and 30.9% for the Conservatives.⁹ In other words, at the outbreak of the Falklands crisis the Alliance was still the first party, even though with a smaller margin than the previous quarter. To all this can be added the fact of continuing defections from the Labour Party: another 13 MPs switched to the SDP during the autumn of 1981. At the outbreak of the Falklands crisis, the Social Democratic Parliamentary Group counted

⁸Ibid., p. 133.

⁹Ibid., p. 522.

29 MPs. Nor were rumours lacking about possible defections from the Conservative Party in the wake of bitter disputes that, as has been noted, had occurred earlier that same year.

To sum up, then, the political situation in spring 1982 seemed to be particularly fluid and capable of sparking further, more profound changes. The Falklands War took place in such a context. It is not definitively certain that without the War these changes would have occurred. What does seem undeniable is that the War conclusively put to rest the hypothesis that such change was a realistic possibility.



The Falklands Issue Before the War

I THE ORIGINS OF THE FALKLANDS CRISIS

From the United Kingdom's perspective, the crisis surrounding the Falkland Islands intertwines itself with the wider process of the break-up of its empire following World War II. In many cases, the disengagement of Great Britain from its colonies was arranged by transfers of power to the local elite at the end of a negotiation process.¹ In other words, the point was to satisfy the request for independence from representative sectors of the native population in the least expensive way for the United Kingdom, from both a military and economic point of view. Whilst this was the general pattern for the British retreat from empire, the Falklands issue differs in three main aspects.

First of all, the Falkland Islands are a colony in the etymological sense of the term as they have never been inhabited by a truly indigenous population. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, human presence on the islands consisted exclusively of civil and military personnel and a few dozen settlers originating from the three European powers that claimed them: France, Spain and Great Britain. Between the 1770s and the early 1810s, however, all three countries abandoned their respective settlements on this group of islands that went back to being

¹D. McIntyre, *British Decolonization 1946–1997: When, Why and How Did the British Empire Fall?* Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1998, p. 103.

res nullius for more than a decade.² When, in 1816, Argentina claimed independence from Madrid, Buenos Aires also claimed sovereignty of the Falklands. In 1820 it formally took possession of the islands and appointed a governor while, at the same time, occupying them with a hundred or so settlers. Their presence, though, only lasted for about a decade. The Argentine authorities implemented an ‘exclusive economic zone’ around the archipelago with the scope, amongst others, of banning the indiscriminate whaling activities of the USA. After having failed to revoke this exclusion order through diplomatic means, Washington decided to use a heavy handed approach. In December 1830 a US Navy team sailed to the islands, ‘landed, destroyed all military installations, razed the buildings, seized the sealskins, put most inhabitants under arrest and then left, declaring the Islands free of all governments’.³ This all paved the way for the return of the British. In 1833 the UK definitively re-established its rule over the Falklands. It was then that the long-term populating of the islands began, with an influx of settlers from Great Britain. According to the 1980 census, 95% of the 1813 Falklanders were British. The remaining 5% consisted of 30 Argentinians, 27 Chileans and 24 Americans.⁴ This peculiarity explains the second departure from the general pattern of British decolonization: the Falklanders had never had any intention of becoming ‘decolonized’. On the contrary, they had repeatedly expressed their allegiance to the Crown and their will to remain under British rule. This was a major problem for both Labour and Conservative Governments, since the British decolonization process had gathered momentum and was self-represented as a positive answer to calls for independence; that is, on the basis of recognising the right to self-determination.⁵ This second factor gained even more relevance when associated with the third of the aforementioned differences. In the case of the Falklands, it had never been a question of granting independence to the islands themselves but rather that of conceding their sovereignty to another nation.

²D. Borsani, *La special relationship anglo-americana e la guerra delle Falkland*, Firenze, Le Lettere, 2015, p. 65.

³L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. I, *The Origins of the Falklands War*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2007, p. 7.

⁴Ibid., p. 2.

⁵Cf. P. Brendon, *Decline and Fall of the British Empire: 1781–1997*, London, Cape, 2007.

Argentina, in fact, never ceased to claim its rights to the islands, and starting from the 1840s it has continuously been sending its official protests to London. Since the mid-1920s, Argentina even started to claim its rights to the South Orkney Islands as well as to South Georgia. These were British territories that had never been occupied or claimed by Spain before its ousting from South America; the United Kingdom had united with the Falkland Islands as being part of their Dependencies. It was basically on the foundation of this administrative form of unification that Argentina was vindicating its right of control, subsequently adding the South Sandwich Islands to their claims. Following World War II, Buenos Aires tried to gain consensus for its demands by putting forward the issue of the Falklands every year at the United Nations General Assembly. The two governments did, however, start to negotiate a possible concession of the islands only when the UK recognised the need to withdraw from an outpost that, by then, was considered as being too uneconomical to maintain within the more general view of its withdrawal from what had been its empire. The real turning point came in 1965. It was in December of this year that the United Nations General Assembly approved Resolution No. 2065, which called for the United Kingdom and Argentina to negotiate bilaterally the sovereignty of the Falklands.⁶

If this was the beginning of a new phase, it did not, however, erase the basic problem that prevented the two countries from reaching an agreement. The stalemate was of a conceptual nature. According to Argentina, the geographical proximity of this archipelago meant that it was 'Argentinian' and that it had, therefore, been illegally occupied by the United Kingdom during the formation of its empire. And now that decolonization had effectively begun, even the Falklands were to be considered as being a part of this process. This specifically meant that the islands had to be returned to their rightful owner. It was, however, the premise of the principles of decolonization that provided the strongest case against the reasoning behind Argentina's claims. The Declaration on the Granting of the Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples approved by the UN General Assembly in 1960 stated the right to self-determination for local populations. This was the principle to which

⁶L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. I, *The Origins of the Falklands War*, pp. 12–25; M. Gonzalez, *The Genesis of the Falklands (Malvinas) Conflict. Argentina, Britain and the Failed Negotiations of the 1960s*, edited by N. Ashton, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

the United Kingdom officially abided by during the dismantlement of its empire. However, when this principle was applied to the specific case of the Falklands, it placed the various British governments in a contradictory position, between having to reconcile the strategic need to withdraw from the islands and the islanders' right to self-determination. If, on the one hand, the aim of the United Kingdom was that of freeing itself from a territory that, in terms of defence and economic growth, called for investing resources that were considered as being excessive in relation to its negligible strategic importance, on the other hand the right to self-determination, in actual fact, granted full powers of veto to the islanders. They were, in fact, continuously consulted by London on the various settlement options that were being discussed by the UK and Argentina between 1966 and the early months of 1982. Starting from the 1960s, the principle stating that the wishes of the islanders were to be considered as being paramount was applied, and this became a decisive element in the case in hand.⁷ The power of the Falklanders to influence the Anglo-Argentinian negotiations was further increased by the way they were able to recruit a cross-section of Members of Parliament that was sufficient in numbers to make life difficult for any government that tried to approve projects that were considered as being unacceptable.⁸

This all went to defining a script that was destined to repeat itself every time London and Buenos Aires sat down at the negotiating table. The Argentinians said that negotiations had to be quick and that they should end with the transfer of the sovereignty. As a matter of fact, successive British governments were always inclined to do that, though they constantly found themselves having to convince the Falklanders. London, therefore, had to set a slower negotiating pace and to delay more or less the transition phase. The end result was a range of arduous and sometimes complicated proposals. The Falklanders continuously opposed the cession of sovereignty over the islands to Argentina, claiming their right to self-determination. They agreed to negotiate with Argentina with the sole scope of improving communications and supplies from the mainland. Their tactics for blocking the Government in London pivoted to the appeal to British Parliament and public opinion. The Falkland Islands

⁷G.M. Dillon, *The Falklands, Politics and War*, London, Macmillan, 1989, Ch. III.

⁸C. Ellerby, 'The Role of the Falkland Lobby 1968–1990', *International Perspectives on the Falklands Conflict. A Matter of Life and Death*, edited by A. Danchev, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1992, pp. 85–108.

Lobby was constantly able to raise the support of a sufficient number of MPs to make negotiations difficult for any government. As a result, no government had the courage to put its majority to the test on this issue. This was not, however, because the question of the Falklands was of primary importance but was, on the contrary, because they were afraid to come undone on a matter of secondary importance. In some ways, the marginal importance of the Falklands ensured that the issue continued unresolved. This led to start and stop negotiations that irritated the Argentinians and made them impatient due to the fact that they considered the Falklands question as being of primary political importance.

The first round of negotiations was held between 1966 and 1968.⁹ After initial resistance in accepting the needs of the British for a gradual approach in order to break down the opposition of the islanders, the Argentinians accepted the idea of strengthening their ties with the islands and of concentrating on the matter of sovereignty at a later date. The Falklanders reacted by sending an open letter to the British Parliament. In this letter, there was a phrase that was destined to be echoed over the following years as well as during the 1982 crisis: that of an imminent ‘sell-out’ of the islands by the Government and, in particular, by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). The result was the formation of the all-party Falkland Islands Committee. The then Foreign Secretary, Michael Stewart, was forced to declare that no decision would be taken against the wishes of the Falklanders. Lord Chalfont, Minister of State at the FCO, was sent to the South Atlantic to convince the islanders to change their minds, but he had very limited success. In December of 1968, while not ruling out future negotiations, Stewart said to the House of Commons that the wishes of the Falklanders were paramount and that, in the name of the Government, they would not be pressured into changing their minds.¹⁰

Following this first attempt, there was a second phase between 1969 and 1972 in which the functionalist approach became key in the dialogue between London and Buenos Aires. The notion was that of increasing

⁹For the Anglo-Argentine negotiations between 1966 and 1982 refer to L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. I, *The Origins of the Falklands War*, which reconstructs the events in abundant detail. For the negotiations in the 1960s see also M. Gonzalez, *The Genesis of the Falklands (Malvinas) Conflict*.

¹⁰House of Commons, *Official Report*, 11 December 1968, vol. 775, cc. 424–434 and 12 December 1968, cc. 608–614.

functional connections between the islands and Argentina, especially concerning communications, without calling into question the sovereignty issue for the time being. Argentina's new political context was then to transform the terms of the confrontation once again. In 1973, with Juan Perón returning to power, there was a decisive nationalistic turn on the Falklands/Malvinas question. The sovereignty of the islands was once again at the centre of attention and of the claims laid down by Buenos Aires.¹¹ In the new round of negotiations that began in October 1973, the Argentinians clearly raised the matter while, at the same time, offering a range of guarantees in order to assure the Falklanders about their future once the transfer of sovereignty had taken place. 'These were full exercise of civil rights; regime of optional citizenship; exemption from military service; use of English language; respect for private property, purchase at fair price of property from islanders wishing to dispose of it; regime of respect for acquired rights; favourable tax system; maintenance of sea and air communications.'¹² It was, once again, the resistance of the islanders that led to the failure of this latest plan. This resulted in a hardening in the line taken by Argentina and in their return to the UN in December of that same year. The General Assembly invited both parties to come to an agreement, while taking time out to praise the Argentinians for their efforts in trying to resolve this dispute. It was also this stance now being taken by the United Nations that forced Ted Heath to try a different approach. In the first few weeks of 1974, the idea of an Anglo-Argentine condominium increasingly gained momentum in the Conservative Government. 'It would have involved the two flags flying together and English and Spanish serving as two official languages. The islanders would have dual nationality and retain as much as possible of their present system, although there might have to be alternating Governors.'¹³ This new status would only be applied to the Falklands and not to its dependencies. This idea, however, left one important question unanswered. Was this going to be an interim arrangement? And if so, how long would it last? Before defining

¹¹P. Calvert, 'The Malvinas as a Factor in Argentine Politics', *International Perspectives on the Falklands Conflict*, p. 50.

¹²L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. I, *The Origins of the Falklands War*, p. 30.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 31.

the details of this new proposal, it was decided to see whether the Falklanders were willing to discuss it seriously.

Although the general elections of 1974 led to a temporary halt of the negotiations, the end of Heath's premiership initially appeared not to condemn this idea of a condominium to failure. Jim Callaghan, the then Foreign Secretary of the Labour Government led by Harold Wilson, decided to keep the project alive. After all, even the Argentinians were open to discussion as long as it was considered a temporary solution and one of transition towards a definitive transfer of sovereignty. Negotiations, however, ended very quickly. The opposition of the Falklanders, who were very well represented in the House of Commons by the Falkland Island Committee MPs, forced Callaghan to suspend the entire project as early as the summer of 1974.¹⁴ A few months later, the Secretary of State at the FCO, David Ennals, became the advocate of a new initiative that was based on two principles. On the one hand, there should have been an "educational campaign" with ministers working on parliamentary opinion while the governor explained realities of the situation to the islanders'.¹⁵ On the other hand, Ennals started to work on a new solution for an agreement with the Argentinians, hinged on a so-called 'lease-back formula'. The idea was that of conceding sovereignty to Buenos Aires while maintaining the existing British administration. Ennals's motives were driven both by the hard line being taken Argentina—that had clearly led everyone to believe that, should no agreement be found, they were prepared to invade the Falklands¹⁶—and his belief that it would have been impossible to defend the islands from a sudden attack. The idea of a lease-back, however, did not have much luck during this initial phase: Callaghan thought that it was an unconvincing idea and Wilson shelved it totally. The Prime Minister preferred going back to the strategy used by the previous government: that of reaching an agreement on sovereignty by means of a functional cooperation which, in this case, meant the joint exploitation of the islands' resources, starting with the oil reserves that supposedly surrounded the islands.¹⁷

¹⁴A. Donaghy, *The British Government and the Falkland Islands, 1974–79*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 21–42.

¹⁵L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. I, *The Origins of the Falklands War*, p. 37.

¹⁶J. Callaghan, *Time and Chance*, London, Collins, 1987, p. 372.

¹⁷A. Donaghy, *The British Government and the Falkland Islands, 1974–79*, pp. 57–70.

It was this aspiration that led to Lord Shackleton's mission. He was delegated to visit the Falklands and to draw up a detailed report on the economic situation and prospects. The idea was that of emphasising the potential of the islands while at the same time asserting 'that economic development could only take place smoothly through cooperation with Argentina'.¹⁸ Unluckily, the British made two careless mistakes: they badly managed Argentina's request for letting their representatives join Lord Shackleton's mission, and they did not realise that the date of his arrival in the Falklands, 3 January 1976, coincided with the 143rd anniversary of the British declaration of sovereignty over the islands. Already irritated by the attempts of the British to delay negotiations regarding sovereignty and wary about the true motivations behind Lord Shackleton's mission, Argentinians considered it as a provocation to which they retaliated by withdrawing their ambassador from London while inviting the British to recall theirs from Buenos Aires.¹⁹ The report drawn up by Lord Shackleton at the end of his mission did nothing to help the situation. His report did, indeed, provide the Falklanders and their supporters back in the UK with something to claim that a decisive and continuous policy of support regarding the development of the islands by their motherland would have led to more than significant results. This obviously left the British Government wide open to criticism by the pro-Falklanders lobby and was seen by the Argentinians as a sign of the UK's desire 'to develop a "stand-alone" option'.²⁰

This all coincided with the start of a phase of political instability in Argentina, triggered by the death of Juan Perón in July 1974 and which resulted in the subsequent establishment of a military junta. In this new context, the 'reunification of the Malvinas to their motherland' gained increased importance for strengthening the new regime. And it was by no coincidence that from mid-1974, as already mentioned, the Argentinians were already warning that the use of arms would be inevitable if no agreement with the British was found. And pressure of this

¹⁸With these words, Callaghan presented the economic and fiscal survey of the Falklands to the Argentine Foreign Minister during their meeting of 25 September 1975. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 79–90.

²⁰L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. I, *The Origins of the Falklands War*, p. 53.

kind was destined to increase. During Lord Shackleton's mission, the Argentine Air force continuously flew over the islands.²¹ In the first few days of February 1976, an Argentine Navy ship fired warning shots at RRS *Shackleton* which had refused to be boarded and inspected. This incident occurred 87 miles from the coast of East Falkland and was a clear sign that Buenos Aires was demonstrating that the waters around the archipelago were Argentinian.²² Then, in September 1976, the Argentinians illegally landed on Southern Thule, where they built a small military base. The British authorities only found out about this a few weeks later but avoided making it public, as this would have inevitably led to the failure of any possible agreement concerning the Falklands.²³

A settlement with Argentina was, in fact, a primary objective for the United Kingdom and the former's impatience was making this increasingly more important. While London had already been aware of the fact that the Falklands were indefensible, the recent pressure applied by Argentina had made the British accept the inescapable truth: that there was no hope of reaching a lasting agreement in the South Atlantic without dealing with the question of sovereignty. The abandonment of the purely functional approach was also favoured when Callaghan took over from Wilson as Prime Minister in early April 1976. Anthony Crosland was appointed as Foreign Secretary who was then succeeded by David Owen in February 1977. Ted Rowlands became Minister of State at the FCO and was delegated to deal with the Falklands. With regards to the objectives that had to be pursued, these ranged from conceding sovereignty of the (unpopulated) Dependencies in exchange for Buenos Aires surrendering their claims to the Falklands, to the idea of a lease-back formula.²⁴ The most important factor, however, was the sudden change in tactics. It was decided that the fundamental opposition to negotiations over sovereignty shown by the Falklanders had to be

²¹Ibid., p. 46.

²²A. Donaghy, *The British Government and the Falkland Islands, 1974–79*, pp. 92–93.

²³The fact became public on 7 May 1978 when *The Observer* printed the article 'Argentinians Take Over British Island' (ibid., p. 191). This provoked an angry reaction by the Lobby (ibid., p. 192). On 10 May Argentina claimed that the South Sandwich Islands had been taken (ibid., p. 193). This obviously jeopardized the trust between the Falklanders and the Government.

²⁴L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. I, *The Origins of the Falklands War*, p. 65.

overcome before returning to talks with Argentina. Rowlands was sent on a mission to the islands from 16 February to 21 February 1977. All in all he achieved positive results. This was helped by the fact that his mission had been preceded by a shrewd statement issued by Crosland to the House of Commons. In this statement, the Foreign Secretary made a commitment to meet some of the less onerous proposals contained in Lord Shackleton's report, aimed at helping the growth of the islands while, at the same time, restarting Anglo-Argentine cooperation in the South Atlantic.²⁵ Thus, the tactics being used by the British Government took a turn towards trying to bring the Falklanders to reason by linking measures aimed at the islands' development to the necessity of talking to Argentina about the question of sovereignty. There was, however, a marked contradiction: success was reliant on Argentina showing patience and on a willingness to hold parallel talks regarding sovereignty and economic cooperation, while accepting the length of time that this option would have called for. The fact that both conditions were hard to accept soon became clear in the autumn of 1977 when the Argentinians showed frustration at how slow the talks were proceeding and started to send out particularly bellicose signals. The British Government sent a small naval task force to the islands as a precautionary measure and as a deterrent.²⁶ The desire of the Argentines to speed up negotiations was counteracted by the resistance of the Falklanders. The more the Argentines became impatient, the more the islanders, efficiently supported by the Falklands Lobby back in London, applied the brakes. After all, the constant violation of human rights that was being committed by the military junta in Argentina became a powerful weapon against trying to go against the will of the Falklanders.²⁷ The outcome was that between 1977 and the 1979 UK general election, the Anglo-Argentinian negotiations took place on a rather regular basis but with little in the way of practical results.

The underlying problem was still that of the substantial difficulty, if not complete inability, to reconcile the Argentine point of view with that of the British. The former had always considered the negotiations as a means of establishing the time frame and method of ceding the UK's sovereignty over the islands. For the latter negotiations were a way of

²⁵See the statement by Crosland in House of Commons, *Official Report*, 2 February 1977, vol. 925, cc. 550–552.

²⁶A. Donaghy, *The British Government and the Falkland Islands, 1974–79*, pp. 160–172.

²⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 148–153.

finding a compromise between their own needs, the Argentinian claims over the islands and the wishes of the Falklanders. This resulted in a divergence between what was considered politically sustainable and what was an acceptable time frame.

2 THE THATCHER GOVERNMENT AND THE FALKLANDS QUESTION

This problem was subsequently inherited by Margaret Thatcher's government. Lord Carrington and Nicholas Ridley, respectively Foreign Secretary and Minister of State at the FCO with responsibilities for the Falklands, quickly realised that the course was that of the lease-back.²⁸ The proposal put forward by the FCO was met with perplexity by quite a few members of the Government. 'The general reaction [recalls Lord Carrington] was that this would, ultimately, mean selling the Falkland Islanders down the river'.²⁹ The main objections were voiced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and by the Secretaries of State for Energy, for Industry and for Trade.³⁰ Even the Prime Minister 'disliked this proposal'.³¹ It was decided, however, to initiate negotiations with Buenos Aires, but only after having settled the even more delicate problem of Rhodesia. The first meeting between Ridley and his Argentinian counterpart was only held in April 1980 in New York. The initial approach was the same as before: that of trying to increase the bond between the islands and Argentina, in order to make an eventual transfer of sovereignty seem more appealing to the Falklanders. With this in mind, the participation of the islanders from the very first meetings was seen as the best way of helping to establish a climate of cooperation. It only took Ridley a few weeks, however, to realise that the Falklanders had absolutely no intention of allowing Argentina to have a greater involvement in the economic and social life of the archipelago. This led to a substantial change in strategy compared to the one used since 1966. The FCO became increasingly convinced that linking the theme of sovereignty to that of greater

²⁸P. Carrington, *Reflect on Things Past: The Memoirs of Lord Carrington*, London, Collins, 1988, pp. 353–355.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 355.

³⁰L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. I, *The Origins of the Falklands War*, p. 104.

³¹M. Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, London, HarperCollins, 1993, p. 175.

economic integration between Argentina and the islands would be useless, if not counterproductive. In order to reach a positive outcome, the heart of the question had to be dealt with directly. To prevent negotiations from coming to a halt or being deflected by pressure from various sources, confidential negotiations with Argentina had to be held. Then, only after having reached a general agreement with Buenos Aires, would the UK try to bring the Falklanders on board. Hence, between September and November 1980, bilateral talks were held. On the whole, the Argentinians found acceptable the British lease-back proposal. The main point of disagreement concerned its timing. London proposed a time frame of 99 years while Buenos Aires replied with a counter-proposal of 20 years. While this divergence was significant, it was not considered as being important enough to derail the agreement that had been reached regarding the form of transition to be imposed. Therefore, on 22 November, Ridley travelled to the Falklands where he outlined the lease-back formula but without revealing any details. The reaction of the islanders was substantially negative even though their official stance would only have been relayed to London during the first few days of January.³²

The event that most affected the future of the lease-back project occurred in London. News of it became public following Ridley's mission. The reaction of the House of Commons was quick in coming. On 27 November, Peter Shore asked the Government to clarify its position on the 'conflicting and unsettling reports about statements made by' Ridley.³³ On 2 December, the FCO Minister outlined the government's intentions regarding the lease-back plan to the Commons in a concise and general manner. The response from the House could not have been worse: seldom could a minister 'have had such a drubbing from all sides of the house'.³⁴ In fact, Ridley 'was savaged'³⁵ by the intervention of 17 MPs: eight Conservatives, one Liberal, one SNP and seven Labour. Some of these MPs would have had an important role in the parliamentary debates on the Falklands between April and May 1982. These were

³²L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. I, *The Origins of the Falklands War*, pp. 105–127.

³³House of Commons, *Official Report*, 27 November 1980, vol. 994, cc. 572.

³⁴H. Noyes, 'Commons Is United by Suspicion of Ridley's Intentions, on the Falklands', *The Times*, 3 December 1980.

³⁵L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. I, *The Origins of the Falklands War*, p. 129.

the Labour MPs Peter Shore and Douglas Jay, the Conservatives Bernard Braine and Julian Amery, and the Liberal MP Russell Johnston. During the sitting on 2 December, the main concepts and key statements that summed up the leitmotif of the opposition to conceding the islands were repeated and which would also have been widely used during the crisis of 1982. Shore defined Ridley's words as 'a worrying statement'; he directly attacked the idea of abandoning 'people of British descent' to the mercy of the Argentines; he reiterated that the British sovereignty over the islands was indisputable and that the wishes of the Falklanders had to be 'of paramount importance' and 'not just "guidance" to the British Government', as Ridley had affirmed. Instead of discussing a lease-back, the Government had to 'make it clear that we shall uphold the rights of the islanders to continue to make a genuinely free choice about their future, that we shall not abandon them and that, in spite of all the logistical difficulties, we shall continue to support and sustain them'. All of the MPs that took part in the discussions spoke within the conceptual boundaries laid down by Shore: the principle of sovereignty; the Britishness of the Falklanders; their right to self-determination. The Conservative Julian Amery and the Liberal Russell Johnston attacked the FCO's ingrained desire to get rid of the Falklands and its people. The Labour MP Douglas Jay criticised the FCO in a less direct manner. Ridley's position became even more untenable when the Conservative MP William Shelton asked the Government whether it would have agreed to maintain the status quo in the South Atlantic should this have been the desire of the islanders. The question was repeated later by Shore. On both occasions, Ridley clumsily avoided answering by stating that he could not give an answer to 'a hypothetical question'.³⁶ On the evening of 2 December, a meeting of the Conservative Party Foreign Affairs Committee confirmed that the mood of most Tory backbenchers was in line with what had emerged in the House: just under a third of the speeches, in fact, supported the line being taken by Ridley.³⁷ Carrington tried to defend the approach being taken by the FCO to the Defence Committee and to the Cabinet meetings over the next few days.³⁸ The shield raising in the Commons, nevertheless, marked the

³⁶House of Commons, *Official Report*, 2 December 1980, vol. 995, cc. 128–134.

³⁷L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. I, *The Origins of the Falklands War*, pp. 129–130.

³⁸G. Boyce, *The Falklands War*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 20–21.

beginning of the end of the lease-back idea. Emboldened by the session held on 2 December, the Falklanders submitted their official request asking for talks on conceding sovereignty to be put on hold on 7 January. Complying with the desires of the House of Commons aimed at safeguarding the wishes of the islanders, Ridley forwarded the request to the Argentinians, who naturally considered it as being unacceptable.³⁹ The FCO tried to keep the idea of a lease-back arrangement alive for a few months, but during 1981 the general situation worsened even more. In June, Ted Rowlands led Ridley to believe that the Labour Party would not have supported a Commons vote on lease-back 'because of the general unpopularity of dealing with a right-wing Junta'.⁴⁰ From that summer, there were several changes within the junta in Buenos Aires which made the continuation of negotiations even more complicated. A new junta was installed in December led by General Galtieri who, as a way of maintaining power, reaffirmed the country's intransigent stance and impatience.⁴¹

In the meantime, the elections for the renewal of the Falklanders' Executive Council, held in October, met with the success of those most hostile to the lease-back proposal.⁴² In such a situation, the only option for the Government would have been that of launching an intense educational campaign aimed at both the islands and the Parliament. This, however, would have created excessive political exposure on a matter that, at the end of the day, was considered as being secondary compared to other more pressing issues that existed at the time. The outcome was the substantial inertia of the British, which made the Argentinians even more impatient. Between the end of 1981 and the beginning of 1982, the junta took on a peremptory and menacing stance. At the end of January 1982, the Argentine Foreign Minister, Nicanor Costa Mendez, relayed his government's requests to Carrington: the formation of a permanent negotiating commission with monthly meetings, for defining the transfer of the islands within no more than one year. At the end of February, Ridley's successor at the FCO, Richard Luce, stated that the

³⁹ *The Falkland Islands Review: Report of a Committee of Privy Counsellors*, § 83.

⁴⁰ L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. I, *The Origins of the Falklands War*, p. 136.

⁴¹ P. Calvert, 'The Malvinas as a Factor in Argentine Politics', pp. 52–53.

⁴² L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. I, *The Origins of the Falklands War*, pp. 140–142.

United Kingdom accepted the idea of a permanent commission while it considered the one-year time frame as being unrealistic. He also reiterated that approval by the Falklanders was needed before proceeding with the transfer of sovereignty of the islands. Unsatisfied with this reply, on 2 March, Costa Mendez issued a statement in which he affirmed that the objective of the Anglo-Argentinian negotiations was that of the transfer of sovereignty of the Falklands in the shortest possible time. The statement concluded with a clear threat of unilateral action should London fail to accept what had been proposed by Argentina.⁴³ The junta was not prepared to allow any more time wasting. From that moment onwards, the military option had become a realistic possibility, even if the time frame for such action was still unclear. In some ways, the events that took place in March had a bearing on this.

Their notion that the United Kingdom would not have retaliated in a particularly aggressive way to an invasion of the Falklands influenced Argentina's way of thinking. A couple of decisions taken by the Thatcher Government had, in actual fact, given the idea that London was, by now, clearly distancing itself from the archipelago in the South Atlantic.

The first decision was that of the Nationality Bill which became law in 1981. This act allowed for full British citizenship for the inhabitants of the overseas territories, as long as they were born in Great Britain or that they were sons, daughters or grandchildren of people born in Great Britain, while it allowed all others to gain nothing more than British Dependent Territories citizenship or British Overseas citizenship. Of the 1800 inhabitants of the Falklands, 1200 were deprived of their full citizenship. On top of meeting clear hostility from the Falklanders and their supporters back in the UK, the new law questioned London's desire to defend the islands on the basis of the rights of sovereignty and of the Britishness of their inhabitants.

The second act carried out by the Thatcher Government was of far more importance. This was centred on the tangible presence of the Royal Navy in the waters around the Falklands. The FCO had always insisted on one principle: until a solution to the dispute had been found, the Argentinians should not be led to believe that Great Britain was prepared to relinquish protection of the islanders. It was for this reason that the FCO had always lent great importance to the deployment

⁴³Ibid., pp. 156–158.

of HMS *Endurance* to the South Atlantic. More than an actual deterrent, it was more of a symbolic presence given the ship's limited weaponry. However, it did demonstrate Great Britain's involvement in the area. Ever since the Defence Review undertaken midway through the 1970s by Wilson's Labour Government, scrapping this ship had been taken into consideration as the Ministry of Defence (MoD) thought that there was very little point in meeting the costs required to maintain it. The FCO was against this idea claiming that such a move would have been interpreted by the Argentinians as a sign of the British abandoning the area, and throughout the duration of both the Wilson and Callaghan Governments, the FCO had always been successful in imposing its wish.⁴⁴ Even though the Conservatives had returned to power claiming their commitment for a strong (and expensive) defence policy, along with the Margaret Thatcher premiership came a convergence between the policy of reducing public expenditure, expressly desired by the Prime Minister, and the strategic outlook of the MoD which saw Europe as the main, if not only, area in which it would be involved. A new recession in the spring of 1980 led to defence spending being one of the main cuts imposed by the Treasury. These cuts were implemented through the reorganisation of the armed forces. The strategic assumption was the conviction that the main threat to the United Kingdom came from the USSR and that any eventual conflict would have taken place in Europe and that it would have been of only brief duration. With this in mind, maintaining and modernising a nuclear deterrent became vitally important, while the Royal Navy's surface fleet ended up as the sacrificial victim. If the first part of the project met with consensus within the Government and the Conservative Party, the second part was strongly opposed as it would have meant reducing in size what was considered an institution in which the consolidated positions of power were further strengthened by the emotional inheritance of a glorious past. It was, in fact, only after the replacement of the wet Tory Francis Pym by the Thatcherite John Nott at the head of the MoD, that the operation could be concluded in June 1981. Margaret Thatcher's staunch and active support was crucial.⁴⁵ HMS *Endurance* was one of the ships destined

⁴⁴On this point cf. J. Callaghan, *Time and Chance*; and D. Owen, *Time to Declare*, London, Penguin, 1992.

⁴⁵See A. Dorman, *Defence Under Thatcher*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002, pp. 32–114; idem, 'John Nott and the Royal Navy: The 1981 Defence Review Revisited', *Contemporary British History*, 15(2) (2001), pp. 98–120.

to be decommissioned or sold towards the end of 1982. ‘The decision was greeted in the Argentine media as evidence that Britain was “abandoning the protection of the Falkland Islands.”’⁴⁶ As in the past, this alarmed the FCO. Lord Carrington repeatedly asked Nott to reconsider the question while constantly coming up against his refusal to do so.⁴⁷ The difference now, compared to the past, was that the Prime Minister vigorously supported the Defence Secretary and not the Foreign one. Faced with choosing between the warnings being given by the FCO and defence cost cutting, Margaret Thatcher went for the latter, supporting this decision while replying to the criticisms being put forward by James Callaghan in the House of Commons.⁴⁸

It was in this context that at the beginning of March 1982 pressure from the Argentinians began to grow. In actual fact, their nervousness was swiftly noted by London, just as from the second half of 1981 the FCO had judged that the chances of an attack against the Falklands and its Dependencies were on the increase. On 3 March, following the previously mentioned communiqué issued by the Argentine foreign minister, Margaret Thatcher decided that a contingency plan would have to be drawn up. The threat was considered to be real while not imminent. And this reflected the actual state of affairs. Even the Argentines, in early March, had not yet come up with a rapid intervention plan, and it was only towards the end of the month that it was decided to invade the Falklands.⁴⁹ This led the British Government to believe that there was sufficient time available to elaborate the best possible plan and put it into action. This, in actual fact, assisted the emergence of opinions that were opposed to sending a naval task force with the scope of prevention and deterrence. In order to dissuade Argentina from invading, the number of men and means that would have to be deployed was too high and too costly; such a deployment of strength would have worsened the crisis because it would have been interpreted as a provocation; and furthermore, it would have negatively affected Britain’s operational capabilities in other, more critical areas. As a consequence, these factors when added

⁴⁶G. Boyce, *The Falklands War*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 27.

⁴⁷P. Carrington, *Reflect on Things Past*, pp. 359–360; and J. Nott, *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow: Recollection of an Errant Politician*, London, Politico’s, 2002, pp. 254–255.

⁴⁸House of Commons, *Official Report*, 9 February 1982, vol. 17, cc. 856–857.

⁴⁹L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. I, *The Origins of the Falklands War*, p. 168.

together led to a substantial standstill. As a consequence, on 19 March, when a small group of Argentinians landed on South Georgia, the British were taken by surprise. Officially the group was made up of scrap-metal merchants and Buenos Aires could therefore claim to be in the dark about the landing. Nevertheless, the Argentine flag was raised on British territory while a small number of Argentines remained on the island, even after the Argentine Government had pledged to evacuate them.

This news triggered a violent reaction in the House of Commons. On 9 March, relating to the meetings held in New York at the end of February and to the communiqué issued by the Argentine government on 2 March, Richard Luce assured everyone that the Government was fully aware of its duties to the Falklanders. On 23 March he was easily pinned down following his statements, just as the Government came under easy attack following its decision to decommission HMS *Endurance*.

The situation deteriorated quickly over the next few days. While the British Government was pressing Buenos Aires to abandon South Georgia and, at the same time, trying not to worsen the crisis, the junta made the decisive move and on the 26th decided to proceed with the invasion of the Falklands. Seen from an Argentinian point of view, the Commons sitting on 23 March showed that the British Parliament would have always been opposed to giving up the islands. Argentina needed to act quickly as the United Kingdom would have been able to take advantage of the events of 19 March for strengthening its presence in the South Atlantic. Notwithstanding the warning signals that were increasing with intensity, London perceived the threat as being low. On 29 March, the Treasury denied Carrington's request to draw from the Treasury Contingency Fund for preparing the necessary measures needed to deal with an eventual worsening of the situation. At the time of his request, nevertheless, the scenario envisaged by the FCO was that of a blockade of all links and supplies with the Argentine mainland.⁵⁰ Between the 29th and the 30th, the decision was taken to despatch the HMS *Spartan* to the South Atlantic while a second submarine and two vessels were prepared for setting sail.⁵¹ The British Government was still convinced, though, that the focus of any further military action would be limited to South Georgia, with the aim of forcing London to negotiate

⁵⁰P. Carrington, *Reflect on Things Past*, p. 365.

⁵¹J. Nott, *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow*, pp. 252–253.

the transfer of sovereignty of the Falklands.⁵² In actual fact, the statement made by Richard Luce to the Commons on the afternoon of the 30th, and the debate that followed, were concentrated on the situation on South Georgia,⁵³ while the Foreign Secretary considered the possibility of a major attack on British territories as being so remote that he flew to Israel on an official visit.⁵⁴ It was only on the 31st that London realised what was happening. During an emergency meeting held that evening, the crucial decision was taken to assemble a task force that would be able to recapture the Falklands in the event of an Argentine invasion. The option was put forward with conviction by the First Sea Lord, Henry Leach, while everyone else present, including John Nott, cast their doubts about their chances of recapturing the islands.⁵⁵ There were indeed problems of a logistical nature concerning the geographical distance and the imminent arrival of the southern hemisphere winter. The task force would have additionally had to operate with inadequate air cover. Other uncertainties were related to the stance that would be taken by the USA and to the opposition of worldwide public opinion. In other words, the United Kingdom would have risked international isolation in a repeat of the humiliation incurred in the Suez crisis.⁵⁶

Margaret Thatcher associated herself with Leach's optimism, realising that only a decisive and rapid reaction would have given her government any chance of survival. The Prime Minister authorised preparations for forming the task force.⁵⁷ In a further meeting held on the evening of 1 April, Thatcher, Nott and Carrington agreed on the need to despatch the task force to the South Atlantic. The following evening, the full Cabinet authorised its deployment. The British Government also increased diplomatic pressure on Argentina, principally through the

⁵²L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. I, *The Origins of the Falklands War*, p. 204; and G. Boyce, *The Falklands War*, pp. 33–34.

⁵³House of Commons, *Official Report*, 30 March 1982, vol. 21, cc. 163–170.

⁵⁴P. Carrington, *Reflect on Things Past*, p. 367.

⁵⁵The most recent account of the meeting is by C. Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorized Biography*, vol. 1, *Not for Turning*, London, Penguin, 2014, pp. 665–667.

⁵⁶As John Nott recalls, 'Whitelaw ... and I, in the early stages' of the crisis, 'thought "Suez, Suez, Suez" in many of our waking hours'. J. Nott, *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow*, p. 247.

⁵⁷J. Nott, *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow*, pp. 257–259; and M. Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, p. 179.

USA, but with no result.⁵⁸ On 1 April, the UK representative at the UN requested an emergency session of the Security Council, thus applying pressure from another direction that would have provided some positive results a couple of days later.⁵⁹ In the early hours of 2 April, the Falklands were invaded by Argentina, which also occupied South Georgia the following day. On 3 April the Security Council approved Resolution 502, which demanded immediate cessation of hostilities, an immediate withdrawal of the Argentine forces and called on Argentina and the UK to seek a diplomatic solution.⁶⁰

The Argentine media immediately gave news of the invasion of the Malvinas, news which reached the United Kingdom in the morning of Friday the 2nd. Nevertheless, at 11 a.m., Humphrey Atkins, the Lord Privy Seal and Spokesman on Foreign Affairs for the Government in the Commons, entered the House and only stated that it was highly probable that there had been an attack. When David Owen asked him to confirm ‘that the report on the tapes that Argentinians have landed in Port Stanley is incorrect’, Atkins replied: ‘we were in touch with the governor half an hour ago and he said that no landing had taken place at that time’.⁶¹ Actually, and as it would be discovered at a later stage, the last contact between the FCO and the Governor of the Falklands took place long before the half an hour indicated by Atkins. In any case, the words of the Lord Privy Seal did momentarily allow the Government to reject requests submitted by various sides asking for the session to continue during the afternoon and, if necessary, the following day. And once again at 2.30 p.m., the Leader of the House, Francis Pym, stated that there was no ‘confirmation of any change in the position in relation to the Falkland Islands since the statement of my right hon. Friend the Lord Privy Seal this morning’.⁶² The statement led to sarcasm by the Shadow Leader of the House and Shadow Defence Secretary, John Silkin: ‘it seems extraordinary that, with so much information apparently coming

⁵⁸L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. I, *The Origins of the Falklands War*, pp. 204–215.

⁵⁹L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. II, *War and Diplomacy*, pp. 41–49.

⁶⁰D. Boyce, *The Falklands War*, p. 55.

⁶¹House of Commons, *Official Report*, 2 April 1982, vol. 21, cc. 572.

⁶²*Ibid.*, c. 619.

in by television and radio from the Argentinians, the Foreign Office should not yet be in a position to tell us what has happened'.⁶³ Silkin insisted on the need to call an emergency meeting of the Commons the next day. Pym reiterated that in the present state and with the information in possession of the FCO, there was no need for the meeting, though should there be any change in events, the House would be recalled.

The Government stance in the House only helped to increase the unrest amongst MPs. Added to the anger due to the humiliation inflicted by Argentina was the annoyance caused by what, at best, was the result of an unacceptable carelessness in the circumstances or, at worst, a clumsy attempt to mislead the House.⁶⁴ When it was finally decided to call an emergency debate at 11 o'clock the next day—the first to be held on a Saturday since the Suez crisis—the general mood against the Government could not have been worse.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴The next day Atkins explained the reasons behind his mistake; House of Commons, *Official Report*, 3 April 1982, vol. 21, c. 629. According to Alan Clark: 'Humphrey Atkins made a clear short but unsatisfactory statement explaining why he had misled (unintentionally, of course) the House about the timing of various announcements yesterday. This certainly did not make the Lady's task any easier as it set the tone, giving further corroboration, as it were, to the general impression of almost total government incompetence which was to pervade the debate'. A. Clark, *Diaries: Into Politics*, London, Phoenix, 2001, p. 312.



The Conservative Party

The Conservative MPs' reaction to the invasion of the Falkland Islands was the result of several factors. A couple of them were contingent: indignation at the humiliation suffered and anger at the Government's inability to read events. Moreover the bitterness had built up as a result of the infighting which had taken place over the previous months, within the Government and the Party, regarding the redefining of the budget for the Ministry of Defence. There was one lengthier factor: the enormous tensions which had formed during the first three years of Thatcher's Government. Especially in the first few days following the Argentinean invasion, to all of this the memory of two crucial events of national history was added, events that had marked the experience of previous Conservative Governments: the policy of appeasement and the Suez Crisis. The appeasement provided the paradigm of the disastrous consequences that could have occurred by yielding to the aggressor. The second one, on the other hand, represented the end of a glorious past seen, depending on interpretation, as a humiliation to be redeemed or as a warning not to be forgotten. The crisis in the spring of 1982 offered a stage from which those feelings living in the shadows of the memories of Munich and Suez¹ entwined with the search for personal revenge by those who had suffered defeat on specific policies, or those who had seen

¹See, for example, what Alan Clark wrote in his diary on 2 April: 'We've lost the Falklands ... It's all over. We're a Third World country, no good for anything'. A. Clark, *Diaries: Into Politics 1972-1982*, London, Phoenix, 2000, p. 310.

their position within the Government or in the PCP diminished. There was just one certainty: the outcome of the crisis would decide Margaret Thatcher's future before that of the Falkland islanders. It was an understanding which was not publicly stated by the Conservatives, but which Enoch Powell recalled quite elliptically and with particularly efficient *ars oratoria* in the Commons debate of 3 April.² As a consequence, the position regarding the diplomatic-military options, that from time to time came about during the Anglo-Argentinean crisis, was also a reflection of the position on Margaret Thatcher's leadership, and vice versa.

1 BEFORE THE 'FAIT ACCOMPLI'

Margaret Thatcher was the first to be aware of the fact that her political survival depended on the outcome of the confrontation with Argentina. Her indisputable merit was her ability to react to the news of the imminent invasion. The speed with which on the evening of 31 March she followed Henry Leach's advice about setting up a massive naval task force was the result of her will for political survival and her ability to stand up to pressure. Her first priority was to report to Parliament that the Government already knew what to do and towards which goals they should move.³ On the evening of 2 April, the Cabinet approved the Prime Minister's orders and decided unanimously to send the task force to the Falkland Islands. However, this unity was more ostensible than real. John Biffen, even though he did not object to the decision, expressed doubts about that operation.⁴ These doubts were shared by others. According to Geoffrey Howe, announcing the sending of the task force would have given the impression that the Government was

² Powell concluded his speech as follows: 'The Prime Minister, shortly after she came into office, received a soubriquet as the "Iron Lady". It arose in the context of remarks which she made about defence against the Soviet Union and its allies; but there was no reason to suppose that the right hon. Lady did not welcome and, indeed, take pride in that description. In the next week or two this House, the nation and the right hon. Lady herself will learn of what metal she is made'; House of Commons, *Official Report*, 3 April 1982, vol. 21, c. 644.

³ D. M. Bruni, 'A Leader at War: Margaret Thatcher and the Falklands Crisis of 1982', *Observatoire de la société britannique*, 20 (2018), pp. 135–157.

⁴ J. Nott, *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow*, p. 264; C. Parkinson, *Right at the Centre: An Autobiography*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1992, p. 190; and G. Howe, *Conflict of Loyalty*, London, Macmillan, 1994, p. 245.

‘in a position to reverse or reconquer’, while they had to ‘convey the opposite impression’.⁵ John Major recalls being aware of tensions existing within the government, after listening to a private conversation in which two Cabinet members labelled the expedition as “‘ludicrous” and “a folly””, because of limited air cover.⁶ The prevailing idea within the Government was that of the difficulty of the enterprise, a scepticism kept in check only by the shared understanding that some kind of action was needed as payback for the national humiliation. For a large part of the crisis there was a substantial difference of opinion between the Prime Minister and a part of the Cabinet on the one hand, and the remaining part of the Cabinet on the other. While for Margaret Thatcher the final objective had to remain the reclaiming of the status quo—to be attained if possible by diplomatic means, or by arms if necessary—for other members of the Cabinet the reaching of an accord, which could be presented as honourable even if it conceded something to the Argentines, was in any case preferable to a risky military operation, with unpredictable outcomes. For these latter, the task force was an instrument of pressure, to be used during diplomatic negotiations. Even though loyalty towards the Prime Minister prevented a public explosion of their conflicts, this difference remained latent and became real in the disagreements between Downing Street and the FCO. It was a strategic and tactical difference in relation to the current crisis, but one that could potentially significantly change the political balance of the Government. To avoid making too much of a muddle of the political handling of the crisis, the Prime Minister quickly attended to the formation of a small War Cabinet. This also partially contributed to avoiding the risk that full Cabinet meetings would become the main confrontational ground for the two above-mentioned positions. Margaret Thatcher was always alert to seeking Cabinet approval for all important decisions, but the daily handling of the crisis was the task of the War Cabinet. For this reason, it was where the opposing positions between the Prime Minister and the FCO Secretary emerged with greatest force. Beyond Margaret Thatcher and Francis Pym, the other Cabinet members who sat in the War Cabinet were the Defence

⁵C. Moore, *Margaret Thatcher*, vol. 1, p. 669.

⁶J. Major, *The Autobiography*, London, HarperCollins, 1999, p. 77.

Secretary, the Deputy Prime Minister, William Whitelaw and, on John Nott's suggestion, the Paymaster General, Cecil Parkinson. The latter was added in order to grant a sure support to Mrs Thatcher, had Pym and Whitelaw put forward a line that was too appeasing.⁷

In this context the ability of the various factions of backbenchers to bring their influence to bear could play a crucial role. Being less constrained than the members of the Cabinet, the MPs constituted a potentially more explosive variable. The dominant atmosphere in the PCP became immediately clear after the joint meeting of the Defence and Foreign Affairs Committees on the morning of 3 April. It was Alan Clark who took the initiative, as he recalled:

When I got up to Committee Room 10 this morning I was gratified to find it extremely full and the panic that my moves had set in train was reflected in the fact that no lesser than the Chief Whip had been brought into 'listen'. Jopling led off by making a soft-sell appeal for (need one say) loyalty, absence of recrimination and so forth. This did not go down very well. Speaker after speaker expressed their indignation at the way the Foreign Office had handled things. Many were critical of John Nott. Much the best speech, and the only one that elicited the banging of desks, was by Robert Cranborne. Expressionless, Michael Jopling took notes. Then, fortified by our mutual expressions of empathy, we trooped down to the Chambers for Prayers.⁸

All this came to the surface in a striking manner in the next Commons debate.⁹ In her opening speech, the Prime Minister set conceptual limits on how events needed to be interpreted and spoke in line with the established position on the Falklands problem: the indisputable British sovereignty, the Britishness of the Falkland Islanders and that their wishes must be paramount. Mrs Thatcher focused especially on the

⁷J. Nott, *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow*, p. 285. The War Cabinet held its first meeting on 7 April, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/122304. See also Peter Hennessy, "War Cabinetry": The Political Direction of the Falklands Conflict', in *The Falklands Conflict Twenty Years On: Lessons for the Future*, eds. Stephen Badsey, Rob Havers, and Mark Grove, London and New York, Frank Cass, 2005, pp. 131–146.

⁸A. Clark, *Diaries: Into Politics*, pp. 311–312. Even for Jonathan Aitken, 'the mood was indignant' and the trend of the discussion was 'almost negative and critical' of the Government; J. Aitken, *Margaret Thatcher: Power and Personality*, London, Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 328.

⁹House of Commons, *Official Report*, 3 April 1982, vol. 21, cc. 633–668.

sovereignty issue, clumsily trying to attack the Labour Party as guilty of allowing the Argentinean occupation in Southern Thule in 1976 without the slightest resistance. The Prime Minister made her government commit to restoring the status quo in the South Atlantic and communicated that a naval task force would set sail the following Monday toward the Falklands.¹⁰ These two elements prevented the Conservative backbenchers from directly attacking the Prime Minister, despite her bad performance.¹¹ In addition, a tacit agreement not to weaken the one who had to deal with a military attack was established. In short, only the gravity of the situation made everyone agree about a suspension of judgement. John Nott and Lord Carrington were the only ones who suffered attacks from all the Conservative MPs who took part in the debate, with only two exceptions. Five out of eight Tories called to speak belonged to the right wing of the party: Edward Du Cann, Julian Amery, Ray Whitney, Sir John Eden and Sir Bernard Braine. One of them, Sir Peter Emery, co-founder of the Bow Group, had been a supporter of Ted Heath, but had gradually changed position after the rise of Margaret Thatcher, who had chosen him for a knighthood in January 1982. The other two were politically distant from the Prime Minister: Patrick Cormack, a ‘One-Nation Tory’, and Sir Nigel Fisher, who belonged to the liberal wing of the Party. The harshest speeches were delivered by those who were particularly sensitive to the subject of imperial heritage—for nostalgic reasons (Amery, Braine), or because they considered the Commonwealth a measure of international and interracial cooperation (Fisher)—and by those who were especially hostile towards Margaret Thatcher for political reasons (Cormack, Fisher) or more personal ones (Du Cann). This second group, with the addition of Amery, vehemently attacked the Government’s defence policy, that is to say one of the most characteristic policies of Thatcher’s Government over recent months. They underlined the connection between the debacle in the South Atlantic and the reduction of the resources available to the Royal Navy, identifying the idea of setting the British defence policy on the basis of the budget as one of the

¹⁰Ibid., cc. 633–638.

¹¹According to Julien Critchley, it was the worst speech by Mrs Thatcher ever (*Westminster Blues: Minor Chords*, London, Elm Tree Books, 1985, p. 125). For Kenneth Baker, ‘she was not at her best’ (*The Turbulent Years: My Life in Politics*, London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1993, p. 67). For Norman Fowler, ‘her speech went as well as was possible, given that it was being made on the stickiest of sticky Parliament wickets’ (*Ministers Decide: A Personal Memoir of the Thatcher Years*, London, Chapman, 1991).

principal causes of the crisis. The attacks against Carrington came mainly from the right—in particular from Amery, Braine and Eden—in other words, from that wing of the Party that usually identified the FCO as the greatest saboteur of British interests worldwide. The reference to the memories of the 1930s and 1940s was encouraged by the atmosphere created in Michael Foot's speech.¹² Du Cann expressed this in general terms, underlining the traditional British opposition to dictatorships of any kind. Braine, on the contrary, highlighted the fact that the United Kingdom was dealing 'with a Fascist, corrupt and cruel regime'.¹³ The most explicit—and threatening—comparison came from Fisher:

We have been pre-empted, as we were in Norway by the Germans in 1940, and that led to the fall of Mr. Chamberlain's Government. Of course, I do not suggest that the same situation should apply today, but we are entitled to a full explanation of these events and, as soon as security considerations permit, to a clear indication from Ministers as to what action is now proposed.¹⁴

The most favourable speech for the Prime Minister and the Government was made by Peter Emery. He, however, made clear that the recovery of the Falklands, even with the risk of going to war, was the only acceptable outcome of the crisis. On this, all the Conservatives MPs who took part in the debate agreed, with the sole exception of Whitney. The former diplomat stationed in Buenos Aires from the late 1960s to the early 1970s was the only one that stressed the logistic and diplomatic risks connected to the use of military force, in the same way he also pointed out the dependence of the Falklands on Argentina for many essential services. The Speaker of the House of Commons wrote in his memoirs: 'During the course of the debate, I saw Mrs Thatcher's Parliamentary Private Secretary, Ian Gow, talking to the right-wing Conservative MP Ray Whitney, a former diplomat. It was therefore obvious that the government wanted him to speak in the debate'.¹⁵ Maybe the Prime Minister wanted to try and relieve the pressure on the Government after a long series of criticisms. Or maybe she just wanted to find out the response of the House to a point of view in contrast to the dominant mood. In any

¹² See Ch. 4.

¹³ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 3 April 1982, vol. 21, c. 659.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, c. 645.

¹⁵ G. Thomas, *Mr Speaker: The Memoires of the Viscount Tonypanydy*, London, Century Publishing, 1985, p. 208.

case, the hostile reactions that Whitney's speech generated left no doubts about the fact that the MPs—starting with the Conservatives—were not willing to listen to more moderate approaches, unless the Government had paid for the humiliation inflicted on the country. The Government's situation got worse—if possible—due to the awful performance of John Nott in winding up the debate. The Defence Secretary chose a difficult path when he affirmed that sending a couple of submarines or a surface fleet to the South Atlantic, after the incident in South Georgia in the middle of March, would not have blocked the Argentinean invasion, but would have increased tension and made the possibility of a diplomatic solution to the affair even more remote. Nott's words provoked a furious reaction in many MPs. David Owen went further when he exclaimed that if the Secretary of State for Defence did not understand 'the value to a Foreign Secretary of being able to negotiate in a position of some military influence and strength, he should not be Secretary of State for Defence'.¹⁶ Nott finished his speech badly, amongst lively and repetitive calls to resign.

What happened in the House made the atmosphere in the PCP even more tense. Michael Jopling, the Conservative Chief Whip, reported to the Prime Minister that the Party was in a state of chaos and that many MPs were saying that 'they wished to resign the whip'. To calm things down, he proposed to call a meeting of the 1922 Committee and that Nott and Carrington should address it.¹⁷ That was a mistake. During the meeting, the limitless bitterness of many backbenchers emerged.¹⁸

¹⁶House of Commons, *Official Report*, 3 April 1982, vol. 21, c. 666.

¹⁷J. Nott, *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow*, pp. 267–268. Jonathan Aitken reports that Jopling left the joint meeting of the Defence and Foreign Affairs Committees 'looking shaken'; *Margaret Thatcher: Power and Personality*, p. 328.

¹⁸Julien Critchley described the atmosphere of the Committee meetings as follows: 'The '22 meets once a week in "peacetime"; in times of crisis it can become a theatre of cruelty and of the absurd, offering an element of drama which the Commons' chamber seems reluctant to provide. The run-of-the-mill weekly meeting is to be avoided. A whip reads out the business of the coming week, the minutes of the last meeting are recited, there may be a listless question or two from a predictable source and that is that. What humour there is can only be of the unconscious kind. But when the party's dander is up, the '22 can be every bit as Gothic as its High Victorian surroundings. ... It is on occasions such as these that the worst side of Our Great Party manifests itself. Unleashed, we run the gamut of our emotions: jingoism, anti-Semitism, obscurantism, cant and self-righteousness; all play their part. We can, when pushed to do so, flourish our political prejudices like so many captive princes paraded through the streets of Imperial Rome. Why not hold such meetings in the Coliseum?'; *Palace of Varieties: An Insider's View of Westminster*, London, John Murray, 1989, p. 127. According

During a packed meeting of around 150 Tory MPs, 41 of them took to the floor. The diplomatic, military and intelligence failure was criticised without compromise. The Government's defence policy was attacked along with parliamentary mismanagement of the issue on 2 April. The FCO was accused of having misled the House of Commons, of pursuing for a long time the sell-out of the Falklands, and of being permeated by the will of appeasement. 'Putting things right' was the main request in order to reinstate the Government's credibility. Taking back the islands was fundamental. Someone tried to encourage a declaration of war against Argentina. Even those who found the resignation of the two ministers inappropriate at that moment, invited the Government to react with strength and determination.¹⁹

Overall, John Nott held a candle better than Carrington, who, as a peer, was less familiar with individual MPs and had less experience with the abruptness and frankness of the meetings of the 1922 Committee.²⁰ According to Nott, Carrington considered resigning immediately after that meeting. The attacks against the two ministers continued during the whole weekend, when Carrington was increasingly referred to as the main culprit of the disaster,²¹ not forgetting the criticism of the press, starting with *The Times*. All this resulted in Carrington's resignation on 5 April, despite the Prime Minister and other colleagues' attempts to

to Critchley, the meeting on 3 April was 'the most exciting committee meeting I ever attended ... Mrs. Thatcher had made what was probably her lamest speech in the Chamber, and the party was reeling from shock and indignation. There was to be blood all over the floor'; *ibid.*, p. 55. J. Nott, *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow*, p. 268; and A. Clark, *Diaries*, p. 313, provide reports of that meeting in line with Critchley's one. On the other hand, the account of the chairman of the Committee is more sugar-coated. See E. Du Cann, *Two Lives: The Political and Business Careers of Edward Du Cann*, Upton upon Severn, Images Publishing, 1995, pp. 213–215.

¹⁹Other than the above-mentioned statements of the meeting of 3 April, there are also the 'warm' notes of Ian Gow, www.margarethatcher.org/document/122872.

²⁰M. Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, p. 185. The Foreign Secretary himself was well aware that his membership in the House of Lords was a weakness for the Cabinet at that moment; *Reflect on Things Past*, pp. 368–372. See also J. Nott, *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow*, p. 269; W. Whitelaw, *The William Whitelaw Memoirs*, London, Aurum, 1989, p. 203; C. Parkinson, *Right at the Centre*, p. 190; and J. Prior, *A Balance of Power*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1986, p. 147.

²¹See, for example, the interview with Patrick Cormack on BBC Radio's *World at One* referred to in 'Carrington's Call to the Falkands', *The Guardian*, 5 April 1982 and also in 'Thatcher Should Have Resigned', *The Times*, 6 April 1982.

dissuade him.²² Humphrey Atkins and Richard Luce also resigned. As a first fleeting hypothesis, Margaret Thatcher thought about nominating Julian Amery as the new FCO Secretary, but William Whitelaw convinced her to turn her attention towards Francis Pym,²³ despite his terrible relationship with the Prime Minister.²⁴ According to the *Telegraph*, even Ted Heath was considered for the post.²⁵ However, Pym ‘was the best available choice’,²⁶ both to improve the Government’s fate in the House of Commons²⁷ and to avoid problems within the Cabinet.²⁸ Furthermore, Mrs Thatcher was probably trying to make jointly responsible the person that, in the case of failure, could have potentially challenged her for the leadership.²⁹ On the other hand, it must be underlined that Pym’s nomination wasn’t the only consequence of Carrington, Atkins and Luce’s resignation. Among new nominations and promotions, the Prime Minister proceeded with 11 appointments, with the logic of compensating the Upper House for Lord Carrington’s exit from the Government and promoting three backbenchers to junior ministerial positions.

²²C. Moore, *Margaret Thatcher*, vol. 1, pp. 674–675.

²³See J. Aitken, *Margaret Thatcher: Power and Personality*, p. 333, and Alan Clark, *Diaries: In Power 1983–1992*, London, Poenix, 1993, p. 97.

²⁴According to Mrs Thatcher, Francis Pym was ‘the quintessential old style Tory ... a proud pragmatist and an enemy of ideology’; M. Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, p. 187. For Cecil Parkinson, Pym ‘and Prime Minister were happy to see the minimum of each other’; C. Parkinson, *Right at the Centre*, p. 198. For Geoffrey Howe, Pym ‘and Margaret had often before shown their incompatibility’; G. Howe, *Conflict of Loyalty*, p. 247.

²⁵‘Nott Told to Stay on’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 6 April 1982. According to the newspaper even Jim Callaghan invited the Prime Minister to call Heath to join the Cabinet during the debate of 7 April: ‘it was clear, though Mr Callaghan did not name him, that he meant that Mr Heath should join the Cabinet to “coordinate the unprecedented diplomatic effort and preparation for possible war”’. See the parliamentary report, *The Daily Telegraph*, 8 April 1982.

²⁶D. Hurd, *Memoirs*, London, Little, Brown, 2003.

²⁷C. Parkinson, *Right at the Centre*, p. 198: ‘Francis commanded the respect of the House of Commons and was the right man to rally and reassure the badly shaken Conservative Parliamentary Party and to unite the opposition behind the government’s policies’. According to Jim Prior, *A Balance of Power*, p. 149, during the crisis Francis Pym ‘did a superb job in the most difficult circumstances. His speech in the House were balanced and well received’. See also *The William Whitelaw Memoirs*, p. 204.

²⁸G. Howe, *Conflict of Loyalty*, p. 246: ‘Any other choice would have meant a series of Cabinet upheavals, which was clearly not on’.

²⁹C. Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorized Biography*, vol. 1, *Not for Turning*, London, Penguin, 2013, p. 676.

Among these latter, significant was the appointment of Cranley Onslow as Minister of State at the FCO. Onslow was a very influential backbencher and the chairman of the Select Committee on Defence, which strongly had opposed the cuts on the Navy provided by the Nott's review. Finally, the most important outcome was a slight rebalancing of power towards the right within the Cabinet as a whole, with the exit of two non-Thatcherites (Carrington and Atkins) and the entrance of a devoted Thatcherite (Lord Cockfield).³⁰

A final point should be emphasised. If the general mood of the PCP in the first few days following the invasion was as just described, then there was no shortage of more moderate opinions. Whitney's intervention in the debate of 3 April has already been stated. Even during the 1922 Committee's meeting of that day, some senior backbenchers—Sir Anthony Kershaw, Sir William van Straubenzee, Maurice Macmillan, Terence Higgins, and John Peyton—tried to use their influence to moderate things.³¹ Kershaw intervened once more during the weekend, calling for calm and to find a diplomatic solution through the UN and with the support of the allies.³² These were apparently minority positions in the frenzied atmosphere that dominated the first days of the crisis. However, they could have gained popularity over the following weeks, because they were fostered by very influential backbenchers.

2 WILLING TO NEGOTIATE, BUT READY FOR WAR

On 5 April Lord Carrington resigned. This was also the day on which the naval task force set sail for the South Atlantic. The sacrifice of a scapegoat and the tangible expression of the will for redemption brought back a semblance of calm to the Conservative Party. This allowed a more articulated manifestation of the more moderate positions, which had already been identified the previous weekend. During the meeting of the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee of the PCP on 6 April, doubts

³⁰'Thatcher Reshuffle Brings in New Names', *The Guardian*, 7 April 1982; 'New Faces in the Government Reshuffle', *The Times*, 7 April 1982.

³¹J. Haviland and P. Webster, 'Nott Threat to Storm Islands, Sink Ships', *The Times*, 5 April 1982. Alan Clark only refers to 'three heavy-weight duds' as exemptions to the general atmosphere of the 1922 Committee of 3 April: Kershaw, Straubenzee and Patten; A. Clark, *Diaries: Into Politics*, p. 313. According to Ian Gow's notes, Patten did not speak at all, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/122872.

³²'Tory MP Pleads for Diplomacy', *The Guardian*, 5 April 1982.

emerged about the long-term consequences of retaking the Falklands.³³ On the morning of the 7th, Ray Whitney, during an interview with the BBC, advised abandoning the idea that the Falkland Islanders' 'wishes' were paramount. To continue to maintain this principle, as the basis of the policy in the South Atlantic, would prevent a diplomatic solution to the crisis.³⁴ The mood within the PCP, carefully monitored by the Chief Whip, Michael Jopling, displayed a variety of positions.³⁵

Thus, it should not be surprising that the debate in the Commons on 7 April was carried out in a different atmosphere from the previous one.³⁶ The Conservative MPs' speeches actively contributed to this. They all agreed with the Government's goals, underlined by Francis Pym at the start of the debate: to obtain the withdrawal of the Argentineans and the restoration of the British administration. The Foreign Secretary also confirmed the conceptual framework elaborated by Margaret Thatcher on 3 April, even though he emphasised above all the need to uphold the rule of law and the right of self-determination of the Falklanders, as well as to show that an unprovoked aggression did not pay. This, moreover, allowed him to remain within a boundary which was acceptable even to the Labour leadership. Pym even reassured the critics of the FCO, promising that 'Britain does not appease dictators'.³⁷ Not one of the Conservative MPs who rose to speak questioned the support for the Government and the task force. However, beyond this common basis, the distinctions were clear. Fourteen Conservative backbenchers took the floor. Keith Speed and Richard Luce made speeches referring more to the past than to the future. In fact both of them had been ministers of Thatcher's Government, respectively at the MoD and the FCO. The core of Speed's speech was criticism of the defence review of 1981, while the subject of Luce's speech was a defence of the FCO's conduct in the weeks before

³³'Cabinet Seeks Options as Tory Unease Sets In', *The Guardian*, 7 April 1982. See also A. Clark, *Diaries: Into Politics*, p. 317: 'Feeling in the Party is still very strong, but already one or two predictable weasels are poking their snouts out of the undergrowth. That sanctimonious creep, van Straubenzee, made a long and unctuous speech—I think he actually "wring" his hands as he regretted "a certain jingoistic tendency"'.
³⁴As stated by Whitney himself in House of Commons, *Official Report*, 7 April 1982, vol. 21, c. 1029.

³⁵See Michael Jopling's Minutes to Francis Pym, 6 and 7 April 1982, www.margaret-thatcher.org/document/122872 and www.margaretthatcher.org/document/122848.

³⁶House of Commons, *Official Report*, 7 April 1982, vol. 21, cc. 959–1052.

³⁷*Ibid.*, c. 960.

the Argentinean invasion. Of the other 12 Tory MPs, half of them questioned the route taken by the Government. This was a composite group. There was a former frontbencher, John Peyton, sacked by Thatcher in 1979; two heavyweight ‘loyalist’ backbenchers, Anthony Kershaw and Maurice Macmillan; Hugh Fraser—a maverick, who in recent months did not hide his profound discontent towards the Government’s economic policy; David Crouch, a One-Nation Tory and ‘ardent Macmillanite’; and Michael Mates, a future anti-Thatcherite. Their doubts were mainly concentrated on the necessity to avoid any emotional response driven by anger for the humiliation suffered and on the right evaluation of the logistical difficulties of a counter-attack on the islands as well as of the long-term military and economic consequences of their reconquest by military means. Even those who, such as Kershaw, recognised the need not to appease ‘the Nazi ruffians’ in Buenos Aires, and to obtain their withdrawal from the Falklands, even at the cost of using force, insisted on the impossibility of restoring the status quo, and on the need for long term solutions to bring about a sharing of responsibility, perhaps even of sovereignty.³⁸ In two of these speeches were presented two concepts that would be engaged with over the following days by members of the opposition parties as well. The first one was the need to shift the focus from the Falkland Islanders’ ‘wishes’ to their ‘interests’. Remaining anchored to their wishes meant being bound to the principle of self-determination. Replacing their wishes with their interests would allow moving from the ethical level to the more pragmatic political one. Remaining on the first level consisted in accepting all the constraints of a moral obligation. Passing to the second one meant gaining major freedom of action. This was what Hugh Fraser intended in his speech, when he said that if the UK’s interests did not coincide with those of the Falkland Islanders, the UK’s interests would have to come first. For Fraser, Britain’s interests in the South Atlantic went beyond the Falklands and a policy that recognised the need for a good relationship with Argentina was necessary.³⁹ Maurice Macmillan introduced a second argument, which would also become the central theme of the Labour leadership: the idea that, if force had to be used, it should be at a minimum level, in order to allow a long-term agreement with the Argentines.⁴⁰

³⁸ *Ibid.*, cc. 989–990.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, cc. 982–983.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, cc. 1008–1010.

Equally mixed was the group of Tory MPs who expressed with major certainty the lawfulness and the opportunity of military intervention to drive the Argentines from the Falklands, if they refused to retreat. There were two ex-Heathites, Geoffrey Rippon and Anthony Buck, who, however, had followed different paths after 1975. Rippon, after being removed from the Shadow Cabinet, had become an opponent of Mrs Thatcher sufficiently to think about seriously challenging her for the leadership in 1981.⁴¹ Buck, after having managed the unsuccessful leadership campaign of Geoffrey Howe in 1975, had tried to return to the frontbenches, but without success. Not surprisingly Rippon did not miss the opportunity to link the ongoing crisis to the need to redraft the defence White Paper. Buck, on the other hand, closed his speech expressing his full support for the Prime Minister. The right-wing Winston Churchill flashed the memory of the 1930s and 1940s, pleading for the necessity to free the islands from the fascists. The then One-Nation Tory Michael Ancram underlined first of all the Britishness of the Falklanders and the need to defend the rule of law. Kenneth Warren, Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS) to Keith Joseph, seized the opportunity for yet another shot against the FCO.⁴² Alan Clark, a Margaret Thatcher supporter, presented the current crisis as an opportunity to overcome the Suez humiliation: it was ‘the very last chance, for us to redeem much of our history over the past 25 years, of which we may be ashamed, and from which we may have averted our gaze’.⁴³ The fact that these six speeches were concentrated in the second part of the debate and the Tory MPs overwhelming approval of the announcement of the Maritime Exclusion Zone (MEZ) around the Falklands gave the impression that the PCP’s mood as a whole was more favourable to the hard line than it actually was.

The 7 April was also the day on which Ronald Reagan announced that he would send his Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, to London and then to Buenos Aires tasked with trying to help the two parties find a solution to the crisis.⁴⁴ The launch of this shuttle diplomacy made new room for manoeuvre for those Conservatives who, for various reasons

⁴¹J. Campbell, *Edward Heath: A Biography*, London, Pimlico, 2004, p. 729.

⁴²‘The Foreign Office must be more clearly identified with the interests of the British Government. There should be no difference between the Foreign Office and the British Government.’ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 7 April 1982, vol. 21, c. 1029.

⁴³*Ibid.*, c. 1038.

⁴⁴A. Haig, *Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1984, Chapter XIII.

and with various intentions, insisted on a more prudent approach. The new FCO Secretary was the main supporter of such an approach within the Cabinet. While Haig searched for Pym's cooperation to force Margaret Thatcher to soften her position,⁴⁵ the Foreign Secretary tried to lever American pressure towards gradually shifting the British line towards the need to avoid armed conflict. Aware that she could not be the first one to abandon the negotiating table, and in order to avoid mediations less friendly than the American one, Mrs Thatcher had to give in on some points. However, she always remained firm on two principles: the Argentines withdrawal had to precede any sort of negotiation over the future of the islands; and the final settlement should have taken into account the Falklanders' right to self-determination. As a consequence, the outcome of the first meeting between the Americans and the British, in the evening of 8 April, did not have any results other than the outline of an undefined scheme to be implemented in three steps: the Argentines retreat; an interim administration; Anglo-Argentinian negotiation for a final settlement.⁴⁶ The vagueness of the scheme allowed Haig to fly to Buenos Aires, Margaret Thatcher not to break the bank, and Pym to propose a different approach from that of the Prime Minister.

On 11 April, in an interview for the programme *Weekend World*, Pym declared that the British Government was ready to talk about the future of the islands only after the Argentines retreated. He reiterated that the islanders' right to self-determination should be respected. At the same time, however, he affirmed that it was impossible to discover their real wishes without an Argentinian withdrawal as the current crisis could have influenced their opinion. In this way, Pym tried to disarm the main rhetorical tool which, until that moment, had justified the British Government's response: the fact that the islanders had always shown their desire to remain British. In a second interview for the BBC radio *World This Weekend* programme, he affirmed that the door would be kept open to various solutions.⁴⁷ He also claimed that the Argentines' compliance

⁴⁵Haig's telegram to Reagan, 9 April 1982, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/109216. James Rentschler's *Falklands Diary*, www.margaretthatcher.org/archive/arch-docs/Rentschler.pdf, p. 11, describes Pym as 'the only British peace party we seem to have in this room'.

⁴⁶L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. II, *War and Diplomacy*, pp. 135–142.

⁴⁷'Pym Firm But with Signs of Flexibility', *The Guardian*, 12 April 1982; 'Pym Lists Possible Diplomatic Solutions', *The Times*, 12 April 1982.

with the MEZ had to be interpreted as their desire to reach an agreement.⁴⁸ On the evening of the 11th, when Haig left the Argentinian capital to go back to London, the FCO Secretary's position seemed to be even stronger. Haig's second trip to the UK was seen as a sign of a step forward. The ABC (American Broadcasting Company) news dared to state—mistakenly—the main pillars of the Argentinian proposals: Buenos Aires would accept the retreat of the troops if the UK withdrew its fleet; the Falklanders would then have the opportunity of choosing their government; the Argentinian flag would continue to fly on the islands. On the morning of the 12th *The Times* ran the title 'Haig Heads Back to London with Peace Hopes Raised'. What seemed positive news was promptly taken advantage of by the opposition parties as well as by Anthony Kershaw, the chairman of the Commons Selected Committee on Foreign Affairs. The authoritative backbencher expressed his support for Pym's line. He stressed how it was impossible to go back to the status quo and urged the avoidance of being 'too dogmatic' over the permanent settlement. The only real necessity was that this was acceptable for the islanders.⁴⁹

However, these movements from the moderate side increased the agitation of those on the intransigent front, starting with Margaret Thatcher.⁵⁰ The stiffening of the Prime Minister came, without a doubt, from the values that she identified as the basis of sending the task force. Equally clear, however, were more prosaically political motivations. The fact that the Foreign Secretary, who aspired to become the new Conservative leader, stuck to the line of mediation at all costs, to some extent forced Mrs Thatcher to insist on the opposite approach. She was helped by the fact that on the 12th and 13th the room for a diplomatic solution was drastically reduced. On the morning of the 12th, whilst the Americans and the British talked about the proposals agreed by Haig with the junta, *The New York Times* published a much harsher version of the Argentinian requests.⁵¹ They now offered the simultaneous retreat of the occupying forces, along with the task force, but only after the acknowledgement of Argentinian sovereignty over the Falklands. In

⁴⁸A. Bevens, 'Pym Places Hopes on Talks if War Zone Stays Respected', *The Times*, 12 April 1982.

⁴⁹'Let Them Fly Their Flag on Islands, Says Owen', *The Times*, 13 April 1982.

⁵⁰'Thatcher Firm on a One-Flag Solution', *The Times*, 14 April 1982.

⁵¹'Argentine Officials Say Prospects of Falkland Settlement Are Dim', *The New York Times*, 12 April 1982.

the afternoon, a number of calls between Haig and Costa Mendez confirmed this hard-line position. On the morning of the 13th, the junta maintained a set of conditions which included two indispensable points: during the interim administration the Argentine flag should be kept flying on the islands; at the end of negotiations the UK should hand over to Argentina the sovereignty of the Falklands. These clauses were completely unacceptable to the British side. Therefore Mrs Thatcher found her chance to reaffirm her position that only a few hours before seemed shaky: Argentinian withdrawal and the re-establishment of British government, leaving, however, the door half-open to an interim administration. After meeting Pym, Haig decided not to return to Buenos Aires and went back to Washington, even though he did not give up mediation.⁵²

The next day, a new Commons debate on the issue offered the Prime Minister the opportunity to clarify that it was Downing Street, not the White House, that set out the objectives to be achieved:

We made clear to Mr. Haig that withdrawal of the invaders' troops must come first; that the sovereignty of the islands is not affected by the act of invasion; and that when it comes to future negotiations what matters most is what the Falkland Islanders themselves wish ... We are also being urged in some quarters to avoid armed confrontation at all costs and to seek conciliation. Of course, we too want a peaceful solution, but it was not Britain that broke the peace. If the argument of no force at any price were to be adopted at this stage it would serve only to perpetuate the occupation of those very territories which have themselves been seized by force. In any negotiations over the coming days we shall be guided by the following principles. We shall continue to insist on Argentine withdrawal from the Falkland Islands and dependencies. We shall remain ready to exercise our right to resort to force in self-defence under article 51 of the United Nations Charter until the occupying forces leave the islands. Our naval task force sails on towards its destination. We remain fully confident of its ability to take whatever measures may be necessary. Meanwhile, its very existence and its progress towards the Falkland Islands reinforce the efforts we are making for a diplomatic solution. That solution must safeguard the principle that the wishes of the islanders shall remain paramount.⁵³

⁵²A. Haig, *Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy*, Chapter XIII.

⁵³House of Commons, *Official Report*, 14 April 1982, vol. 21, cc. 1149–1150.

The general trend in the debate contributed to shoring up the Prime Minister's position. The debate, in fact, did not return to the passionate and dramatic tones of 3 April, nor did it move on those of the 7th. While the latter had shown a complex and uneven picture of the positions within the PCP, on the 14th the Conservatives' speeches approved the line presented by Margaret Thatcher. Whilst not excluding the possibility of a future agreement with Argentina, the objective to be pursued was that of the re-establishment of the status quo: in other words, Argentinean withdrawal and the restoration of British administration, even at the cost of the use of force. Only then would it be possible to reinstate the rule of law and substantiate the real will of the Falklanders. This apparent compactness was favoured most of all by the fact that nine of the ten Conservative MPs who were called to speak were part of the right wing of the Party,⁵⁴ or they combined a 'one-nation' view on social and economic policies with a right-wing view on foreign and defence policy.⁵⁵ The only dissenter was Antony Meyer, who stressed the insanity of a military reconquering of the Falkland islands.⁵⁶

An important moment of that debate was Enoch Powell's speech.⁵⁷ Even though he did not belong to the Conservative Party any longer, his words greatly appealed to a part of the Tories, a minority one, yet not insignificant. Powell was among the first to take the floor. In his speech he attempted to clear the field of two inconsistencies which were present in the rationale after 3 April. First of all, he advocated that the management of the crisis had not to be conditioned by the islanders' wishes. This was a recommendation also made by others. Whilst, however, the others used it to seek a way out by compromise, Powell moved in the opposite direction. In his opinion, putting the Falklanders' wishes at the centre of everything meant allowing that, if the islands were uninhabited, then the act of piracy carried out by the Argentines would have been admissible. Actually it was necessary to make clear that the UK was defending its territory as much as its residents. Secondly, Powell urged the making of a clear distinction between the idea of a peaceful

⁵⁴This was the case of Michael Shersby, John Stokes, Alan Glyn, Ian Lloyd, Hector Monro and John Browne.

⁵⁵This was the case of Philip Goodhart, Michael McNair-Wilson and Hilary Miller.

⁵⁶House of Commons, *Official Report*, 14 April 1982, vol. 21, cc. 1195–1196.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, cc. 1158–1160.

solution and the idea of a solution by compromise. This latter necessarily implicated a meeting point of the two irreconcilable positions: the British one, respectful of international law, and that of the Argentinian aggressors. The aggression had nothing to do with the previous negotiations between the two countries. Therefore, finding a peaceful solution did not imply that the UK renounced its right to defend itself, but an attempt to find a way to obtain the Argentinian withdrawal using peaceful methods, if possible.

Once again, in the case of the debate on 14 April, the solidarity was more for appearance than it was real. On 21 April, Michael Jopling identified six different positions present in the PCP.⁵⁸ On the right there was a ‘no surrender’ group that wanted the utter restoration of the status quo. With antithetical positions, there were two groups which, with minimum differences, considered it senseless fighting for the Falklands. Close to these, a fourth group supported the necessity to explore all possible mediations, starting with the UN, before having to make use of weapons. In the middle there were the two most numerous groups. A large section of the Party was of a mind that it was better to fight only if necessary, and then to try and negotiate a lasting settlement. A similar position was expressed by the last group of MPs, who were however more pessimistic about the final outcome of a war. Jopling, unfortunately, did not count on the consistency of each group. According to *The Times* the group of intransigents which were fully in line with Enoch Powell consisted of three dozen MPs,⁵⁹ while for *The Guardian* the number of MPs who shared the Labour frontbenchers’ ideas about the UN’s involvement in the crisis, in the case of a failure of the USA’s mediation, ranged from 20 to 30.⁶⁰

The bustle in the PCP grew even more after 20 April when, with the task force now in the South Atlantic, Haig’s negotiation reached a critical point. On the evening of the 19th, at 9 p.m., the new American proposals, written after Haig’s second visit to Buenos Aires on 16–19 April, reached London. At 11 p.m., after a War Cabinet meeting, an official

⁵⁸M. Jopling to the Prime Minister, www.margarethatcher.org/document/122849.

⁵⁹H. Noyes, ‘Thatcher Warns Junta Next Haig Meeting Is Crucial’, *The Times*, 15 April 1982.

⁶⁰‘UK May Take Crisis to Court’, *The Guardian*, 20 April 1982.

statement described the proposals as ‘complex and difficult’.⁶¹ On the morning of the 20th, Margaret Thatcher announced to the Commons that Francis Pym would go to Washington to discuss the most problematic points still on the table.⁶² On that same day, the Conservative Backbenchers Foreign Affairs Committee held its own meeting. The Foreign Secretary also attended it. The gap between the two most polarised groups was evident. If, on the one hand, the need to obtain the Argentines’ unconditional withdrawal at all costs was made clear, some MPs, on the other hand, expressed their anxiety over the use of military force.⁶³ Of course Pym’s mission to Washington worried the most intransigent within the PCP. This was made evident by the reactions of many Conservative MPs who rose to speak in the House on the 21st, straight after his statement.⁶⁴ The concern grew further when Pym answered the Labour MP Dick Douglas and excluded the resort to military means ‘as long as negotiations’ were ‘in play’.⁶⁵ The Foreign Secretary was forced to return to the House and rectify that ‘the use of force could not at any stage be ruled out’.⁶⁶ That was not enough for some MPs. In the evening, the Tory MPs of the ‘92 Group’ convened. According to one of the attendants ‘the meeting was assiduous, our mutual suspicions and paranoia feeding on itself’. Alan Clark fiercely criticised ‘the old Foreign Office lobby’, which ‘had already suborned a number of Party heavies (such as Straubenzee and Mates) to state the appeasement case in its

⁶¹Minutes of OD(SA)(82) 10th, 19 April 1982, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/122313.

⁶²House of Commons, *Official Report*, 20 April 1982, vol. 22, c. 119. Pym’s trip to Washington was explicitly requested by Haig; M. Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, p. 204.

⁶³J. Haviland and P. Webster, ‘Pym off to US for Talks on British View’, *The Times*, 21 April 1982; ‘Pym Jets to US With a Thatcher Package’, *The Guardian*, 21 April 1982. According to *The Times* the majority of those who spoke at the meeting preferred the option of force and the general atmosphere in the meeting was that of putting pressure on the Foreign Secretary. On the other hand, according to *The Guardian*, Pym received ‘warm support’ from the backbenchers. In any case, however, both newspapers agreed on the fact that the majority of the PCP supported the government’s efforts to find a diplomatic solution.

⁶⁴See the questions asked by Julian Amery, Nicholas Winterton, Sir Frederick Burden, Alan Clark and Winston Churchill. House of Commons, *Official Report*, 21 April 1982, vol. 22, cc. 271–280.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, c. 278.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, c. 280.

various forms'. He also expressed his discontent for how the whips had managed the Commons debates on the Falklands. In fact all the participants highlighted the problem of how to convey their ideas to the Cabinet, outflanking the expected resistance of the whips of the party. On the proposal of Bob Dunn, Cecil Parkinson's PPS, they decided to 'by-pass the Chief Whip and go direct to the Chairman of the Party'. A delegation composed of Alan Clark, Bill Clark, Bob Dunn, Jill Knight and Patrick Wall immediately went to Parkinson to express their worries. According to Alan Clark's record, Parkinson 'was *extremely* reassuring and replied most hawkishly', and he also made it understood 'that we would be going into South Georgia within the next couple of days, as there was not the slightest chance of agreeing to any arrangement that left an Argentinian presence on the Islands'.⁶⁷ The next day, according to *The Times*, about 30 MPs⁶⁸ told their whips that the Government could not count on their votes for any agreement with Argentina which fell short of the Government's objectives: total invaders' withdrawal, re-establishment of British administration and a long-term solution which met the wishes of the islanders.⁶⁹ The move by the MPs at the centre of the party was specular. They wanted 'to strengthen the Prime Minister's position in Cabinet' and save her 'from the embrace of those whom they' called 'the "war party"'. Therefore they guaranteed Mrs Thatcher 'through the whips their unqualified support for whatever decision she and the Cabinet may take'.⁷⁰ Likewise, the appeal of implementing every kind of diplomatic pressure was reiterated.⁷¹ In short, each faction within the PCP wanted to give weight to their numbers as much as possible, in order to reinforce one of the two different political positions within the War Cabinet. Their activism grew as the time for finding a negotiated solution to the crisis diminished. Between 21 and 29 April, ahead of crucial decisions, the tension within the government increased.

⁶⁷A. Clark, *Diaries*, pp. 323–324.

⁶⁸They were 60 according to J. Wightman, 'Grytviken', *The Daily Telegraph*, 23 April 1982.

⁶⁹J. Haviland and A. Bevins, 'Fleet Reassured by Thatcher', *The Times*, 23 April 1982.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*

⁷¹During the Prime Minister's Question Time of 22 April, Terence Higgins suggested that economic sanctions through the UN Security Council was the best option if the Argentines refused to apply Resolution 502; House of Commons, *Official Report*, 22 April 1982, vol. 22, c. 417. On the 24th, Sir Derek Walker-Smith, MP for Hertford East,

With the task force by now in the South Atlantic it was its safety and the maximum effectiveness of its use that marked the time for diplomacy. Due to the logistical and climatic conditions, the time frame for a possible counter-invasion was considered to be limited to the middle of May, after which the risks would have become too high. The military timing coincided with Margaret Thatcher's political timing. She had realised from the start that her political survival would depend on the reinstatement of Britain's status quo in the Falklands or on a new settlement not too dissimilar, which should be welcome to the Islanders. This entailed having the ability to withstand all the opposing international pressure and to avoid remaining blocked in endless negotiations. From the start the Prime Minister announced that the time available to reach an agreement with the Argentines was the same as that necessary for the task force to reach the archipelago. The plan developed in London envisaged that, once in the theatre of operations, the task force would proceed with the recapture of South Georgia and then head towards the Falklands. The War Cabinet and the Cabinet discussed whether or not to authorise the operation in South Georgia for 21 and 22 April. In the War Cabinet, only Pym supported the idea of a postponement as the American mediation was still in progress. During the full Cabinet meeting on the 22nd, two other 'wets' expressed these same doubts, Peter Walker and Jim Prior⁷²: it was necessary 'to avoid action of which the Americans might disapprove' and which 'might take some of the international pressure off the Argentine Government'.⁷³ The operation, in the end, was authorised, and on the 25th South Georgia was recaptured. In the meantime, the day before, a dramatic confrontation between Margaret Thatcher and Francis Pym had taken place. The Prime

reiterated the option which had already been proposed of deferring the controversy to The Hague Court; see his letter in *The Times*, 24 April 1982 and House of Commons, *Official Report*, 26 April 1982, vol. 22, c. 612. St. John-Stevas was invited to consider the possibility of a mediation conducted by the Holy See during Prime Minister's Question Time on 27 April. On this same occasion David Crouch appealed against dropping the American mediation: House of Commons, *Official Report*, 27 April 1982, vol. 22, cc. 719, 721.

⁷²J. Nott, *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow*, pp. 301–302.

⁷³Confidential Annex to Minutes of Full Cabinet: CC(82) 19th, 22 April 1982, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/123919.

Minister described as ‘totally unacceptable’⁷⁴ the last set of American proposals, whilst the Foreign Secretary was prepared to accept them. The stalemate was resolved by asking the American Secretary of State to submit them first to the Argentines, as they had triggered the crisis.⁷⁵ Haig asked the junta for a reply by midnight on the 27th. On the 28th the British Government announced that the MEZ would be transformed into a Total Exclusion Zone (TEZ) starting from midnight on the 30th. On the morning of the 29th, as a reply from Buenos Aires still had not arrived, the Cabinet and the Prime Minister decided that the silence meant a refusal of the American proposals. This gave way to a new phase in which the US open support was expected.⁷⁶

In that same afternoon, during the Commons debate, Margaret Thatcher highlighted her Government’s commitment to try and reach a negotiated settlement; yet, at the same time, she made clear that the non-withdrawal of the Argentines left her no other alternative than the use of force. The Prime Minister ruled out appealing for the mediation of the UN, because it would not have been a good mediator as it did not possess the right means to ensure that its resolutions would be applied.⁷⁷ With the exception of Sir Derek Walker-Smith, who asked that the military option be dropped and the arbitration of the International Court of The Hague be resorted to, all the Conservative MPs who spoke expressed approval for the line adopted by the Government, albeit with different shades of enthusiasm.⁷⁸ It was the logic of the facts, rather than personal conviction, that decided this alignment. Julian Critchley’s speech was exemplary. He, like others, understood that if the Argentines did not retreat, the only alternative was to drive them out by force. The inevitability of this step, however, was not an intrinsic necessity, rather the outcome of wrong political choices. At the origin of these choices, Critchley identified two protagonists: the Falkland Islands Lobby,

⁷⁴M. Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, p. 206.

⁷⁵See the account of the meeting in M. Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, pp. 205–208; and J. Nott, *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow*, pp. 292–293.

⁷⁶See the Minutes of the Full Cabinet Meeting, CC(82) 21st, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/122275. See also M. Thatcher letter to R. Reagan, 29 April 1982, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/122038; and F. Pym message to A. Haig, 29 April 1982, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/122039.

⁷⁷House of Commons, *Official Report*, 29 April 1982, vol. 22, cc. 980–985.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, cc. 991–1046.

which was concerned with the recent past, and the right wing of the Conservative Party, which was specifically concerned with the crisis in progress. For the latter, ‘the weakness of the Whips’ Office, which lost its nerve at the first whiff of high explosive from South-East Essex’,⁷⁹ was identified as playing a great role.

3 FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE WAR OPERATIONS TO THE COUNTER-INVASION

The debate on 29 April closed the first phase of the crisis. On the same day, the junta rejected the proposals put forward by Alexander Haig. The next day, the USA publicly backed the British Government and announced a set of economic sanctions against Argentina.⁸⁰ While the task force enforced the TEZ around the Falklands archipelago, Francis Pym announced he would fly to the USA in order to meet both the American Secretary of State and the UN Secretary General. In fact the pressure put on the Argentines by the USA’s new stance could have made the resumption of negotiations possible.⁸¹ Pym was firmly convinced it was necessary to put forward an alternative diplomatic solution and fill the gap left by the end of Haig’s mediation.⁸² Other than the Foreign Secretary’s personal conviction and the need to maintain, as tightly knit as possible, the House of Commons’ support for the task force, this decision was made in compliance with the whole Cabinet’s desire to maintain, in front of worldwide public opinion, the reputation of the UK as acting reasonably, which it had gained during the month of April.⁸³

However, as repeatedly stated both inside and outside the House of Commons, this did not imply ruling out military actions in the meantime. As a matter of fact on 1 May British bombers carried out their first raids on the Falklands. The Argentineans’ rejection of the American proposals and the launch of the war operations forced the PCP to tighten

⁷⁹Ibid., c. 1024. The MP for South–East Essex was Sir Bernard Braine.

⁸⁰D. Borsani, *La special relationship anglo-americana e la guerra delle Falkland*, pp. 169–180.

⁸¹War “Quite Probable” Pym Tells Islanders’, *The Times*, 1 May 1982.

⁸²See Pym memorandum circulated to OD(SA) Committee: OD(SA)(82) 35, dated 29 April 1982, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/122399.

⁸³L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. II, *War and Diplomacy*, p. 191.

ranks. The support for the task force became loyalty to the Conservative leader, at least publicly. The harmony however was short term. Because of the quick deterioration of the situation, the divisions within both the Government and the Party came back to the surface. On 2 May HMS *Conqueror* torpedoed the Argentine cruiser *General Belgrano*. The cruiser sank and 321 Argentine sailors died. On the evening of 4 May other news from the Southern Atlantic worsened the situation further. The Defence Secretary reported the sinking of HMS *Sheffield* to the House of Commons: 20 men had died and 26 had been injured. The result of such a rapid escalation was a reinforcement of the ‘doves’ on the British side. The end of Haig’s shuttle diplomacy had allowed the start of a fresh initiative on the part of the President of Peru, with the support of the American Secretary of State himself. Simultaneously, the UN Secretary General, Perez De Cuellar, was trying to gain room for manoeuvres. On 2nd May he had handed to Pym a confidential document with a procedural formula for calling a truce and resuming negotiations. As Lawrence Freedman has shown, the tragic events on 2 and 4 May strengthened both the prospects of the Peruvian–US initiative and, when this eventually fell apart, the inevitability of moving the issue to the UN.⁸⁴ Margaret Thatcher had to face rising pressure for a drastic change of strategy. The Peruvian–US plan seemed to offer her opponents a good opportunity to put her in the corner. During the War Cabinet meeting on 5 May, she acknowledged the necessity to accept the American request for a truce in order to implement the Peruvian plan, even though she was ‘deeply unhappy’ about that.⁸⁵ At the full Cabinet meeting afterwards, two heavyweight ‘wets’, Jim Prior and Peter Walker, pushed for a return to diplomacy.⁸⁶ Patrick Jenkin argued that the sinking of the *Sheffield* ‘meant that Britain had to offer a ceasefire’. Whitelaw stressed the necessity of accepting the Peruvian proposals in order not to lose the support of both the USA and the House of Commons. Nigel Lawson, Keith Joseph and Michael Heseltine held up a tougher line in order not to give up what the Government had set out to achieve. Michael Jopling ‘warned that conservative MPs would see British efforts to negotiate as a climbdown after the loss of the *Sheffield*’. Eventually, following the indications of the Prime Minister, the Cabinet decided to accept the plan.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 319–344.

⁸⁵ M. Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, p. 217.

⁸⁶ ‘Cabinet Puts Diplomats Back in Business’, *The Guardian*, 6 May 1982.

⁸⁷ C. Moore, *Margaret Thatcher*, vol. 1, pp. 718–722.

They also agreed that the Foreign Secretary ‘should speak positively to the Commons about the Government’s willingness to work for a ceasefire, but that that should be dependent on a commitment by the Argentines to withdraw’.⁸⁸ That was exactly what Francis Pym did in the afternoon. During Question Time, he also expressed disagreement with Labour’s idea that there was a ‘diplomatic vacuum which only the UN could fill’.⁸⁹ However, this was immediately overtaken by the facts. On the evening of the 5th, the Argentines rejected the Peruvian–US plan.⁹⁰ As a consequence, Perez De Cuellar’s proposals came into the spotlight and the British Government was obliged to deal with them. During Prime Minister’s Questions on 6 May, Margaret Thatcher was more conciliatory than usual over the mediation option via the UN Secretary General, whilst remaining ‘very wary’ of the Argentines intentions.⁹¹ This opened up a new diplomatic phase which lasted until 19 May.

In the first period of this phase, from 6 to 11 May, the UK was able to take advantage of the rigid attitude shown by the Argentine junta.⁹² The British Government could easily insist on the point that the truce should be connected to the beginning of an Argentinean withdrawal according to Resolution 502, and that the retreat itself had to be concluded within a certain number of days. In their adoption of this position, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet were consoled by the good result obtained in the local elections held on 6 May. Opinion polls gave them an added boost. The one published by *The Economist* on 8 May registered a decrease of 5% concerning the intention to vote in favour of the Conservatives (from 43 to 38%). The same reduction applied to Margaret Thatcher’s handling of the confrontation with Argentina. Nevertheless, this latter figure stood at a very high value: 71% of the sample did in fact give a positive rating to the Prime Minister’s actions. Moreover, 53% continued to maintain that the issue of the Falklands was

⁸⁸J. Haviland, ‘Cabinet Agrees New Proposals’, *The Times*, 6 May 1982. See also the Minutes of Full Cabinet: CC(82) 23rd, 5 May 1982, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/122277.

⁸⁹House of Commons, *Official Report*, 5 May 1982, vol. 23, c. 163.

⁹⁰According to *The Guardian*, many members of the Cabinet were confident that the Argentines would have accepted the Peruvian plan and that a ceasefire would have been reached. ‘Pym Saddened by Plan’s Failure’, *The Guardian*, 7 May 1982.

⁹¹House of Commons, *Official Report*, 6 May 1982, vol. 23, c. 280.

⁹²L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. II, *War and Diplomacy*, pp. 345–354.

worth the loss of British lives. Another poll, taken on 7 May for *Weekend World*, confirmed a high level of consent for the Prime Minister's position, despite the sinking of HMS *Sheffield*.⁹³ At mid-May a MORI survey for BBC *Panorama* found 59% of the sample in favour of a full scale invasion of the Falklands.⁹⁴

In this context, on 7 May, Pym made clear to the Commons that the Government had responded positively to the ideas proposed by De Cuellar; that these proposals were substantially aiming to reach a negotiated settlement of the dispute; that the Government regarded the implementation of Resolution 502 to be a *sine qua non*.⁹⁵ However, all this did not slow down the preparation for a counter-invasion of the Falklands. On 7 May *The Times* reported that the Prime Minister had 'secured the authority of the full Cabinet for an attack on airbases in mainland Argentina if this' was 'seen as imperative for the protection of the task force'.⁹⁶ On 6 May, in fact, more than 20 Tory backbenchers, 'including several senior members of the party', tabled a Commons motion calling for 'whatever measures should prove necessary' to eliminate the capacity of the Argentine forces to inflict unacceptable losses on the task force. The motion was then signed by many others, not only of the right wing of the Party. That was of course a consequence of HMS *Sheffield's* sinking.⁹⁷ On the 7th, Pym reaffirmed in a press conference that the British Government would not exclude any military measure, even the bombing of the Argentinean bases on the mainland.⁹⁸

⁹³ *Weekend World* issued the poll on 9 May: 59% of the sample expressed strong support for the Government's policy in the South Atlantic, 55% thought the recovery of the islands was worth the loss of British lives, while 70% were ready to back an invasion on the islands if this was the only means to achieve Argentine withdrawal. See 'Public Opinion Background Note 112', 10 May 1982, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/123624. See also *The Economist*, 8 May 1982, p. 30.

⁹⁴ 'Public Opinion Background Note 112', 17 May 1982, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/123625.

⁹⁵ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 7 May 1982, vol. 23, cc. 395–403.

⁹⁶ J. Haviland, 'Junta Wrecks Hopes of Ceasefire by Refusing to Withdraw', *The Times*, 7 May 1982.

⁹⁷ G. Clark, 'Bomb Argentine Air Bases Say Senior Tory MPs', *The Times*, 7 May 1982. The motion was tabled by Ian Lloyd and the main sponsors were Sir Anthony Kershaw, Sir William Clark, Sir Patrick Wall and Sir Frederic Bennett. The MPs who first signed the motion were George Gardiner, James Hill, John Stokes, Peter Lloyd, Trevor Skeet, Tony Marlow, John Carlisle, Neil Thorne, Ivor Stanbrook, Percy Grieve, David Bevan, Mark Wolfson, Eldon Griffiths, Geoffrey Dickens, Paul Hawkins and John Hannan.

⁹⁸ A. Bevins, 'Pym Gives Warning on Further Bombing', *The Times*, 8 May 1982.

On the evening of the 7th the MoD announced the extension of the TEZ: 'any Argentine warship or military aircraft which' was 'found more than 12 nautical miles from the Argentine coast' would 'be regarded as hostile and ... liable to be dealt with accordingly'.⁹⁹ In any case, the Government also tried to avoid the interpretation of this as the start of an escalation and at the weekend John Nott went so far as to declare that a blockade of the islands was one of the possible options.¹⁰⁰

Tuesday 11 May marked the transition to a second period which was much more difficult for the Prime Minister, both on the Parliamentary level and, most of all, on the diplomatic one. That same day the British representative to the UN, Anthony Parsons, announced that the Argentines had declared that they were willing to accept the British method and language in the course of the negotiations. This changed the whole picture. At that point it was London which was under pressure, having to decide if it would be better to make a concession as well, in order to keep the dialogue going, or to walk away from the table altogether and accept the consequences. If this second option was not even to be considered, the first would be difficult to carry out. According to Margaret Thatcher, the UK had already agreed many concessions. The War Cabinet meetings on 12 and 13 May were unable to lead to an agreement on a new concession and Parsons had to juggle to gain time in his meetings with Perez De Cuellar. The situation was made even more delicate by the pressure from the USA, which hoped to reach a negotiated solution. On the 14th the War Cabinet made the only possible decision to stop temporarily the talks in New York: Parsons was recalled to London for consultations and to help draft a definitive set of proposals that Britain could agree on.¹⁰¹

The signs of a softening of the junta, coming from New York, increased the room for manoeuvre for those who desired to avoid a counter-invasion of the Falklands at all costs. Question Time on the 11th was the stage for a particularly severe confrontation between Mrs Thatcher and Michael Foot. The Leader of the Opposition asked six times for the House to be

⁹⁹H. Stanhope, 'Blockade Extended to 12 Miles from Coast of Argentina', *The Times*, 8 May 1982.

¹⁰⁰The option, obviously, was immediately relaunched by Michael Foot. See A. Bevins, 'Foot Welcomes the Long Siege Option', *The Times*, 10 May 1982; 'Foot Rallies to Nott's Hint of a Lengthy Blockade', *The Guardian*, 10 May 1982.

¹⁰¹L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. II, *War and Diplomacy*, pp. 345–367.

given the opportunity to judge the UN proposals on the table, thus asserting Parliament's supremacy. The Prime Minister opposed harshly, claiming the Government's full decisional rights.¹⁰² Still on the 11th, the Cabinet decided to take another week to consider if De Cuellar's mediations could result in a diplomatic solution to the crisis. According to *The Times*, Pym was authorised by his colleagues 'to go as far as he wishes to secure a settlement in the next few days, if one is to be had'.¹⁰³

The new scenario generated worries throughout the more intransigent backbenchers. On the one hand the nervousness exploded against the BBC as guilty of having given too much space to those Conservative MPs, such as Anthony Meyer and David Crouch, 'who disagreed with their Government's policy'.¹⁰⁴ On the other hand the pressure on the Government intensified so that it would not accept a diplomatic agreement which implied a sell-out of Britain's basic principles. Between 11 and 12 May there was a chain of Tory backbenchers meetings, including the powerful Foreign Affairs Committee. It was not only right-wing Conservatives who were worried. There was also increasing unease among many MPs who were not in the right wing of the Party. The problem was that the scenario under discussion at the UN did not foresee the reinstatement of the British administration in the Falklands and therefore sacrificed the crucial aspect which the Government, and consequently the Conservative Party, had committed to.¹⁰⁵ In this context, for the 'doves', the House of Commons was the ideal place to try and add weight to their cause and especially their numbers, giving birth to a cross-party majority able to influence the Government. Precisely for this reason the 'hawks' considered the House of Commons to be very slippery ground. Therefore, when on 12 May the Leader of the House announced that a new debate on the Falklands would take place the following day, Sir Hugh Fraser and John Stokes vividly protested.¹⁰⁶ Stokes stated the key words which had always been used to label as betrayal any attempt by the FCO to resolve the Falklands problem: 'Today I hear

¹⁰²House of Commons, *Official Report*, 11 May 1982, vol. 23, cc. 596–601.

¹⁰³J. Haviland, 'Thatcher Prepared to Wait', *The Times*, 12 May 1982.

¹⁰⁴G. Boyce, *The Falklands War*, p. 161.

¹⁰⁵I. Aitken, 'Tories Think Pym Is Too Soft', *The Guardian*, 12 May 1982. See also J. Haviland, 'Tories Uneasy Over Pym's Attitude', *The Times*, 13 May 1982.

¹⁰⁶House of Commons, *Official Report*, 12 May 1982, vol. 23, cc. 749–750.

rumours that Downing Street is full of cameras and talk of a sell-out. If there is a sell-out, no debate will be necessary; something much graver will be required'.¹⁰⁷

In fact the Commons debate on 13 May was a very critical moment, with Ted Heath's voice being added to the usual convergence between Pym and the Labour Party's leadership. Actually his speech was 'the main drama of the day'.¹⁰⁸ Beforehand, the former Prime Minister had never spoken on the crisis, either in the House or outside. His decision to speak for the first time at a particularly delicate moment and in clear opposition to the Prime Minister was a signal that the outcome of the talks in New York could be a decisive step towards the showdown within the Conservative Party.

The Foreign Secretary opened up the debate by giving an overview of the negotiations and by stressing the sticking points from the British point of view: the timing of the mutual withdrawal, the features of the interim administration, the necessity that the outcome of the long-term negotiations would not be prejudged in advance.¹⁰⁹ He was interrupted seven times, in four cases by Tory MPs. All of them were on the right wing of the Conservative Party: Julian Amery, Stephen Hastings, Alan Clark and Bernard Braine. The last three especially raised sensitive issues. Hastings asked whether the supposed interim administration by a small group of nations implied 'the return of British troops and a British element among those nations'; that is the admission that the Government was definitely going to give up the commitment to the restoration of a British administration of some kind.¹¹⁰ Braine subsequently asked Pym whether Argentina would be excluded from the interim administration.¹¹¹ The Foreign Secretary equivocated without giving a clear answer. He only ruled out any arrangements which debarred some role for 'the administrative experience of the British inhabitants of the islands'.¹¹² Clark explicitly highlighted the differences between Thatcher and Pym: while the former had asserted that the British withdrawal would not have begun before

¹⁰⁷Ibid., c. 749.

¹⁰⁸I. Aitken, 'Angry Tories Round on Pym in Sell-Out Row', *The Guardian*, 14 May 1982.

¹⁰⁹House of Commons, *Official Report*, 13 May 1982, vol. 23, cc. 952–958.

¹¹⁰Ibid., c. 955.

¹¹¹Ibid., c. 957.

¹¹²Ibid.

the completion of the Argentine withdrawal, now the latter was arguing that the British one would start immediately after the demonstration of the Argentine readiness to withdraw. Pym prevaricated again: ‘the Prime Minister may have said that, although I did not hear it’. In any case, ‘precise arrangements’ remained ‘to be settled’.¹¹³ These were important alarm bells for the more intransigent Tories. The concern was reinforced by the conclusion of Pym’s speech, in which, while not excluding military intervention, he gave credit to the new Argentinean attitude.¹¹⁴

The next speech, made by the Shadow Foreign Secretary, Denis Healey, was in total support of the position taken by the Foreign Secretary. He also lent support to the more slippery topic of not requesting the Argentines’ unconditional withdrawal¹¹⁵ and asked the Government to ‘not be put off by strident voices from the militarist tendency on the Conservative Back Benches’.¹¹⁶

But the highlight of the day was, as anticipated, Ted Heath’s speech,¹¹⁷ who took the floor right after the Labour Deputy Leader. Heath immediately made his views clear:

I want to say how much I agree with what the Foreign Secretary has said today in his account of the negotiations so far, the negotiating position he has taken up and the considerations of which he believes he ought to take account.¹¹⁸

Heath recalled that Resolution 502 requested explicitly that the UK and Argentina reached a diplomatic solution to their differences. This request was part of the Resolution, as much as the retreat of the Argentineans

¹¹³Ibid., cc. 956–357.

¹¹⁴‘There have been some indications—actually the first since the crisis began—of genuine Argentine willingness to negotiate on some of the important points. There will have to be more if we are to succeed. The Government remained determined to see the implementation of the mandatory resolution of the Security Council. As before, we infinitely prefer to achieve this by negotiations, and we are bending our most strenuous efforts to this end. At the same time our military presence in the South Atlantic continues to become stronger. If, in the end, Argentine intransigence prevents success in negotiations, Argentina will know that the alternative is another kind of ending to the crisis. We do not want that, but we are ready for it. As it has been throughout this crisis, the choice lies with those who rule Argentina.’ Ibid., c. 958.

¹¹⁵Ibid., c. 962.

¹¹⁶Ibid., c. 961.

¹¹⁷Ibid., cc. 964–969.

¹¹⁸Ibid., c. 964.

was. It was also necessary to remember that the Prime Minister and the FCO Secretary had always supported the theory that the task force was sent as an instrument to support the diplomatic offensive. This, however, implied working towards granting a way out to the Argentines. This was increasingly necessary because the invasion had called into question the whole defence policy of the UK. Even taking into account the islanders' wishes, a right to veto could not be granted. 'The implications for this country of accepting that veto are so great in every respect that I do not believe that the Government are any longer justified in taking up that position.'¹¹⁹ At this point, the reaction of the Conservative backbenchers exploded. Nicholas Winterton, Ivor Stanbrook and Sir Bernard Braine attacked Heath, resorting to the usual arguments of the principles of sovereignty and the right to self-determination. They also accused him of being the main sponsor of the 'Foreign Office sell-out'. Heath counter-attacked by underlining the senselessness of his critics' reasoning:

In a dispute about the group of islands, a solution must be negotiated. We have all said that the interests of the Falkland Islanders must be taken into account. There is a variety of ways of dealing with those interests. The point is connected with that of world opinion. Britain has immense interests in Latin America as well as in the Falkland Islands. We should not forget that. The responsibility for safeguarding those interests rests on the Government in their negotiations. There was a time when the world thought that we were rather astute at looking after our interests wherever they were. We must do that. They are widespread.

In other words, the Falklanders should not be 'the determining factor of the whole of British naval strategy in the South Atlantic'.¹²⁰ Heath pointed out the groundlessness of the two other arguments, which were often used by the hardliners. It was senseless stating that the task force 'could not possibly be brought back without action'. Since the Government had repeated more than once that the task force's goal was to strengthen the UK's negotiating position, 'if diplomacy is successful, the task force has achieved its purpose'.¹²¹ Not even anti-fascism was a valid reason to resort to the use of force:

¹¹⁹Ibid., c. 966.

¹²⁰Ibid., c. 967.

¹²¹Ibid., c. 968.

Nor are we taking action because the Argentine Government can be described as Fascist or as one that has a disgraceful record of human rights. I sometimes feel that the attitude of some Opposition Members is motivated or coloured by that. We are dealing with this because there has been aggression against the Falkland Islands. If other types of Government had done that, we would have been in exactly the same position. Fascism or a disgraceful record on human rights should not be allowed to colour the issue. We did not fight Hitler or Mussolini because they were dictators or because of their internal policies. We fought them because they had reached such a state of power that they were a menace to vital British interests. We must always consider vital British interests.¹²²

Enoch Powell's speech was the counter-balance to Heath's. Powell started from an undeniable fact: the Government had the right to make the policy it considered the most appropriate. However, such a right was matched by a duty: 'that they do not change the major outlines of policy upon which, with the approval of the House, they have acted without the change being clearly understood and equally approved by the House'.¹²³ The fleet set sail with the support of the whole House, since disagreements had been individual. The Government declared that its goals were the withdrawal of the Argentines and the restoration of the British administration. Accepting agreements that entailed some kind of interim administration meant going off-road from the designated route. Even negotiating a definitive agreement meant denying the principle for which the whole operation was justified: the defence of the self-determination of the Falklanders. The responsibilities, therefore, were clear:

The Foreign Office on behalf of this country has agreed to a series of propositions which differ radically from the basis upon which this whole operation was undertaken and on which it was supposed by the country.¹²⁴

It was obvious that within the Government there was a clear contradiction that had to be resolved:

¹²²Ibid.

¹²³Ibid., c. 976.

¹²⁴Ibid., c. 977.

It may well be that the Foreign Secretary is not in agreement with his colleagues in the Cabinet. It may be that the divergence to which I have drawn attention and which I believe is indisputable represents an internal difference of opinion in the Government. If so, the right hon. Gentleman can resolve it. If he is not agreed with his colleagues on the purposes for which this operation is being conducted, there is an honourable course that he can take. But it is not only to the right hon. Gentleman that this is addressed, nor upon him alone that the duty rests. The supreme duty to maintain the unity of the Government rests upon the Prime Minister. She owes to the country, to the forces and to the Falkland Islanders to restore the unity of the Government, to restore the clarity of purpose upon the basis of which the whole operation began and in the name of which alone we in the House are entitled to call upon our forces and our people for sacrifice.¹²⁵

It was the second time, after the debate of 3 April, that Powell reminded the Prime Minister of her responsibilities as a leader.

Heath and Powell's speeches were two crucial moments of the debate in the Conservative camp. The Tory MPs who spoke reacted primarily to their own words, rather than to that of the Foreign Secretary. Those who could be placed in the right wing of the Conservative Party, or had right-wing views on foreign affairs, had no doubts about which of the two speakers they preferred. As far as Stephen Hastings was concerned, Powell had made 'an impressive speech'. Hastings agreed on the fact that a possible failure to restore the British administration would mean a failure on the part of the Government. The UN mediation was unable to do anything but gain precious time for the Argentines, whilst the FCO would have had to abandon finally the 'specious arguments about the Falklands being an unnecessary embarrassment to us'.¹²⁶ Even according to Michael Colvin, Powell was right when he stated that the House had 'spoken for the nation to the government'. The Government therefore had to be coherent to the stated objectives and resort to arms if the Argentines did not withdraw.¹²⁷ Probably not a few Tory backbenchers shared James Hill's words:

¹²⁵Ibid., c. 978.

¹²⁶Ibid., cc. 1016–1019.

¹²⁷Ibid., cc. 995–999.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Sidcup (Mr. Heath), for whom I have a great deal of admiration, made a speech today parts of which I could not agree with. When there was an intervention from the Opposition he had an admirable chance to take the side of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.¹²⁸ It was perhaps a little sad that he did not take the opportunity once and for all to confirm that his support is completely with the Government in this matter and that he no longer wishes to sit on the fence. If my right hon. Friend can correct that in the not-too-distant future, his admirers will gather force again.¹²⁹

In fact, many MPs not attributable to the right wing of the Party manifested their disagreement with Heath, also because they considered his behaviour to be disloyal. Maurice Macmillan defended the Government's willingness to negotiate up until the last minute, therefore criticising Powell. However, he dedicated much more space to dismantling Heath's arguments.¹³⁰ The One-Nation Tory William Benyon supported the essence of Powell's speech: the retreat of the Argentines and the reinstatement of British sovereignty were the essential, non-negotiable conditions. Any other solution would be a success for the aggressors.¹³¹ William Rees-Davies stated that he was 'immensely impressed by the speech made by the right hon. Member for Down, South' and he agreed that the Government had to 'stand for the principles for which we stood when we sent the task force'. Therefore, the FCO had to abandon its 'flabby attitude'. If the Argentineans did not withdraw within ten days, the Government would take back the islands by force. Rees-Davies however was open to the possibility of a UN trusteeship or to a 'Cyprus-style' solution, but only after an Argentinean withdrawal and without the implication of a retreat by the British

¹²⁸The Labour MP, Sydney Bidwell, had asked Heath whether he had 'any advice to offer the present Prime Minister in her exchanges with my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, about the manner in which, when the Government's position is rounded out, it should be brought to the House of Commons first'. Heath answered as follows: 'It is not for me to interfere between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. I am sparing in my advice anyway'. *Ibid.*, cc. 967–968.

¹²⁹*Ibid.*, c. 1003.

¹³⁰*Ibid.*, cc. 981–984.

¹³¹*Ibid.*, cc. 990–991.

forces.¹³² Keith Best was also open to the possibility of a UN trusteeship, but only after the withdrawal of the Argentines. If Buenos Aires refused to abandon the Falklands the Government would have to use force.¹³³ The only person to express explicit support for Francis Pym and his work was Peter Griffiths.¹³⁴

Far from reassuring the Tory backbenchers, the debate alarmed them even more. During the meeting of the 1922 Committee of 13 May Pym's speech was strongly criticised by Julian Amery, Eldon Griffiths, Kenneth Warren and Patrick Cormack.¹³⁵ The most belligerent within the PCP reiterated their threat 'to resign the whip rather than swallow anything they would regard as a sell-out'.¹³⁶ On Friday the 14th the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Conference in Perth gave the leadership the right occasion to try and reassure the Party rank and file. Margaret Thatcher and John Nott touched the emotional chords of patriotism and reasserted their commitment to defend the principles stated at the start of the crisis and strongly reaffirmed that, even though the Government wanted 'a peaceful settlement', it rejected 'a peaceful sell-out'.¹³⁷ John Nott restated this in an interview that he gave to the BBC Radio programme *The World This Weekend*.¹³⁸

The accusation of a sell-out added one more reason—if it had been necessary to do so—to keep the military pressure on Argentina high and show that negotiating did not mean the British Government had to give up its position. So at the morning meeting of 14 May, the War Cabinet discussed for the first time the details and prospects of Operation Sutton, the landing plan for the counter-invasion of the Falklands. At the same meeting, a special forces raid against Rio Grande airfield was approved. This was a thorny matter, because it was about attacking a military target on the Argentine mainland. On the night of 14–15 May a fully successful raid against Pebble Island airfield

¹³²Ibid., cc. 1007–1009.

¹³³Ibid., cc. 1011–1013.

¹³⁴Ibid., cc. 1022–1023.

¹³⁵See Ian Gow's notes of the meeting, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/151095.

¹³⁶I. Aitken, 'Angry Tories Round on Pym in Sell-Out Row', *The Guardian*, 14 May 1982.

¹³⁷M. Thatcher, *Speech to the Scottish Conservative Party Conference*, www.margaret-thatcher.org/document/104936; and J. Wills, 'Nott Dismisses Rumours of Falkland Sell-Out', *The Times*, 15 May 1982.

¹³⁸J. Haviland, 'Nott Says Allies Must Back Island Assault', *The Times*, 17 May 1982.

(West Falkland) was carried out.¹³⁹ On 17 May, *The Times* announced further similar raids, whilst *The Guardian* stressed the mounting expectation among the PCP for an assault on the islands.¹⁴⁰

The 16 May was a crucial date on the diplomatic front. In a long and tense meeting at Chequers, the members of the War Cabinet, Tony Parsons and the British Ambassador in Washington, Nicholas Henderson, managed to win Margaret Thatcher's resistance to elaborating a set of proposals to grant something more regarding the last British position presented to De Cuellar. Although with much reluctance, the Prime Minister had to bow down to pressure and eventually accepted the impossibility of a full return to the status quo, the commitment to debate the sovereignty over the islands, and some form of provisional administration that foresaw a role, however limited, for the Argentines. By the admission of Parsons himself, 'in terms of concessions' the final draft took the UK Government a 'long way from' the 'original negotiating position'.¹⁴¹ This constituted the final British proposal for reaching an agreement. The deadline for a reply was fixed for 19 May at midday New York time.¹⁴²

Pending a response, on the 18th the War Cabinet approved the plans for a counter-invasion.¹⁴³ On the political level, attempts were made to calm the waters among the backbenchers. Both Margaret Thatcher and Francis Pym declared that there was a total agreement of positions within the Cabinet.¹⁴⁴ Pym, in particular, managed to calm down the Conservative MPs present at the Tory Foreign Affairs Committee's meeting on the 17th. He reassured the 'doves' by maintaining that some channel for dialogue would be kept open regardless of the Argentines' response. At the same time, he reassured the 'hawks' that the British position in the negotiations would become more rigid once the landing

¹³⁹L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. II, *War and Diplomacy*, pp. 435–436.

¹⁴⁰J. Haviland, 'Harriers Strike Again as Suspicions Over Argentina Grow', *The Times*, 17 May 1982; 'Last Chance Talks Begin at the UN', *The Guardian*, 17 May 1982.

¹⁴¹C. Moore, *Margaret Thatcher*, vol. I, p. 727.

¹⁴²N. Henderson, *Mandarin: The Diaries of an Ambassador 1969–1982*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1994, pp. 461–462; and M. Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, pp. 222–223.

¹⁴³Minutes of the OD(SA) (82) 37th Meeting, 18 May 1982, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/122340.

¹⁴⁴Margaret Thatcher radio interview for IRN, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104938.

was successfully completed.¹⁴⁵ Only Anthony Meyer openly criticised the Government, comparing its policy to that of Begin.¹⁴⁶

This concern aimed at backbenchers, in effect, helped to calm things down. But what more than anything else simplified the situation within the PCP was that Buenos Aires also rejected the proposals drawn up on 16 May. De Cuellar and Haig attempted *in extremis* to revive the negotiations, finding once again the cooperation of the Foreign Secretary. The Cabinet however decided otherwise.¹⁴⁷ Nonetheless, the differences between the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary were revealed yet again in the parliamentary debate on 20 May. The Prime Minister focused her attention on the fact that the proposals of the 16th were ‘no longer on the table’. She also avoided anything that would have given rise to the idea that the Government had left a door open to possible future negotiations based on the circumstances of war.¹⁴⁸ The Foreign Secretary, on the other hand, did not miss the opportunity to underline the similarity of his views to the Deputy Leader of the Labour Party about the fact that it was necessary to continue to exercise military and diplomatic pressures together. Therefore, withdrawing the proposals of 16 May ‘does not in any way mean that we are no longer prepared to talk or that we will not follow up with imagination and energy any ideas which may lead to a fair settlement’.¹⁴⁹

As for the PCP, it proved to be solid at least on this crucial point: all the Tory MPs took it for granted that, at that point, the invasion was the only available option. The confrontation however moved towards other questions. Should the most recent proposals made by the British Government be pulled back or should they remain on the table? Was it necessary to continue with the negotiations even after the landing? What actions would need to be taken after completing the recapture of the islands?

All those who spoke agreed on the fact that the recent proposals rejected by Buenos Aires should be taken off the table. Julian Amery,

¹⁴⁵‘Back to Square One on a Deal Once We Win, Pym Declares’, *The Guardian*, 19 May 1982.

¹⁴⁶J. Haviland, ‘Pym Still Sees Slight Hope of Falklands Peace’, *The Times*, 19 May 1982.

¹⁴⁷C. Moore, *Margaret Thatcher*, vol. 1, pp. 730–731.

¹⁴⁸House of Commons, *Official Report*, 20 May 1982, vol. 24, cc. 477–483.

¹⁴⁹*Ibid.*, cc. 551–560.

David Atkinson, Ian Lloyd and John Stokes declared that they were proposals which would hardly be accepted by a not irrelevant group of the PCP.¹⁵⁰ Two MPs, Paul Bryan and David Crouch, stated that the Government should, in any case, remain open to some sort of negotiation over the next few weeks, even if the proposals would have to be adapted to the circumstances of the moment, in order not to lose the advantages gained during the battle. Crouch was the one who spoke most strongly about the need to continue ‘to keep the diplomatic door open’, whilst warning about the negative consequences of the imminent escalation in terms of international support. He declared his commitment to the line taken by the Foreign Secretary, namely that the negotiable solution was always the preferred one, even in the new phase.¹⁵¹ Bryan also expressed clear appreciation and gratitude for the work carried out by the FCO.¹⁵² As for the long-term settlement, none of the speakers exposed themselves to speculation about solutions that would cause the disruption of the UK’s administration. Only Stokes suggested the possibility of magnanimity after the victory, with the possible involvement of Australia and New Zealand, and maybe allowing ‘Argentina a place in the development of the assets of the whole of the Antarctic’.¹⁵³ According, however, to Amery, Lloyd and Braine, at this point the only possible solution was purely and simply to return to the situation before the Argentinean invasion. Braine said that the British people would ‘never forgive a government who, having expelled the invader from our territory, then submits to pressures which, in the end, gives Argentina what it wants’.¹⁵⁴ Atkinson thought that giving up the energy resources present in the seabed around the archipelago would have been foolish. Neil Thorne was also on the same wavelength. He tried to deconstruct the argument that the lack of a long-term agreement with Argentina would have resulted in too high a cost for the defence of the Falklands. According to Thorne, the current crisis would have rendered superfluous the permanence of a substantial garrison on the islands. In fact the experience

¹⁵⁰Ibid., cc. 494, 520, 540, 545.

¹⁵¹Ibid., cc. 527–530.

¹⁵²Ibid., cc. 498–500.

¹⁵³Ibid., c. 545.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., c. 534.

gained would have allowed for a similar operation in the Ascension Islands to be set up. There was also the possibility for logistical agreements with Chile.¹⁵⁵

4 TOWARDS VICTORY

On 21 May the landing operations began. Discussion in the Conservative camp from that moment was about what had already emerged in the last Commons debate. The dichotomy between the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary was reformulated around the question as to whether the beginning of this new phase of the conflict would close the door or not on the possibility of a negotiated solution. Margaret Thatcher judged that there was no longer any chance of this possibility after the rejection of the British proposals on 16 May. From the moment in which the British troops set foot on the Falklands, she remained firm that only after the unconditional withdrawal of the Argentineans would she be able to stop the recovery *manu militari*.¹⁵⁶ From 21 May Francis Pym continued to affirm that, if the Argentines changed their attitude, the space for negotiation could still be reopened.¹⁵⁷ Obviously the question was strictly connected to the post-war arrangement. For the Foreign Secretary ‘what one would hope to see at the end of it all, despite what Argentina did, is that there can be friendships rebuilt, and stability and peace, and that’s the way to create prosperity and happiness for the people living there’.¹⁵⁸ There was a geographical logic which required negotiations to be either early or late. According to Pym, therefore, it was necessary to remain within the perimeter designed by Resolution 502. Obtaining, therefore, the Argentines’ withdrawal was fundamental, but so was negotiating with them for a lasting settlement. Ted Heath expressed his support for this position at the beginning of

¹⁵⁵Ibid., cc. 514–517.

¹⁵⁶House of Commons, *Official Report*, 25 May 1982, vol. 24, cc. 789–794 and 27 May 1982, vol. 24, cc. 1049–1052.

¹⁵⁷‘Door to Negotiations Stays Open, Says Pym’, *The Times*, 22 May 1982.

¹⁵⁸Interview given to Thames Television’s *TV Eye* of the 27 May, reported in J. Haviland, ‘Pym Hope of Lasting Peace for Islanders’, *The Times*, 28 May 1982.

June.¹⁵⁹ The Prime Minister's position was backed by two other members of the War Cabinet. Cecil Parkinson in a radio interview on the BBC's *World This Weekend* stated that any transfer of sovereignty over the Falklands was 'ruled out "way into the foreseeable future"'. This implied accepting the consequential cost:

Having taken the islands we have to be prepared as a nation to pay the price of keeping them until we can arrive at a future for the islands which is acceptable to the islanders and to ourselves. I would have thought the whole country would be united in agreeing that the first priority now is to regain possession of the islands and to liberate the Falklanders—then to consider the range of options open to us always in the closest possible consultation with the islanders.¹⁶⁰

Even John Nott used similar arguments in his reply to John Silkin in the House on 24 May:

At the moment we must concentrate on the military aim of repossessing the Falkland Islands. Any question of talks about the long-term future of the Falkland Islanders must be left aside for the moment. The crucial thing is that we should find out the wishes of the Falkland Islanders. We can do that properly when we have repossessed the islands.

Nonetheless he conceded 'that eventually some long-term accommodation will be needed between the Falkland Islands and other countries in that area'.¹⁶¹ Once more, it was Enoch Powell who mercilessly underlined the contradictions present within the Government. Speaking after Nott's communication, which announced the British disembarkation in San Carlos Bay, Powell asked bluntly:

While all this is going on, why is the Foreign Secretary still permitted to continue to use language that is plainly incompatible with our continued possession of the islands in the long term?¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹D. Brown, 'Foot and Owen Emphasise Need for Negotiations', *The Guardian*, 2 June 1982.

¹⁶⁰P. Webster, 'Tory View Hardens on Sovereignty Transfer', *The Times*, 24 May 1982.

¹⁶¹House of Commons, *Official Report*, 24 May 1982, vol. 24, c. 649.

¹⁶²*Ibid.*, c. 651.

At the end of May, the relationship between Thatcher and Pym reached its lowest level, so much so that according to *The Times* ‘some of Mrs Thatcher’s senior ministerial colleagues have begun to vilify Mr Pym in the most disparaging personal terms, in private Commons conversation, even with MPs of other parties’.¹⁶³ Obviously the new phase of the conflict started by the landing reduced the popularity of Pym’s position among the Conservative backbenchers. The Foreign Secretary could, however, count on the support of ‘a strong cross-party mix of MPs who want to see the eventual reestablishment of friendly relations with Buenos Aires’.¹⁶⁴ The most important support, however, was that of the Labour Party. Michael Foot reiterated both in the House¹⁶⁵ and outside¹⁶⁶ his backing for the political line pursued by the Foreign Secretary. In addition, Pym’s position continued to be the one capable of best satisfying the international pressure to put an end to hostilities. The launch of the land campaign, in fact, did not stop the work of diplomacy. The Americans continued to put pressure on the British to offer an honourable way out to the Argentines. The UN Security Council continued to play a crucial part. On Ireland’s initiative, on 25 May the Security Council approved Resolution 505, which gave the Secretary General the task of making one further effort to reach a truce.¹⁶⁷

The resumption of the UN activism coincided with the end of the landing operation, the latter of which had last seen the sinking of HMS *Coventry* and the merchant ship *Atlantic Conveyor*. All these circumstances, as a whole, made it urgent for the Prime Minister to resolve the conflict as soon as possible, knowing that the longer it lasted, the more difficult the political situation would become.¹⁶⁸ The situation seemed still fluid enough to leave room for various solutions. Indicative of this point of view was the fact that on the eve of the spring recess the right-wing

¹⁶³A. Bevens, ‘Colleagues Vilify Pym as Split with Thatcher Widens’, *The Times*, 31 May 1982.

¹⁶⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵House of Commons, *Official Report*, 25 May 1982, vol. 24, cc. 789–794.

¹⁶⁶G. Clark, ‘Foot Sides with Pym on British Commitment’, *The Times*, 1 June 1982.

¹⁶⁷L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. II, *War and Diplomacy*, pp. 516–524 and 527–529.

¹⁶⁸John Nott announced the Government’s intentions in a meeting with the Conservative backbenchers on the evening of 26 May. See J. Haviland, ‘Land Battle Soon Nott Tells MPs’, *The Times*, 27 May 1982.

Conservative MP John Stokes urged the Leader of the House not to give into possible requests to call back the House.¹⁶⁹ In other words, ‘the War Party’ believed ‘that one more round of casualties, followed by any wavering in the opinion polls, could bring the party out against the venture and bring new strength to the Negotiating Party within the Government’.¹⁷⁰ In this respect, however, the recess served to ease the parliamentary pressure on the Government. In addition to this, there was the smooth running of the military operation and the success of the Conservative candidate in the by-election for Merton Mitcham and Morden. For the first time since 1960, the ruling Party’s candidate managed to snatch the seat from the opposition party, with 4274 votes more than the second candidate. The main worries continued to come from the UN. On 2 June, Perez De Cuellar reported to the Council the negative outcome of the mediation that followed Resolution 505. Panama and Spain immediately presented a draft of a resolution which authorised the Secretary General to apply all the necessary measures for an immediate ceasefire. The British representative had to resort to the veto.¹⁷¹

The pursuit of unconditional surrender brought with it the consequence of exclusion of any type of role for Argentina ‘in anything related to sovereignty’. The Prime Minister asked Lord Shackleton to update his report of 1976. She also considered the possibility of international protection of the islands, with the involvement of the USA.¹⁷² In fact, on around 3 June the Prime Minister seemed ready to assert the UK’s full commitment to the development of the Falkland Islands.¹⁷³ This principle was reiterated even louder by Parkinson on 6 June. In the meantime, the possibility of involving the USA in a plan of international cooperation to guarantee the protection of the Falkland Islanders vanished. The USA, in fact, subordinated their involvement to the resumption of dialogue between London and Buenos Aires on the future of the Islands.¹⁷⁴ This

¹⁶⁹House of Commons, *Official Report*, 27 May 1982, vol. 24, c. 1056.

¹⁷⁰F. Johnson, ‘Ten Days That Will Shake Some of Their Worlds’, *The Times*, 28 May 1982.

¹⁷¹L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, vol. II, *War and Diplomacy*, pp. 531–536.

¹⁷²P. Webster, ‘Thatcher Has Little Hope That Battle Can Be Avoided’, *The Times*, 3 June 1982.

¹⁷³N. Ashford, ‘Thatcher Wants Increase in Falklands Population’, *The Times*, 4 June 1982.

¹⁷⁴J. Haviland, ‘Hopes Fade for US Occupation’, *The Times*, 9 June 1982.

was an unacceptable request at one step away from victory.¹⁷⁵ On 10 June it was William Whitelaw who clarified things in his reply to Michael Foot during Question Time:

Since our landings on the islands and the losses that we have incurred, it is unthinkable to negotiate about the future of the islands as if everything was as it had been before. As I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will accept, the situation has moved on and the islanders will need a breathing space before they can express their views about their future. I am sure that all hon. Members would wish them to do that.¹⁷⁶

Four days later, Margaret Thatcher announced to the House that the Argentinean troops concentrated in Port Stanley had raised the white flag.

¹⁷⁵J. Haviland, 'Thatcher Pledge on Islands' Future', *The Times*, 10 June 1982.

¹⁷⁶House of Commons, *Official Report*, 10 June 1982, vol. 25, cc. 388–389.



The Labour Party

According to Tam Dalyell, two contingent and fortuitous occurrences strongly conditioned the Labour Party's response to the Argentine attack on the Falkland Islands. Firstly the fact that neither Michael Foot nor Denis Healey were in London on Friday 2 April. As a consequence, on that day, the acting leader of the PLP was John Silkin, Shadow Defence Secretary and Shadow Leader of the House of Commons. When at 11 a.m. the Lord Privy Seal announced as imminent an Argentine attack, Silkin committed the Party to the 'full support for the right of the people of the Falkland Islands to stay British' and branded Galtieri and his fellows a 'tinpot Fascist junta'.¹ The second occurrence was the interview given by Silkin himself on the BBC's *World at One* later that day. When asked whether the UK should have committed to supporting the Falklanders up to the point of taking up arms against the Argentines, Silkin answered without hesitation: 'certainly!'. The media exposure was crucial: 'from that moment the PLP leadership was on a motorway which perhaps it never really intended to travel, but from which there was no obvious exit'. In Dalyell's opinion, had Denis Healey been in London on 2 April, he would have displayed a more cautious approach.² In fact, in his memoirs, Healey considered to have been an error the bellicose attitude of the Labour Party in the first stage of the crisis. However, Healey related

¹House of Commons, *Official Report*, 2 April 1982, vol. 21, c. 571.

²T. Dalyell, *One Man's Falklands*, London, Cecil Woolf, 1982, pp. 46–49. See also the transcription of Silkin's interview at pp. 138–139.

such an assessment to the speech of Michael Foot on 3 April: that was the defining moment in the shaping of the Labour Party's attitude at the outbreak of the crisis.³ Foot fully agreed with what Silkin had said both in the House and to the BBC and there is no reason to believe that without the Shadow Defence Secretary's statements he would have set out his speech in the emergency debate on 3 April differently.⁴

Actually many Labour MPs looked at the crisis in the South Atlantic with the memories of the European crisis of the 1930s in their minds. The need not to accept a *fait accompli* and not to give in to the temptation of 'appeasement' went far beyond John Silkin's personal belief.⁵

One more factor helped to shape the attitude of many Labour MPs in the crisis. During the 1970s the Labour movement had repeatedly raised the issue of the defence of human rights under the dictatorial regimes in Latin America, particularly in Chile and Argentina. The greater the weight of the Left within the National Executive Committee of the Party, the more the commitment on these issues increased. The draft manifesto approved at the Labour Annual Conference in 1980 affirmed the party's commitment to avoiding a situation where the Falklanders would 'be handed over to any Argentinian regime which violates human and civil rights'.⁶ When Argentina invaded the Falklands, the NEC was discussing the Labour Programme draft to submit to the Annual Conference the next autumn. The chapter on 'Latin America and the Caribbean' worked out by the Latin American sub-committee of the International Committee included a paragraph on the Falkland Islands, which stated:

We believe that the rights of the Falkland Islanders to self-determination should be upheld; in no circumstances should they be put at the mercy of a regime which violates human and civil rights. It is unlikely that fruitful tripartite discussion on the question can begin until there has been a change of regime in Argentina.⁷

³D. Healey, *The Time of My Life*, London, Michael Joseph, 1989, p. 496.

⁴What Dalyell himself acknowledges at p. 48. Before the emergency debate, Dalyell met Foot to convince him of the hazard of binding the party to the position expressed by Silkin the day before. Labour History Archive and Study Centre (LHASC), Labour Party Archive (LPA), Foot papers, MF/L 19, Dalyell to Foot, 22 May 1982.

⁵R.G. Hughes, *The Postwar Legacy of Appeasement: British Foreign Policy Since 1945*, London, Bloomsbury, 2014, pp. 91–116.

⁶*Labour Manifesto 1980*, NEC, 1980, p. 38.

⁷LHASC, LPA, NEC, ID/1981-82/102-April.

The debate on this section of the programme was suspended precisely because of the outbreak of the crisis.⁸ When the discussion was resumed in June, the paragraph on the Falklands was completely erased.⁹ However, at the beginning of April the one cited was the position regarding the Falklands worked out by the competent body of the Labour Party, and it was in line with what had been approved by the whole party two years earlier.

Random and subjective factors certainly played a role in defining the Labour leadership's first reaction. However, this latter must be included within a broader context that helps to explain its rationale.

1 FIRST REACTIONS

Since the morning of 2 April John Silkin had been providing an interpretation of the events on the basis of the interwar period model. His most important contribution on that day, however, was to get the House to hold an emergency debate the following day, winning the Government's attempts at resistance.¹⁰

Five Labour MPs took to the floor in the debate on Saturday 3 April. Michael Foot's speech played a major role in shaping the mood of the House during the emergency debate. The extent of its impact can be appreciated by the approval expressed by the chairman of the 1922 Committee, Edward Du Cann: 'the Leader of the Opposition spoke for all of us'.¹¹ These words of course stemmed from the anger of Conservative MPs towards the Government, but they also revealed Foot's ability to touch sensitive keys for the Tories on that specific situation. First of all, the Labour leader made clear that the situation of the Falkland Islands did not relate to colonialism. The goals to be pursued had to be identified in the light of other premises. Actually, what were at stake were the wishes of the Falklanders and the safeguard of the international rule of law. As a consequence it was required, on the one hand, to protect

⁸LHASC, LPA, NEC, ID/1981-82/140-May, *Report of a meeting of the Latin American sub-committee*, 6 April 1982.

⁹See *Labour's Programme 1982*, NEC, pp. 271–277.

¹⁰Churchill Archive Centre, Silkin Papers, SLKN 1/4/11, undated notes, probably written by Anne Carlton, personal secretary of John Silkin.

¹¹House of Commons, *Official Report*, 3 April 1982, vol. 21, c. 642.

the islanders and to defend their rights; on the other hand, it was ‘to ensure that foul and brutal aggression does not succeed in our world’.¹² The first, more specific purpose was closely connected with the second, more general one. The latter evoked a traditional self-representation of the British elites, that is the idea of being the ‘defender of people’s freedom throughout the world’.¹³ Both factors were also present in Margaret Thatcher’s speech. The Prime Minister, however, greatly emphasised the principle of sovereignty and the UK’s right to self-defence, whilst the Leader of the Opposition gave much more importance to the right to self-determination of the Falklanders and the defence of the rule of law. The result was a highly effective speech. Moreover, its impact was further strengthened by the speaker’s curriculum vitae. Foot’s anti-appeaser reputation, established by his public behaviour in the 1930s, allowed the automatic reference to the events of fifty years earlier, increasing, if possible, the pathos of his words. Douglas Jay and John Silkin spoke in similar terms. Jay accused the FCO of being ‘too much saturated with the spirit of appeasement’ and the MoD of having carried on a ‘policy of unilateral disarmament of the Royal Navy’, which ‘had invited aggression’.¹⁴ Silkin was even more explicit: he branded the Argentine government ‘fascist’ and Galtieri as a ‘bargain basement Mussolini’.¹⁵

A second recurring element in the Labour MPs’ speeches was the will to underline the gap between the ineptitude of the incumbent government and the effectiveness of the previous Labour Cabinet. Michael Foot dealt with this issue, but it was fully exploited by Edward Rowlands.¹⁶ Having handled the Falklands problem as Minister of State at the FCO under Jim Callaghan’s premiership, Rowlands was enabled to stigmatise the Government’s faults and mistakes. In 1977, the Labour Government had shown its ability to read as well as to react to the situation, in such a way as to enable effective playing of the deterrence card. In contrast, the errors and the incompetence of the Thatcher Government had opened the way for action by the troops of Buenos Aires. Political evaluation reached a conclusion that could only call for the resignations of the

¹²Ibid., c. 641.

¹³Ibid., c. 639.

¹⁴Ibid., c. 658.

¹⁵Ibid., c. 663.

¹⁶Ibid., cc. 649–651.

principal responsible figures: Carrington and Nott. A strong request was put forward by John Silkin, who also linked Margaret Thatcher with the responsibility of the two ministers.¹⁷

A third distinguishing element of the Labour MPs' speeches concerned the first steps taken by the Government immediately after the news of the attack on the Falklands. On the one hand there was the approval of the recourse to the United Nations. On the other, more cautious assent to the sending of a task force was expressed. Silkin was explicit in distinguishing the substantial homogeneity between Government and Opposition in the reading of events from true, actual, political action. If from one standpoint it was necessary to respond to an unprovoked aggression, from another standpoint—if the Government failed to clarify its responsibilities, and how it intended to use the fleet—it could not rely on the unconditional support of the Opposition.

George Foulkes was the only Labour backbencher who had the possibility of openly expressing, in Parliament, any dissent vis-à-vis the bellicose mood that seemed to pervade the entire House of Commons. While admitting that his instinctive reaction would have been to pay back with force the humiliation the United Kingdom had undergone, Foulkes invited his colleagues to consider the human costs that such action would bring. He therefore declared his opposition to any form of military action.¹⁸

The meeting of the Shadow Cabinet following the debate proceeded with the general appreciation of Foot's successful performance on the floor of the House. An object of debate was the identification of the best way to exploit the 'widespread discomfiture among the Tory back benchers'.¹⁹ Foot stressed once more that 'the Labour Party had clearly a better record over care of the Falkland Islands interests'. As a consequence 'the whole political picture' could change over the coming weeks. The pressure on the Government had to be kept up. A second debate on the issue had to be scheduled for the next week, following which the Shadow Cabinet would have to decide whether to file a

¹⁷Ibid., cc. 661–664. Over the weekend, Silkin asked again for Nott and Carrington's resignations; J. Haviland and P. Webster, 'Nott Threat to Storm Islands, Sink Ships', *The Times*, 5 April 1982.

¹⁸House of Commons, *Official Report*, 3 April 1982, vol. 21, cc. 660–661.

¹⁹LHASC, LPA, Parliamentary Committee, *Minutes*, 3 April 1982.

censure motion on the Government or ask for a parliamentary inquiry on its conduct.²⁰ Eric Heffer was the only one to urge a wider discussion. Although he affirmed his agreement with the views articulated by Foot and Silkin in the House, Heffer expressed his concern regarding the danger that Labour might appear ‘jingoistic and more nationalistic than the Tories’. He invited his colleagues to reflect deeply on how much it would or would not behove Labour to adhere to the Government’s decision to send the task force. There was a need to reach agreement on the position to take, in case matters reached—as was possible—the point of a ‘naval engagement’, if not indeed a war.²¹ These concerns were downplayed by Foot, Shore and Silkin.

Heffer once more expressed his doubts, with greater force, during the Shadow Cabinet meeting of 5 April.²² According to him, the political approach had to be decided on the basis of a single consideration: ‘in three weeks time the country could be in a shooting war with the Argentines’. At that point it would be difficult to keep the party united. Therefore it was necessary to devise a strategy that would allow for an efficacious attack on the Conservatives, but without making Labour appear to be more nationalist than their opponents. Heffer’s idea was to negotiate ‘for evacuation of the Falklands without deploying physical violence’ and to concentrate on the mistakes of the Government. He ended up by isolating himself. Various objections were raised against his argument: some were pragmatic—the naval task force was necessary to constrain the Argentines to negotiate²³; others were political—the

²⁰They decided to ask for a parliamentary inquiry. The other option was discarded because the vote on a censure motion would have tightened up the Tories; see C. McLaughlin, ‘Trident Sunk’, *Labour Weekly*, 8 April 1982.

²¹Heffer’s insistence was also motivated by worries about media coverage. Postponing decisions to Monday meant running the risk that declarations to the press would emerge during the weekend. It seems that Foot limited himself to responding that the line to follow until Monday was clear, and that ‘there should be no leakages from this meeting which would damage our strategy’.

²²LHASC, LPA, Parliamentary Committee, *Minutes*, 5 April 1982.

²³Roy Hattersley: ‘It was more likely that the Argentines’ will ‘only shift their position through a display of strength’. Denis Healey: ‘If evacuation took place then there would be very little else to negotiate with the Argentines There could be no negotiation with a dictator if he was offered victory without a struggle. What dictator bribed when he could bully? ... The point about the deployment of the force was to give the United States a chance to put pressure on Argentina’.

aim was not to offer the Government a polemical objective, in order to escape from being cornered²⁴; and some were idealistic—Labour had the moral duty to resist yielding to a fascist aggressor, and to defend the right of self-determination.²⁵ At the same time it was necessary to avoid giving carte blanche to the Government, and to impede it from ‘seeking revenge for their political humiliation’.²⁶ In this same regard, it was an obligation not to fall into lockstep with the Government’s decisions. There was the need to defend the interests of the United Kingdom and of the Falklanders, but also to keep distance from the disasters committed by the Conservative Government. The result was to favour a diplomatic solution, and the support for the sending of a naval task force, while continuing to seek the differentiation of patriotic commitment from political support for the Government.²⁷

George Foulkes and Eric Heffer were not alone in doubting the attitude shown by the leadership of the Party. Foulkes reported the fears of other MPs, worried by the apparent unequivocal support ‘to the Government’s policy on military retaliation against the Argentines’. Therefore he asked for the calling of a PLP extraordinary meeting before the Commons debate scheduled for 7 April.²⁸ Eric Deakins of the ‘gentle left’ of the Party²⁹ called for Michael Foot and the Shadow Cabinet to maintain a constructive attitude towards the Government,

²⁴According to Gerald Kaufman, Labour had to avoid giving ‘the impression of sabotaging British troops in action. The Government was in a morass and we ought to stay clear of it’. For Eric Varley: ‘The only way the Prime Minister could salvage her reputation would be if the Party looked as if it were not giving adequate backing’.

²⁵Stan Orme said clearly that ‘there were occasions in which socialists ought to fight. The Islands now occupied by the Argentines were ours and the people were being subjected to fascism’. According to Brynmor John, ‘the right of self-determination was a higher concept than a mere enlightened “slum clearance” programme’. He also accused Heffer of having proposed ‘a classic apologia for a re-run of the 1930s’. According to Roy Hattersley: ‘It would be immoral if we left’ the Falklanders ‘with a choice between Fascism or evacuation’.

²⁶So said Denis Healey.

²⁷John Silkin: ‘We should not get too closely involved in discussions on strategy for this was the Prime Minister’s responsibility’. Bruce Millan: ‘Party should support the deployment of force if necessary, but not get committed to any detail of strategy’. Neil Kinnock: ‘We should back the general action but there was no patriotic duty to support the demonstrable incompetence of the Government’.

²⁸LHASC, LPA, Foot Papers, MF/L 19, Foulkes to Bryan Davis, 4 April 1982.

²⁹The definition is drawn by J. Golding, *Hammer of the Left: The Battle for the Soul of the Labour Party*, London, Biteback, 2016, *passim*.

but also to urge it to pursue the goal of the restoration of the British administration through the machinery of the United Nations.³⁰ At the meeting of the West Lothian Constituency Labour Party on 4 April, the Opposition Spokesman for Science, Tam Dalyell, expressed in no uncertain terms his opposition to the sending of the task force, as well as to the idea of restoring the status quo in the South Atlantic.³¹ At the Tribune Group meeting on 5 April Tony Benn spoke against the sending of the British fleet. He was backed by Stuart Holland and Ian Mikardo even though the majority of the Group supported the stance of the Party leadership on 3 April. Even ‘the most forthright peacemonger’ Stanley Newens spoke in favour of military action in support of international law, the right of self-determination and against a fascist dictatorship.³² In short, the doubters were a minority, but they were present. The potentially most dangerous dissent was Tony Benn’s, whose ‘unfailing instinct for detecting political sensitivity’ identified ‘a source of future embarrassment’ for the Party.³³

The NEC of the Party was the place for the possible affirmation of an alternative political approach to the official one. This fact became clear in the meeting, on 6 April, of the International Committee. Two and a half hours were needed to reach a compromise solution between the two texts of the resolutions presented by Eric Heffer and Denis Healey.³⁴ The differences were the same ones that emerged during the Shadow Cabinet meeting. Heffer repeated his view that the only way to avoid a war was to evacuate the islands and to negotiate their final status with Argentina. Healey objected that the preventive evacuation was equivalent to accepting a fait accompli. It was necessary to avoid a war, and therefore to negotiate, but this could be done only from a position of strength. The sending of the fleet was therefore required, in order to constrain Argentina to reach an agreement that would also

³⁰LHASC, LPA, Foot Papers, MF/L 19, Deakins to Foot, 5 April 1982.

³¹T. Dalyell, *One Man’s Falklands*, pp. 61–65. Dalyell reiterated his position the following day in an interview for Independent Radio News. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

³²See T. Benn, *The End of an Era: Diaries 1980–90*, ed. Ruth Winstone, London, Hutchinson, 1992, p. 205; ‘Nott Offer to Quit Rejected by Mrs Thatcher’, *The Times*, 6 April 1982; ‘Benn Pinpoints Labour’s Weak Link’, *The Guardian*, 7 April 1982.

³³‘Benn Pinpoints Labour’s Weak Link’, *The Guardian*, 7 April 1982.

³⁴Cf. ‘Labour Divided on Use of Force’, *The Times*, 7 April 1982.

be acceptable for the Falklanders.³⁵ The result of the debate was a motion that condemned the aggression, stigmatised the failures of the British Government and requested an investigation into its responsibilities, invited the seeking of a diplomatic solution, and at the same time recognised the necessity of negotiating with a dictatorship from a position of strength. It was specified, however, that there was no need for a military expedition in Victorian style, but one in 'Labour 1977' style. The aim therefore was not to extinguish the humiliation suffered by the Government, but to reach 'an honourable settlement which has the support of the Falkland islanders'. 'The paramount consideration' was to be 'the rights and safety of the people of the Falklands', who had the right to live 'under the sovereignty of their own choice'.³⁶ Once this compromise had been reached, Benn tried to disrupt the proceedings. With the support of Joan Maynard, he proposed an amendment which touched the true exposed nerve: 'the NEC opposes the despatch of the Task Force and the Government's apparent intention to use it in war with Argentina; believing this will imperil the safety of the Falkland Islanders which should be the prime concern of the British Government'.³⁷ The chairman of the committee, Joan Lestor, invited Benn in vain to retract the amendment, and thus preserve the arrived-at consensus.³⁸ The amendment was rejected, but by a single vote.³⁹ At this point the resolution passed without opposition, and with only three abstentions,⁴⁰ thanks to the indeterminacy regarding the crucial point 'whether the forces should be encouraged to do anything once mobilised'.⁴¹ In sum, right from the first moments of the crisis, only the reticence about this theme permitted the expression of a unitary position.

It was thus no accident that Foot opened the PLP meeting of 7 April by declaring that his speech of the previous Saturday did nothing else than 'to set out the traditional views of the Labour Party on aggression'. Those views, moreover, were in keeping with the Charter of the United

³⁵T. Benn, *The End of an Era*, pp. 206–207.

³⁶LHASC, LPA, NEC, *Minutes*, 6 April 1982.

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸'Labour Divided on Use of Force', *The Times*, 7 April 1982.

³⁹LHASC, LPA, NEC, *Minutes*, 6 April 1982.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹'Benn Pinpoints Labour's Weak Link', *op. cit.*

Nations.⁴² Although in a more muted and subtle manner with respect to the International Committee of the NEC, even within the PLP they emerged differing positions. The ones who adhered to the leader's stance did so based on idealistic motivations—to stand against a naked aggression from a fascist junta, to defend the right to self-determination as well as the international rule of law—as much as on political ones—the chance to put the Government in difficulty, and to attack the military defence policy of the Tories.⁴³ Among these, Stan Newens, Giles Radice, Reginald Freeson, Ron Leighton, and Ioan Evans also expressed the necessity of marking a more definite difference from the Government: the right thing to do would be to clarify forcefully that support for the task force did not amount to giving a blank cheque to the Government. Robin Cook and Bruce George called attention to the logistical and military difficulties of an eventual conflict with Argentina, and to the impossibility of returning to the status quo. In particular, Cook judged not only the UK's diplomatic position to be extremely precarious, but also the chances of avoiding a combat-related debacle as practically nil. Consequently, from a tactical standpoint the Labour Party's prime objective was to reclaim adequate space for autonomous manoeuvring. Tony Benn, Tam Dalyell, George Foulkes and David Lambie instead expressed their clear dissent. Behind their arguments was the idea that it would be impossible to support the sending of the task force, and in future to renounce its usage. According to them, this would be the inevitable scenario, since it was clear that the Government intended to use the task force to recover its own reputation. The Labour Party therefore must request the return of the fleet, and decisively pursue options with the United Nations.

In the following parliamentary debate, the burden of taking into account the divisions among the groups of Labour MPs fell upon the Deputy Leader, Denis Healey. His task was to some extent facilitated by his personal conviction that during the 3 April debate Foot had made exaggerations that he would have done well to avoid. The majority of the PLP had cited specific idealistic principles as the basis for the approach to adopt, while advocating putting the Tories in difficulty, and expressing the need to maintain distinctions from the Government. For these reasons Healey articulated his speech in three sections.⁴⁴ In the first, he attacked

⁴²LHASC, LPA, PLP, *Minutes*, 7 April 1982.

⁴³See the speeches by Ioan Evans, Stanley Newens, Patrick Duffy, Reginald Freeson, Barry Sheerman, Ron Leighton, and Giles Radice.

⁴⁴House of Commons, *Official Report*, 7 April 1982, vol. 21, cc. 963–969.

Margaret Thatcher for not having prevented the crisis. The second section was above all a response to the Labour MPs critical of the positions taken by the party leadership. Healey in fact underlined the importance of defending the rule of law against the arrogance of dictatorial governments; he rejected the idea of an analogy with the events of 1956, and instead made an analogy with 1938, to warn against the risks of the policy of appeasement.⁴⁵ The most important section was the third one. Healey congratulated the Government for the approval of Resolution 502 made by the United Nations Security Council, and supported its aim to implement it. He strongly emphasised, however, that this support did not give the green light to the use of force, but imposed the search for a negotiated solution between the two nations. This tactic gave him the possibility of aligning the Labour Party against ‘the wrong use’ of the task force. The task force needed to be a means of strengthening diplomatic pressure on Argentina, used always within the context of United Nations rules and guidelines. Healey’s words succeeded in holding together both those who, standing on principles, recognised the right and the necessity to react to defend the rule of law and democracy,⁴⁶ and those who feared that direct conflict would end badly and therefore, while not excluding recourse to military force (if necessary), advocated reaching a compromise solution through the United Nations.⁴⁷ Outside of the circle drawn by Healey’s speech there remained those who explicitly called for

⁴⁵‘Some people have sought to see a precedent for the despatch of this force in what happened at Suez a quarter of a century ago. The argument in Suez was about property rights—that in the Falkland Islands is about human rights. At Suez a British Government violated the United Nations charter. In the Falkland Islands crisis the Argentine Government have violated the United Nations Charter and the British position has won overwhelming endorsement from the Security Council. Suez offers no precedent here. Others say, as was said in 1938, that the Falkland Islands is a far-away country that is indefensible and that we must accept the geographical and strategic realities ... The right of self-determination is a fundamental human right that we are responsible for restoring ... If we turn our backs on that responsibility the next thing we shall see is an invasion of Belize by the brutal dictatorship in Guatemala, a possible invasion of Nicaragua by her neighbours, an invasion of Grenada or Cuba by their neighbours, and, perhaps, the invasion of Guyana by Venezuela. Indeed, there could be threats to British overseas colonies such as Gibraltar and Hong Kong.’

⁴⁶See the speeches by Robert Mellish, Samuel Silkin, and Michael English. Callaghan was the most hawkish.

⁴⁷See the speeches by Ioan Evans, John Gilbert, Frank Hooley, and David Ennals.

the retreat of the task force (Benn, Dalyell), or those who at least judged it an error to have sent it at all (Lambie, Allaun). For all of them, the fleet served to save the Government, and not the Falklanders. As a result, the only thing to do was to arrive at a negotiated solution through the United Nations (Benn, Lambie), perhaps also offering a resettlement for the islanders (Allaun).

For Labour the debate was closed by John Silkin.⁴⁸ The articulation of his speech also reflected a wish to respond to the main input from the PLP meeting. His stylistic choices, however, gave his words a more vibrant twist than those spoken by Healey. What matters the most, however, is a specific passage. In repeating that the solution of the crisis had to take into account the ‘wishes’ of the islanders, Silkin raised the practical problem of how to identify them, and how to satisfy them. The passage is significant, since it indicated the theme of how to detach the defence of the right to self-determination from the excessive rigidity that the call to ‘wishes’ conferred upon it. The theme was raised even at the end of David Ennals’s speech. He had invited the House to listen attentively to the Falklanders, so that the Government could decide at the right moment what was best ‘in the interest of the people concerned’.⁴⁹ In the Labour camp, the lexical shift from ‘wishes’ to ‘interests’ would continue during the days and weeks to follow, with the aim of obtaining an ever wider margin of flexibility.

2 BETWEEN US MEDIATION AND RECOURSE TO THE UNITED NATIONS

In the speeches given by Healey and Silkin during the 7 April debate, there was an implicit element, which was destined to play an increasing role during the following days and weeks. In fact the words that these two men spoke could have enabled the offer of some common ground to the more moderate sectors of the Conservative Party, in the case of rifts within the Cabinet. This was crucial after the appointment of Francis Pym as Foreign Secretary. According to *Labour Weekly* such an appointment could mark a ‘decided shift in government policy’. It also gave the Tories

⁴⁸House of Commons, *Official Report*, 7 April 1982, vol. 21, cc. 1040–1044.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, c. 1028.

an alternative Prime Minister.⁵⁰ *Tribune* went further and interpreted Pym's appointment as the first move of a strategy in progress to replace Mrs Thatcher with the new Foreign Secretary. The Prime Minister's naval venture would be eventually opposed by the USA. Mrs Thatcher would have been the only person responsible for such a failure and Pym would have played Macmillan's role at the time of the Suez crisis.⁵¹ According to Tam Dalyell, in those first days of the crisis, the Labour leadership 'believed that it would never come to any kind of battle and that the dispute with Argentina would be solved peacefully through diplomatic negotiation'.⁵² In this scenario the Labour Party should try to sustain the policy of the Foreign Secretary and at the same time avoid making the same mistakes as in 1956.

The first steps of Alexander Haig's shuttle diplomacy confirmed the possibility of a convergence with Pym. While the US Secretary of State prepared for his second visit to London, and the British daily newspapers quoted improved odds for a diplomatic solution, on 11 April Pym renewed his commitment to this option, demonstrating moderate optimism. The FCO Secretary also recognised the signs that the House of Commons had given, with respect to the necessity to loosen the restriction enjoined by the appeal to the 'wishes' of the Falklanders. While he confirmed that the Government would not impose any solution refused by the islanders, he emphasised the fact that the Argentine invasion could have changed their opinions, and that their will could only be ascertained once the occupation was terminated. The obvious implication was that it was necessary to abandon the rigid line of a return to the status quo, as a prerequisite for sitting at the negotiating table with Buenos Aires. Healey was ready to receive and accept the message. Interviewed on the *World this Weekend*, he said he agreed with Pym, confirmed that the crux of the problem was not sovereignty over the islands

⁵⁰'Trident Sunk', *Labour Weekly*, 8 April 1982.

⁵¹'Why Carrington Really Resigned', *Tribune*, 9 April 1982. See also G. Sinclair, 'Why Francis Pym Has the Backing of the Tory "Magic Circle" Against Thatcher', *Tribune*, 16 April 1982.

⁵²T. Dalyell, *One Man's Falklands*, p. 66. Dalyell wrote that on 5 April he went to the Labour Chief Whip, Michael Cocks, to offer his resignation from the Front Bench because of his contrariety to the leadership stance on the Falklands crisis. Cocks answered: 'This thing won't last! It would be stupid to give up your job on the Opposition Front Bench for something that will leave the centre of the political stage as rapidly as it came'.

and underlined that the Cabinet was now clearly split.⁵³ On 13 April, another element arrived, that pointed towards the possibility of a settlement, when Perez de Cuellar proposed some involvement of the United Nations to facilitate a diplomatic solution to the crisis.⁵⁴

In the 14 April Shadow Cabinet meeting, efforts were made to orchestrate all these diverse elements. Foot and his deputy insisted on a strategy that would bring together diplomatic, economic and military pressure, maintaining preference for a very circumscribed use of force. Responding to the cues offered by the evolution of the diplomatic picture, they drew up a three-step strategy: first the retreat of the Argentines, then an interim administration, and finally Anglo-Argentine negotiations for the sovereignty of the islands. For the interim phase, the door was left open for both a United Nations-brokered solution, and for a 'tripartite presence'. Peter Shore expressed doubts about the likelihood of obtaining the Argentines' retreat without turning to force, as well as about the effective possibility of postponing the question of sovereignty. Taking antithetical positions to those of Shore, Eric Heffer declared himself contrary to any recourse to military force, and warned that such action would lead to a splitting apart of the Labour Party. Heffer also sought to downplay the rhetoric of anti-fascism, recalling that the Government was opposing Argentina by cooperating with Chile. His arguments did not meet with success, and were rebuffed especially by Gerald Kaufman, who invited his colleagues to show themselves to be democratic in their actions, and not only in their written words. In fact, the necessity to maintain distance from the Government was reaffirmed. Thus Roy Hattersley's proposal to reject 'any offer of detailed consultation with the Government over developments' of the crisis was approved without any objection.⁵⁵

In the House, Foot moved along the lines decided by the Shadow Cabinet. He defined the sense of Labour's support for sending the task force in the light of the necessity to avoid yielding to treacherous aggression. Foot specified, however, that such a position did not imply support for the Government, and reiterated the need to resolve the crisis through a diplomatic agreement. Towards achieving such a goal, the involvement of the United Nations would be productive during the following phases

⁵³'Pym Places Hopes on Talks if War Zone Stays Respected', *The Times*, 12 April 1982; and 'Pym Firm but with Signs of Flexibility', *The Guardian*, 12 April 1982.

⁵⁴'Mediation by UN More Likely', *The Times*, 13 April 1982.

⁵⁵LHASC, LPA, Parliamentary Committee, *Minutes*, 7 April 1982.

of the crisis.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the words of the eight Labour MPs who spoke during the debate confirmed the existence of problems looming on the horizon. At the two opposite extremes there were the speeches of Alexander Lyon and Douglas Jay. The former explained the crisis within the interpretative frame of colonialism and argued that the problems about the small former colonies could not be solved on the basis of the will of their respective inhabitants. Lyon had no doubts: Britain had to return the islands to Argentina, while the Falklanders did not have the right to determine the UK's foreign policy.⁵⁷ On the contrary Jay interpreted the current crisis through the memories of the 1930s and in the light of the principle of self-determination, coming to embrace the line of the Government even more than that of its leader.⁵⁸ The other six speeches remained within this range. Patrick Duffy,⁵⁹ Betty Boothroyd,⁶⁰ Peter Hardy,⁶¹ William Hamilton⁶² and Dick Douglas⁶³ backed Foot's stance, even though with various nuances and different levels of conviction. Some of them stressed the logistical and economic difficulties of a reconquest of the Islands, and of their defence during the years to come. Others highlighted the fact that the defence of the international rule of law imposed finding a solution within the limits of the United Nations, also because of the impossibility of restoring the status quo. Judith Hart, in contrast, moved in another direction. While recognising that the invasion of the Falklands was an intolerable act, carried out by a fascist government, she invited the House to evaluate the situation with regard not only to international law, but also to responsibility. This imposed an avoidance of war, both with respect to international rules—given that UN Resolution 502 constrained the two conflicting nations to finding a negotiated solution—and to the interests of the Falklanders. It would be necessary to stop the advance of the task force, to allow more time for seeking a diplomatic solution.⁶⁴ Denis Healey closed the series

⁵⁶House of Commons, *Official Report*, 14 April 1982, vol. 21, cc. 1050–1054.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, cc. 1178–1181.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, cc. 1196–1197.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, cc. 1164–1167.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, cc. 1169–1171.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, cc. 1175–1176.

⁶²*Ibid.*, cc. 1183–1185.

⁶³*Ibid.*, cc. 1193–1195.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, cc. 1160–1162.

of Labour comments with a speech that clearly offered the most help possible to the advocates of a negotiated approach within the Cabinet.⁶⁵ He proffered some compliments to the Government, and confirmed support for the strategy of using military pressure to reach a negotiated solution. Above all he declared his agreement with the Foreign Minister, who a few days earlier had made it understood that there was the positive wish to offer an honourable way out to the Argentines, and to proceed to a more pragmatic appraisal of the Falklanders' 'wishes'. Here Healey completed the semantic progression already announced in the 7 April debate. Seizing on Pym's words with regard to the difficulty of ascertaining at that moment the real wishes of the Falklanders, Healey put the theme of their 'wishes'—though without letting it completely disappear—on standby mode, and focused full attention on their 'interests'. This last-named aspect finally left some space for an objectivity that did not give any room for error: 'it was very much in the interests of the islanders themselves to resolve a situation which has condemned them to physical insecurity and less material prosperity than they might have enjoyed for many years'.⁶⁶ With the 14 April debate the Labour Party leadership achieved a first redefinition of its own political stance, and consolidated positions that offered undoubted advantages: they put the Prime Minister in difficulty, and maintained unity among the majority of the PLP, without exposing it to accusations of anti-patriotism.

The Foot–Healey stance provoked fierce opposition from those who for quite some time had sought to push Labour's political platform always more to the left. In the aftermath of the 7 April debate the *Labour Herald* had accused the Party's leadership of 'propping up the Government's credibility by refusing to censure it' and exhorted the rank and file to 'tell the PLP loud and clear that it must change tack'.⁶⁷ In the middle of the month, the newspaper renewed the appeal to the party members: the CLPs had to call emergency meetings and approve motions to request the return of the task force.⁶⁸ Even *Labour Weekly's* readers' letters showed a rising aversion of the Party membership against their leaders.⁶⁹ As already

⁶⁵Ibid., cc. 1200–1203.

⁶⁶Ibid., c. 1202.

⁶⁷See 'Labour Unity in Crisis Begins to Crumble', *The Times*, 10 April 1982.

⁶⁸"'Trot Line' on Fleet Disowned by Labour Man", *The Guardian*, 16 April 1982. The *Labour Herald* attacks were rebuked by the shadow minister Denzil Davies, who labelled them as incredible from a moral point of view and from a socialist point of view.

⁶⁹'Just over the Foot Horizon', *The Guardian*, 17 April 1982.

mentioned, a party of dissidents had also been present in the PLP from the first days of the crisis. After the Commons debate on 7 April and during the Easter recess these divergences increased. On 8 April, it was the chairman of the Party, Judith Hart, who pronounced herself against both the sending of the task force and the proclamation of the MEZ in an interview with the BBC.⁷⁰ She complained that the House was not allowed to debate the declaration of a 'war zone' and in a message to the Prime Minister she said it was 'intolerable' that a war could begin 'without full Parliamentary debate about the opportunities for negotiations'.⁷¹ Tam Dalyell and Judith Hart strove to coordinate the dissenters within the PLP. They convened a meeting of the Labour MPs against the use of force for the morning of 14 April. Their claim was to stop the task force. Only ten MPs attended the meeting: Frank Allaun, Tony Benn, Tam Dalyell, Alf Dubs, George Foulkes, Reg Freeson, Judith Hart, Stuart Holland, Joan Maynard and Ernie Roberts. This was too small to condition the party leaders' stance in that same afternoon's debate,⁷² but it was enough to cause the indignant reaction of the popular press.⁷³ A few days later, *The Guardian* noted that the dissidents continued to be in the minority, even within the Tribune Group. The newspaper, however, did underline the fact that the small subgroup could count on a potential leader, Tony Benn, who was capable of playing the role of the anti-establishment pacifist, especially were things to go badly.⁷⁴ Pressures began to come from the trade unions. While the TWGU and the GMWU supported Foot's line even if in a generic way,⁷⁵ on 22 April the Scottish TUC stated that the rights of the Falklanders had to be safeguarded, but the use of force was not the solution. A war would have been only a diversion from the real problems of the British people. The Scottish TUC

⁷⁰'Labour Unity in Crisis Begins to Crumble', *The Times*, 10 April 1982.

⁷¹'Thatcher's Tense Wait as Deadline Approaches', *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 April 1982. This was an argument that the Labour leadership would use later in May.

⁷²T. Dalyell, *One Man's Falklands*, p. 77. Dalyell mentions that the ten MPs decided to clarify their position before the debate in the Commons scheduled for that afternoon. Dalyell and Hart met with Foot. He listened to what they had to say, and then limited himself to asking how many MPs would be present at the meeting. See also C. McLaughlin, 'Falkland Islands Fury', *Labour Weekly*, 16 April 1982.

⁷³The *Daily Star* of 15 April published a front page photo, and the names of the ten MPs, with the full-page title: 'Whose Side Are They On?' The newspaper labelled the ten as 'no friends of their country, of freedom or of their own party'.

⁷⁴'Just over the Foot Horizon', *The Guardian*, 17 April 1982.

⁷⁵'Leaders of Two Unions Back Foot on Force', *The Guardian*, 19 April 1982.

called for both the Argentines' withdrawal and the recall of the British task force. A UN interim administration had to be set up for the duration of the negotiation on sovereignty.⁷⁶

As a matter of fact, the Foot–Healey stance presented a major problem: it could be sustained only so long as use of the task force could be avoided for every option which went beyond the blockade of the Falklands. It was essential to keep alive the diplomatic negotiations. As a consequence, when Haig's mission seemed to be headed towards a negative conclusion, the Labour leadership was ready to resume its efforts, asking the Government to pursue increased involvement by the United Nations,⁷⁷ perhaps entrusting it with the interim administration of the disputed islands.⁷⁸ Denis Healey decided to take advantage of a trip to the USA to meet the UN Secretary General as well as the US Secretary of State. The purpose was 'putting forward the Party's view'⁷⁹ and exploring the prospects for further negotiations.⁸⁰ The intention of marking in this way the distance from the Government was to be made all the more efficacious by the fact that Healey's trip occurred at the same time as Francis Pym's visit to Washington. Healey's journey was wholeheartedly approved both by the Shadow Cabinet and by the PLP, even by those who had expressed doubts about the positions hitherto taken by the leadership, or had directly opposed them.⁸¹ According to David Winnick, Healey's trip would have helped 'to minimise the differences of opinion in the Party'.⁸² This was indeed one of the two main objectives of his meeting at the UN Headquarters. In addition, there was the aim of putting the Labour stamp on the hypothesis of United Nations mediation, all the more probable in light of the difficulties faced by Haig, but not yet practicable, as long as US mediation continued.⁸³

⁷⁶Scottish TUC telegram to M. Foot, 22 April 1982, LHASC, LPA, Foot papers, MF/L19.

⁷⁷'Healey Seeks UN Intervention', *The Times*, House of Commons, *Official Report*, 19 April 1982, vol. 22, cc. 21–28; and 'Haig Mission Provides Best Hope of a Peaceful Settlement', *The Guardian*, 20 April; 'Pym Jets to US...', *The Guardian*, 21 April.

⁷⁸See Denis Healey's speech, House of Commons, *Official Report*, 21 April 1982, vol. 22, cc. 271–272.

⁷⁹LHASC, LPA, Parliamentary Committee, *Minutes*, 21 April 1982. In the 22 April meeting of the PLP, it was noted that the trip was already scheduled, and that the visit to the United Nations was added.

⁸⁰LHASC, LPA, PLP, *Minutes*, 22 April 1982.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, speeches by Frank Allaun and Reg Freeson.

⁸²*Ibid.*

⁸³Z. Pysariwsky, 'Healey's Enthusiasm for UN Mediation Fades', *The Times*, 24 April 1982.

The evolution of the overall picture could only augment Labour Party worries. There were obvious fears regarding the effects that military escalation would have on the party leadership. In the Shadow Cabinet meeting of 21 April, Kinnock observed that ‘there were some in the Party in the country who were fostering the notion that the Leader had turned from peacemaker to warmonger’. It was time to relaunch Foot’s image, perhaps through a major speech, in which he could clarify his position, and emphasise the faults of the government.⁸⁴ Bruce Millan warned that ‘the outbreak of a fullscale shooting war’ would have seriously compromised the support for the parliamentary leadership. All these factors together resumed the problem that had already emerged in the Commons’ debates: the risk that the Labour Party remained the prisoner of the Falklanders’ veto. Roy Hattersley maintained that the moment had arrived for opposing the claim of the Prime Minister, according to which the wishes of the islanders were paramount. Healey recalled that the Party Conference and the NEC committed the Labour movement to self-determination for the Falklanders. Even the United Nations Resolution 502 was based on this principle. Labour was now obliged to push the Government towards softening its stance on the principle of sovereignty, but for the rest it would be necessary to obtain a change of attitude on the part of the islanders.⁸⁵ In his turn, Bruce Millan objected that ‘self determination normally meant our favouring the independence of peoples, which was not the case in the Falkland Islands’.⁸⁶ Even David Clark, in the PLP meeting on 22 April, brought up the problem of not remaining trapped by the self-determination issue.⁸⁷

To sum up: on the one hand there was the awareness that in principle, and on the basis of the Labour programme of 1980, yielding to Argentine aggression could not be allowed. On the other hand, there was the knowledge that it was impossible to approve any recourse to

⁸⁴Gwyneth Dunwoody agreed with Kinnock. LHASC, LPA, Parliamentary Committee, *Minutes*, 21 April 1982.

⁸⁵Gwyneth Dunwoody and Eric Varley also substantially agreed on this point. A less certain stance seems to have been taken by Stan Orme (according to whom it was not widely known that the Party’s policy was so specific on the issue of self-determination). John Silkin maintained that the UN Trusteeship formula could be the right one for favouring this change of position on the part of the Falklanders. Healey replied that it was not appropriate to be too specific about proposals. *Ibid.*

⁸⁶Peter Archer agreed with him. *Ibid.*

⁸⁷LHASC, LPA, PLP, *Minutes*, 22 April 1982. See also the speeches by Jeremy Bray and Denis Healey.

arms to uphold those principles, and the connected programme, if party unity was to be maintained. In other words, it was obligatory to avoid turning to military force, without however entirely excluding it in theory. As the task force continued its advance toward the South, adhering to this position became more and more complicated.⁸⁸

Matters came to a head with the reconquest of South Georgia. On the eve of the attack, Healey hinted that Labour could give support to it.⁸⁹ When the first news of armed skirmishes arrived in London, Foot affirmed that it was necessary to avoid arms, as long as negotiations continued.⁹⁰ Once it was concluded, Kinnock declared that the action in South Georgia was ‘necessary and unavoidable’.⁹¹ Since British rights and claims to this island had nothing to do with the historic Anglo-Argentine conflict, and the operation was accomplished without British victims, the Shadow Cabinet could acknowledge the legitimacy of the just concluded mission.⁹² However, everybody agreed that the Falklands were a different issue. In this case, escalation was to be avoided, and pressing the Government was to be pursued, especially for revealing further details of the American proposals still being debated, with the aim of reproposing more effectively the idea of United Nations’ involvement in the negotiations.⁹³ Foot’s speech to the Commons on the afternoon of 26 April oscillated between the necessity of not showing any anti-patriotism and that of differentiation from the Government. He affirmed that ‘the recovery of South Georgia was fully within our international rights’, but he declared that the opposition was ‘firmly, unshakably and persistently committed to fresh initiatives in the search for a peaceful settlement’: if one initiative failed, another had to be started.⁹⁴

⁸⁸C. McLaughlin, ‘Soon the Day of Reckoning’, *Labour Weekly*, 23 April 1982.

⁸⁹‘Military Muscle Backs Up Talks, Says Government’, *The Guardian*, 26 April.

⁹⁰‘We believe that we must go on negotiating, and if one negotiation fails we must still come back and try other forms of negotiations, if they are available. We believe that, rather than resort to force, we should take them back to the UN, and that the UN could play a bigger part in the present negotiations.’ Foot’s interview given to LWT on 25 April, quoted *ibid.*

⁹¹‘Kinnock Backs Invasion’, *The Times*, 27 April 1982.

⁹²LHASC, LPA, Parliamentary Committee, *Minutes*, 26 April 1982.

⁹³Both the most hawkish and the most doveish were in agreement on this point.

⁹⁴House of Commons, *Official Report*, 26 April 1982, vol. 22, cc. 610–611.

Foot's position was rendered temporarily less awkward by the appeal, made on the same day by the United Nations Secretary General to the two opposed nations, to desist from further combat, and to apply Resolution 502. The appeal took centre stage in an 'almost abusive'⁹⁵ exchange between the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister during Question Time on 27 April. Faced with Margaret Thatcher's evident wish to consider that the negotiating phase had ended, and to use arms to impose respect for Resolution 502, Michael Foot made a forceful attack. He argued that precisely because the Government had mobilised the fleet under the umbrella of a UN Resolution, it was obliged to accept the request of Perez de Cuellar to send the FCO Secretary to New York, in order to initiate new talks. Otherwise the Prime Minister would 'inflict a grievous blow to our country's cause'. Foot also used the occasion to reaffirm the principle of Parliament's full control over the ongoing crisis:

The responsibility in this matter rests with the right hon. Lady and with all hon. Members of the House of Commons. I ask the right hon. Lady not to take any further steps in the escalation of military matters and to give the House of Commons the chance of deciding what should be the proper response to the appeal of the Secretary-General. I ask her not to take any military action, but to take this diplomatic action after consulting the House of Commons.

Foot succeeded in catching Mrs Thatcher in counter-attack mode when he asked for clarification of the response given by the British UN ambassador to the UN Secretary-General. 'I think that our ambassador's reply is likely to have been ...' were the opening words of her response. Invited to publish 'as speedily as possible the timing and exact wording of the reply given by our ambassador to the Secretary-General's statement', Thatcher affirmed that there had not been any official response, but only an informal one. The exchange concluded with the Prime Minister's claim that it would be pointless for the Government to take any official step in reply to Perez de Cuellar's request.⁹⁶

⁹⁵I. Aitken, 'Foot Puts Paid to Falklands Unity', *The Guardian*, 28 April 1982.

⁹⁶House of Commons, *Official Report*, 27 April 1982, vol. 22, cc. 720–724.

On balance the Prime Minister came off sounding extremely bellicose, too bellicose for the image of a leader attentive to avoiding a clash with the worldwide public opinion that she herself had sought to cultivate until that moment. She herself must have been fully aware of the situation, given that she found it opportune to send a public letter to the Leader of the Opposition. In this document she explained that the informal nature of De Cuellar's request made it inappropriate for the British Government to respond in a formal way, and that the UK's permanent representative at the UN had already given a verbal communication to the Secretary-General that Her Majesty's Government could not accept anything less than full respect for Resolution 502.⁹⁷

This particular Prime Minister's Question Time was probably the occasion on which Michael Foot most notably succeeded in putting Margaret Thatcher in difficulty, during the entire Falklands crisis. All the same, it also provided the umpteenth confirmation of the divisions within the Labour Party. In fact, Foot won the applause of George Foulkes, who had constantly disparaged the approach taken by the Labour leader,⁹⁸ but he was criticised by Samuel Silkin, who had instead fully shared his positions.⁹⁹

The now concrete risk of a war fuelled agitation both in the unions and in the Party. On 26 April the Shop Distributive and Allied Workers Union (USDAW) approved a resolution urging Britain to 'take no military action' in South Atlantic.¹⁰⁰ On the 28th the TUC warned of 'the dangers of a widening bloody conflict involving the armed forces and the people of the Falklands'.¹⁰¹ On the same day, it was once more the turn of the NEC to be the theatre of fibrillations within the Labour Party. Healey and Foot, with Heffer's support, presented a motion that requested the British Government to respond immediately and positively to the 26 April

⁹⁷LHASC, LPA, Foot papers, MF/L/19, M. Thatcher to M. Foot, 27 April 1982. This same file contains the minutes of Foot's response, which repropounded the same arguments presented in the House.

⁹⁸LHASC, LPA, Foot papers, MF/M10/7, G. Foulkes to M. Foot, 27 April 1982.

⁹⁹LHASC, LPA, Foot papers, MF/L/19, S. Silkin to M. Foot, undated.

¹⁰⁰'Kinnock Backs Invasion', *The Times*, 27 April 1982. The motion was approved after the rejection of 'a trotskyst-inspired resolution condemning the dispatch of the British fleet to the Falkland Islands as an act of "imperialist aggression"'.
¹⁰¹A. Bevins, 'Subtle Manoeuvres Unite Labour Front Bench', *The Times*, 29 April 1982.

appeal of the UN Secretary-General.¹⁰² Benn and Hart presented another motion, which condemned the Argentine military aggression, called for the suspension of any British military action, and for the implementation of Resolution 502. The UK had to support all UN initiatives as well as the resettlement of the islanders wishing to leave the Falklands and negotiate on sovereignty. The Labour Party had to make it clear that it would not uphold the Government in a war against Argentina and to call for a ceasefire and the withdrawal of the task force to South Georgia.¹⁰³ The completely generic quality of the first motion made it easy to approve, without any contrary vote.¹⁰⁴ Debate was heated, however, about the second motion. Foot said that it would help the junta, giving a distorted interpretation of Resolution 502, and that it constituted a retraction of what the UK had already achieved after the reconquest of South Georgia. Heffer upheld Foot's thesis, inviting everyone to make party unity their prime obligation. Sam McCluskie accepted Benn's analysis in principle, but he argued against the timing: it came too late, since the task force was already in position.¹⁰⁵ The motion was rejected by 15 votes against and 8 in favour,¹⁰⁶ and 2 (Heffer, Coates) abstentions.¹⁰⁷ The NEC was confirmed as the preferred site for an efficacious opposition to party leadership. The meeting also confirmed that the possibility of reaching a wide consensus was directly proportional to the generic or non-generic qualities of the political proposal in question.

Tensions also increased within the PLP. In this case as well, the generic principle of recourse to the United Nations allowed for the display of a certain compactness. Beyond this context, however, the lines of rupture were clear. On 27 April six Labour MPs presented a motion critical of Benn's stance in the crisis.¹⁰⁸ This last was in strident opposition to the words pronounced by Benn himself at the Marx Memorial Lecture he delivered just before the invasion of the Falklands:

¹⁰² LHASC, LPA, NEC, *Minutes*, 26 April 1982.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ T. Benn, *The End of an Era*, pp. 215–216.

¹⁰⁶ In favour: Frank Allaun, Eric Clarke, Judith Hart, Tony Benn, Joan Maynard, Jo Richardson, Dennis Skinner and Les Huckfield.

¹⁰⁷ LHASC, LPA, NEC, *Minutes*, 26 April 1982.

¹⁰⁸ J. Lagdon, 'Benn Stand Criticised on Left of Party', *The Guardian*, 28 April 1982.

There is a clearly inherent right to take up arms against tyranny or dictatorship, to establish or uphold democracy, on exactly the same basis, and for the same reasons, that the nation will respond to a call to arms to defeat a foreign invasion, or repel those who have successfully occupied a part of our territory.¹⁰⁹

Even if its terms were ironic, the motion was the sign of evident impatience with Benn's behaviour. This impatience went beyond the fracture between the right and left wings of the party. In fact the motion was tabled by six left-wing Labour MPs. Five of them were also members of the Tribune Group. Instead the crucial point was party discipline, along with support for leadership that moved in accordance with programmatic documents.¹¹⁰

In the PLP meeting of 29 April the minority grouped around Tony Benn was accused of acting in opposition to the party policy on the issue, thus confusing the situation in many constituencies. Accusations were also launched against *Labour Weekly*, which was seen as giving too much space to the dissidents.¹¹¹ Benn answered that no one was moving in opposition to party policy. Nobody wanted to appease a fascist junta nor to hand over the Falklanders to them. The point was whether the military route was the best one for reaching those objectives. Everyone affirmed the need to keep the party united, but differences remained. The potentially most dangerous moment coincided with the speech of another left-wing MP, Norman Atkinson, who requested an open vote that would stabilise the party's position as definitely contrasting with that of the Government. The risks for the party leadership were evident. The proposal for a vote was not seconded by others. Foot thus could let it pass by, judging it to be inappropriate, but leaving the door open for a vote at some later stage in the crisis. The leader worked to defend openly the necessity of pursuing all possible diplomatic avenues, towards arriving at a negotiated solution of the crisis.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹The lecture 'Democracy and Marxism' was published in *Marxism Today*, 1982, May, pp. 6–14. The excerpt quoted is at p. 11.

¹¹⁰One of the proponents of the motion, Jeffrey Rooker, declared that the signers were 'giving Tony the same kind of support he gives to Michael'. Previously Rooker had underlined the fact that Foot's stance was in accord with the 1980 draft Manifesto. See A. Bevin, 'Subtle Manoeuvres Unite Labour Front Bench', *The Times*, 29 April 1982.

¹¹¹See the speeches by William Hamilton, George Robertson, Joan Lestor, and Hugh Brown.

¹¹²LHASC, LPA, PLP, *Minutes*, 29 April 1982.

During the Commons debate that afternoon, all PLP sensibilities lined up behind the request to verify the possibility of United Nations mediation. Probably as a result of the criticisms made against him in the course of the PLP meeting, Benn underlined that ‘any difference of emphasis that there may have been is over’¹¹³ and that the party should remain united in supporting Foot’s requests. But the superficial quality of this concordance emerges when the speeches of the Labour MPs are more deeply and closely analysed. Tony Benn, Stan Thorne,¹¹⁴ Frank Allaun¹¹⁵ and Jack Ashley¹¹⁶ made it clear that they were contrary to any use of force, with the first two accusing Margaret Thatcher of wanting to use the conflict to make people forget her own failures in domestic policies. For Robin Cook, the Falklands did not have enough relevance to justify military escalation. As for the task force, ‘however effective’ it could ‘be in putting pressure on the Argentines to reach a diplomatic solution, it’ was ‘much more effective in putting pressure on ourselves to adopt a military solution’.¹¹⁷ Taking an antithetical stance, Jim Callaghan backed the enforcement of the TEZ, decided by the Government: since the UN could not deploy any force to impose its own decisions, it was left to the Royal Navy to ensure the application of Resolution 502.¹¹⁸ Stanley Newens maintained that every possible attempt needed to be made to reach a diplomatic solution, but that it was not the case to exclude a priori the use of force. Nor did he exclude the idea that the increased diplomatic and economic pressures that Labour was requesting could be accompanied by limited military pressure as well. What must be avoided was deciding ‘immediately on a full-scale invasion of the Falklands’.¹¹⁹ However, the party leadership refrained from placing an absolute veto on the use of military force. Michael Foot did not directly address the question, but he did mention the obligation imposed on nations who intended to avail themselves of Article 51 of the UN Charter, to keep the Security Council fully informed about the military

¹¹³House of Commons, *Official Report*, 29 April 1982, vol. 22, c. 1020.

¹¹⁴Ibid., cc. 1014–1016.

¹¹⁵Ibid., cc. 1038–1040.

¹¹⁶Ibid., cc. 1010–1011.

¹¹⁷Ibid., cc. 1033–1036.

¹¹⁸Ibid., cc. 994–997.

¹¹⁹Ibid., cc. 1028–1031.

measures that they intended to use. He also stressed the necessity ‘for the House to exercise control over the Executive, over the military machine and over the diplomatic process’. It was ‘essential that that control should be sustained from week to week and from day to day in the most detailed manner’.¹²⁰ As for Denis Healey, he emphasised in his speech the points he had argued for in his preceding one: the military option must serve the purpose of favouring a diplomatic solution, not to suppress it once and for all. It therefore was necessary to use it a moderate way, with the wisdom shown up to that point, and within a negotiating strategy that aimed to reach a lasting settlement in the South Atlantic.¹²¹

On the whole, then, the Labour Party leadership held to its same positions of the preceding two weeks. Looking ahead, however, to the already probable combat episodes, Foot reinforced his own position with a strong appeal to the necessity of parliamentary control over the military measures that the government would be taking. His constitutionally based argumentation could serve to put limits on the Government, and guarantee a controlled use of military force. This approach would assume a central place in Labour arguments during the three following weeks.

3 FROM THE SINKING OF THE *BELGRANO* TO THE COUNTER-INVASION OF THE ISLANDS

As of 29 April, the Labour Party’s strategy thus remained that of offering a meeting ground to the more moderate members of the Cabinet. This did achieve some results, since it contributed to giving wiggle room to the Foreign Secretary, who on 1 May travelled to the USA to meet with Haig, and then De Cuellar, ‘in accord with the wishes of the House of Commons’.¹²²

Up to a certain point it was reasonable to hope that even the theme of parliamentary control could create some problems for the Prime Minister, and offer some advantage to the Labour Party. Yet Mrs Thatcher took swift action to diminish its effect. Applying the input of David Steel and of David Owen, on the evening of 30 April the Prime

¹²⁰Ibid., cc. 985–991.

¹²¹Ibid., cc. 1046–1052.

¹²²‘Pym Talks of “Major Change in Situation”’, *The Times*, 1 May 1982.

Minister invited the leaders of the opposition parties to meetings, in which she would give updates on the evolution of the crisis, in Privy Council terms. After consultations with Healey and other members of the Shadow Cabinet, Foot declined the offer. He was the only one to do so. His motive was the concern that ‘the constraint imposed by the receipt of information on Privy Council terms’ would have obliged him ‘to secrecy’ and therefore ‘inhibited him from criticism’ on the Government. For Foot, non-participation in these meetings was the best way to safeguard the principle of parliamentary supremacy.¹²³ To this choice was added a more pragmatic reason, stressed by Healey: to avoid getting one’s hands tied on crucial questions liable to throw the Labour Party into chaos.¹²⁴ As *The Guardian* stressed:

If you represent a party which is largely united and is generally prepared to take you on trust, like Mr Steel or Dr. Owen, that is no insuperable problem; but if you are leading a party as riven with disputes and riddled with suspicions as Labour, it is a much more difficult matter.

The binding factor of secrecy would have risked making Foot’s parliamentary action much less effective, leaving space wide open to Benn and his comrades.¹²⁵ Foot’s decision was approved by the entire Shadow Cabinet,¹²⁶ with the single exception of Peter Shore.¹²⁷

Meanwhile, only a few days after the last debate in the Commons, the situation rapidly deteriorated, with the launching of military operations and above all with the sinking of the *Belgrano*. This event signalled a major escalation, which risked becoming politically very dangerous for the Labour Party. The leadership therefore reconfirmed, with even more conviction, the necessity on the one hand of reaching a negotiated solution under the aegis of the United Nations, and on the other hand of maintaining firm political control over events, with the aim of ensuring a minimum use of force. This was decided by the Shadow Cabinet on 4 May, and this was the position held in the House

¹²³P. Webster, ‘Argentine Cruiser Hit by Torpedoes from Royal Navy Submarine’, *The Times*, 3 May 1982; and ‘Foot Rejects Offer of All-Party Talks’, *The Guardian*, 3 May 1982.

¹²⁴‘Foot Rejected PM Meeting to Press for Commons Debate’, *The Guardian*, 4 May 1982.

¹²⁵‘Mr Foot Stays Out’, *The Guardian*, 4 May 1982.

¹²⁶LHASC, LPA, Parliamentary Committee, *Minutes*, 4 May 1982.

¹²⁷‘Mr Foot Stays Out’, *The Guardian*, 4 May 1982.

of Commons on the same day.¹²⁸ In the Shadow Cabinet meeting several reservations re-emerged. Eric Heffer expressed the necessity to clarify further the Party's position, in the light of the new situation. The Labour Party had to call for an immediate truce, respect for Resolution 502, the intervention of the UN during the interim administration of the Falklands, and Britain's complete readiness to negotiate over sovereignty. On the opposite front, Peter Shore supported the absolute correctness of the British position, both regarding the sinking of the *Belgrano*, and on the Falklands issue as a whole. He also confirmed his suspicions about the capacity of the UN to play an effective and positive role in the developing conflict.

The sinking of HMS *Sheffield* made the situation all the more troubling. On 5 May the Shadow Cabinet met once more. For Healey the bad news demonstrated the insufficiency of British air cover. There was the consequent fear that the Government would be tempted to compensate for the disadvantage by bombarding the Argentine mainland. These developments again imposed the question of adequate political control in the chain of command. For Healey, however, the events also offered the possibility of finally pushing the Government to follow the lead of the UN, given that international pressure for the suspension of hostilities was growing. At this point, however, there arose the problem of how to respond to the likely request of an immediate truce that would be proposed by several Labour MPs. Healey held firm on the necessity of linking the truce to the implementation of Resolution 502. Heffer rejoined that it was highly improbable that the Argentines would decide to retreat. 'A ceasefire was essential lest Party's position became untenable.' Therefore it would be necessary to work for a truce, and to negotiate, even if the Argentines were still on the islands. Shore declared to the contrary, and argued for the necessity of linking a truce with the retreat of the invaders. Healey proposed an intermediate solution: agree upon a truce, but only after the Argentines had signed and pledged themselves to precise commitments regarding their withdrawal. The compromise terms did not seem to win much support, and Roy Hattersley stressed that it would be political suicide to request a truce 'without ending Argentine possession of the Islands'. As a result, Foot concluded that it was better

¹²⁸LHASC, LPA, Parliamentary Committee, *Minutes*, 4 May 1982; and House of Commons, *Official Report*, 4 May 1982, vol. 23, cc. 16–37.

not to set down too many precise details. Then there was the question of parliamentary control. One consequent position would have been to request a debate in the Commons. This proposal was put forward by Albert Booth, but it met with strong opposition from all those present. Even Heffer, while reasserting the need to make clear the Party's 'positive ideas on what should be done', argued against an 'early debate'. A debate would have brought into the open the difficulties of leadership to hold the party together in that moment, and would have given the impression of a wish to exploit events for the sake of the party's own aims.¹²⁹

All in all, even amidst the new and much more troublesome scenario for the Prime Minister, the internal divisions within the Labour Party made it impossible for Foot and Healey to deviate from the path traced out until that moment. In the following days, consequently, they continued to press the Government on the need to control events politically, avoiding an escalation of conflict, and insisting on a negotiated solution that made use of all possibilities offered by the UN. At the same time, the Labour leaders were careful not to request a truce which was not tied to the application of Resolution 502, and they sought as always to exploit any space left open by the internal differences in the Cabinet.¹³⁰

In fact, Foot had to manoeuvre between an internal minority that seemed to lean toward backing military escalation, convinced that this would have led to a British defeat and hence to Margaret Thatcher's definitive exit,¹³¹ and a more significant minority that aimed to get the Labour Party to call officially for an unconditional ceasefire. This second group was much more formidable, since the populist pacifism of which it was the mouthpiece could consolidate around a potential leader, as an alternative to the official one. They also organized extra-parliamentary actions. By the beginning of May Judith Hart established the Ad Hoc Falkland Islands Peace Committee, which campaigned for unconditional ceasefire until the end of the war. The Committee was supported by 25 organisations¹³² and 'was bolstered by the selection of a leading Bennite,

¹²⁹LHASC, LPA, Parliamentary Committee, *Minutes*, 5 May 1982.

¹³⁰See, for example, Michael Foot's interview for the BBC quoted in 'Foot Rallies Nott's Hint of a Lengthy Bblockade', *The Guardian*, 10 May 1982.

¹³¹'A Constructive Silence from Mr Heath', *The Times*, 7 May.

¹³²See the list 'Organisations Supporting the Ad Hoc Falkland Islands Peace Committee', LHASC, LPA, Hart Papers, HART/6/13.

Chris Mullin, as *Tribune's* new editor'.¹³³ Mullin set the magazine on anti-war stances. On 7 May he urged Labour Party to ask for the recall of the task force and the surrendering of the sovereignty over the Falklands to the UN Trusteeship. Mullin made a parallel between the Falklands crisis and Suez and stated that the position of the *Tribune* was the same as in 1956. This was a poisonous reference, because the editor during the Suez crisis was Michael Foot, who at the time called for the return of the fleet and the end of bipartisan policies.¹³⁴ Two days earlier, on 5 May, Judith Hart had promoted a motion in the Commons to call for an immediate truce. The motion had been backed by 69 Labour MPs,¹³⁵ a number that rose to 80 during the following days. On 9 May Benn and Hart led a demonstration against the war in London.¹³⁶ On 10 May Dalyell made himself the spokesperson for the necessity of calling back the task force, a position shared by 'friends in "different areas" of the PLP'.¹³⁷ On the 12th, Benn, Hart and Arthur Scargill spoke at the Stop the War meeting, warning of the danger of an escalation and demanding the recall of the British fleet.¹³⁸

In this context, and while the mediation attempted by the UN Secretary-General entered into a crucial and particularly delicate phase for the British Government, the meeting of the International Committee of the NEC took place on 11 May. Tony Benn and Judith Hart presented a motion for committing the party to call for an immediate truce, and a similar commitment on the part of the Government to engage in genuine peaceful negotiations. Running counter to this, there was the motion of Foot and Healey which enjoined the party to support the efforts of the UN Secretary-General to obtain a truce linked to the implementation of Resolution 502, and which proposed avoiding

¹³³D. Stewart, 'The Labour Party and the Falklands War', in *The British Labour Movement and Imperialism*, eds. Billy Frank, Craig Horner, and David Stewart, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, p. 186.

¹³⁴C. Mullin, 'Stop This Falklands', *Tribune*, 7 May 1982.

¹³⁵'69 Labour MPs Call for Truce', *The Times*, 6 May 1982.

¹³⁶'Benn Attacks "Thatcher's War"', *The Times*, 10 May 1982.

¹³⁷Churchill Archive Centre, Dalyell papers, TADA 3/5/4, copy of T. Dalyell's letter to B. Davis, 10 May 1982.

¹³⁸'Healey's Patience Runs Out', *The Times*, 13 May 1982.

military actions that would make a peaceful settlement more difficult.¹³⁹ Benn started by affirming that he had the support of 69 MPs who had signed the motion of 5 May, and of 24 CLPs. He openly attacked the stance of the frontbenchers, based on the idea that they could endorse the sending of the task force and at the same time disassociate themselves from its use. He reminded his colleagues that sooner or later it would be necessary to withdraw troops from the Falklands. Finally he stressed how the Government was using the war to sink the Labour Party and to remain in power for another five years. Frank Allaun insisted that the party base concurred with Benn's positions, and that the war only served to save Margaret Thatcher's face. Foot retorted by saying that he had acted in keeping with the principles of the Labour Party. He declared himself opposed to a truce that would have rewarded the junta, because such a pact would have removed any prospect of peace. The sinking of the *Belgrano* demonstrated the need for increased political control, as he had affirmed many times, but it did not invalidate the adopted political strategy. Therefore it was necessary for those positions to remain in place, without changing them, which would throw the party into chaos. The most interesting speech was that of Eric Heffer. Until this point, he had been the critical voice within the Shadow Cabinet, and within the NEC he had assumed a middle-ground position between Foot and Benn during the latter part of April, after first adhering to positions close to those of Benn. In the meeting of 11 May, Heffer once more repositioned himself, attacking Benn and embracing even the anti-fascist rhetoric that he had formerly criticised. He in fact defended the Shadow Cabinet from the accusation of being nationalist, justified the sending of the task force as inevitable, and argued that if the Labour Party had not backed the expedition it would have been called the 'Munich Party'. For Heffer the behaviour of Benn risked putting the party in an indefensible position, as demonstrated by some banners at the pacifist demonstration which invoked 'Victory to the Argentine Junta'.¹⁴⁰ The IC-NEC meeting of 11 May represented one of the most heated moments of the conflict within the Labour Party. The high point of tension was reached when the Chairman of the Committee, Joan Lestor, asked Benn and Hart to retract or amend their resolution, in the interest of preserving the unity

¹³⁹ See copy of the motions in LHASC, LPA, HART 6/10.

¹⁴⁰ T. Benn, *The End of an Era*, pp. 221–222.

of the NEC.¹⁴¹ At that point, Alan Hadden presented a third motion, aimed at supplanting the two in discussion, and limiting the party to reaffirming the resolution agreed at the NEC meeting on 28 April. The proposal was deemed impracticable by Lestor, since the two already-presented motions had to be voted on, before a new one could be submitted to the attention of the Committee. After long debates, to avoid taking the two motions to a vote, the Committee chairman accepted the recourse of Gwyneth Dunwoody and Betty Boothroyd to a procedural juggling to stop the debate, and make both emergency motions lapse. The Dunwoody–Boothroyd proposal was approved with eight votes in favour, and four votes against. At that point the Chairman ruled out any further discussion about the Falklands at that meeting.¹⁴² This conclusion provoked a hard-hitting reaction from Benn, who exclaimed: ‘this is the end of democracy in the Labour Party’.¹⁴³

The split reproduced itself at the PLP meeting of 12 May. Healey frontally attacked Benn and Hart for their public activity about the Falkland crisis, based in good measure on the exploitation of fears of an escalation—even a nuclear one—of the conflict. The Labour Party could take some credit both for the fact that the Government had now adopted a far less intransigent attitude towards the involvement of the UN Secretary General in the crisis, and for the fact that they were finally prepared to make some major concessions on the issue.¹⁴⁴ Nonetheless, the party could not increase its popularity, ‘because our message had been muffled by minority spokesmen’. Now more than ever it was necessary to speak ‘with a single voice’, also in order to benefit from divisions between

¹⁴¹This detail is recorded by P. Webster, ‘Benn and Hart Protest at Labour “Gag”’, *The Times*, 12 May 1982.

¹⁴²LHASC, LPA, NEC, Minutes of the International Committee meeting held on 11 May 1982.

¹⁴³M. White, ‘Labour Policy Survives Attacks’, *The Guardian*, 13 May. Benn wrote in his diaries: ‘That is the first time in twenty-three years on the NEC that I have ever known a chairman accept a motion to prevent a vote’. Benn, Judith Hart, Frank Allaun, and Jo Richardson voted against the Dunwoody–Boothroyd proposal; T. Benn, *The End of an Era*, p. 222.

¹⁴⁴Healey listed them as follows: ‘They accepted there could be negotiations before the withdrawal of Argentinian troops; they accepted there could be a ceasefire before the withdrawal was complete; that Britain could not administer the islands alone after withdrawal; that British sovereignty could be negotiated in the longer term. They had qualified their original position that the islanders had the right to veto on any final settlement’.

‘hawks’ and ‘doves’ in the Cabinet. Criticisms of the minority were also pronounced by David Stoddart and Samuel Silkin and, in softer tones, by Stanley Newens and Stanley Clinton Davis. Joining Benn and Hart in their call for an immediate ceasefire were Frank Allaun, Tam Dalyell, David Winnick and Reginald Freeson. Alex Lyon let it be known that the divisions within the party had emerged because the decision already had been taken regarding whether or not to support an invasion of the Falklands after having given approval to the sending of the task force. He called for a return to party unity, recognising that in the end sovereignty over the islands would need to be passed on to Argentina. Beyond the divisions, however, a growing unease emerged within the PLP. While not attacking Foot, Nigel Spearing expressed his clear impatience with how the leadership had dealt with the issue, especially in the first stages of the crisis. He lamented the bypassing of the PLP in the definition of the political strategy to adopt, and he criticised the handling of parliamentary debates in which too little time was left for backbenchers.

In the debate of 13 May the voices dissenting with the leadership had the opportunity to express themselves in the House. Denis Healey¹⁴⁵ and John Silkin¹⁴⁶ showed substantial support to the Foreign Secretary’s line, approved the principle of refusing any kind of unconditional ceasefire, and reminded their backbenchers that the 1980 Draft Manifesto committed the party to defend the Falklanders in front of ‘any Argentine regime which violates human and civil rights’. However, only two out of the eight Labour MPs who spoke in the debate backed the line of their leadership. They were Arthur Palmer¹⁴⁷ and David Stoddart.¹⁴⁸ Both of them put the need ‘to resist aggression’ at the centre of their arguments, making analogies with the 1930s and the dangers connected to the policy of appeasement. Six others made dissonant moves with respect to their own frontbenchers. In David Winnick’s case, there seemed to be more of a difference in tone, rather than substance: he stressed the need to avoid military escalation with greater vehemence than had Healey.¹⁴⁹ David Ennals reminded that he had approved and supported all the decisions of

¹⁴⁵ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 13 May 1982, vol. 23, cc. 958–964.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, cc. 1023–1027.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, cc. 988–990.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, cc. 991–994.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, cc. 1013–1016.

the Government, up to the sinking of the *Belgrano*. That event marked a rupture: ‘we went beyond the concept of force to back diplomacy’. It now was right to abstain from further military actions, to give the UN Secretary-General the real possibility of reaching a negotiated solution.¹⁵⁰ Judith Hart,¹⁵¹ Michael Meacher,¹⁵² Norman Atkinson¹⁵³ and Raymond Powell¹⁵⁴ were the most emphatic in maintaining that the Falklands were not worth fighting a war over, and that it was high time to agree upon a truce. For Hart and Meacher the most efficacious way to get the junta to capitulate remained the application of rigid financial sanctions, which the Government had not wished to apply in full, to avoid damaging the financial interests of the City. According to Atkinson, one could not get the Argentines to the negotiation table if they were being threatened by the task force. Calling back the fleet was the necessary premiss to give some hope to the negotiations that were being conducted in the context of the United Nations. For Powell the reconquest of the islands would be a disgrace, second only to the sinking of the entire British fleet. There was the need to proceed to the resettlement of the Falklanders, settle accounts with reality, and stop ‘being unrealistic about Britain’s role in the world’. Finally, it is worth noting that it was above all this group of Labour MPs who most appreciated Ted Heath’s speech, that is the one that caused the greatest polemics in the Conservative camp during the debate. According to David Ennals the former Prime Minister had given an ‘outstanding speech’.¹⁵⁵ Michael Meacher expressed strong support for what he had said.¹⁵⁶ Norman Atkinson went even further:

Had the right hon. Member for Sidcup (Mr. Heath) returned earlier from China and said then what he has said tonight I am certain that the Cabinet’s politics would have been different and there would have been many different faces around the Cabinet table. The matter would have developed differently and we would have seen some changes.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁰Ibid., cc. 999–1002.

¹⁵¹Ibid., cc. 978–981.

¹⁵²Ibid., cc. 1004–1007.

¹⁵³Ibid., cc. 1009–1011.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., cc. 1019–1021.

¹⁵⁵Ibid., c. 999.

¹⁵⁶Ibid., c. 1004.

¹⁵⁷Ibid., c. 1010.

If Heath's words, and even more those of Pym, left some space to hope for a continuance of negotiations, Margaret Thatcher's speech at the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Conference on the next day more than slightly alarmed the Labour leadership. On 16 May the War Cabinet elaborated its final and definitive offer to the Argentine junta, asking for a response by midnight of the 19th, New York time. The indiscretions that were leaked from the meeting, as well as the official declarations, made it clear that time was rapidly running out on the chances of reaching a negotiated resolution of the conflict.¹⁵⁸ Considering the new and probable escalation of military actions, many unions clarified their position. The Scottish TUC had been urging for a truce since 6 May.¹⁵⁹ The National Union of Seamen backed a landing on the Falklands if diplomatic efforts collapsed. APEX passed a more moderate motion supporting the use of force to sustain diplomacy and urging the involvement of the UN. ASTMS, ASLEF and the Fire Brigades Union called for an immediate ceasefire and the implementation of Resolution 502. ASLEF also called for the return of the task force¹⁶⁰ and so did NUM and NUPE.¹⁶¹ The TUC issued a generic statement supporting Labour frontbench strategy, but avoiding any specific mention of the task force and without adopting any policy on the use of force.¹⁶²

In the House, Foot returned to insist on the necessity of putting the Commons at the centre of the decision-making process. Everyone agreed on the necessity of applying Resolution 502,

but the judgement about the way in which such a national commitment should be carried forward cannot be left to the Cabinet, less still to some inner Cabinet, and less still again to some raucous group of Conservative backbenchers. It should be made, and must be made, by the House of Commons as a whole.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁸See for example J. Haviland, 'Harriers Strike Again as Suspicions over Argentina Grow', *The Times*, 17 May 1982.

¹⁵⁹Scottish TUC telegram to M. Foot, 6 May 1982, LHASC, LPA, Foot papers, MF/L/19.

¹⁶⁰'Seamen Back Use of Force', *The Times*, 18 May 1982; 'Aslef Votes for Task Force Recall', *The Times*, 20 May 1982; LHASC, LPA, NEC, ID/1981-82/July-202, *Resolutions on the Falklands Crisis*.

¹⁶¹D. Stewart, *The Labour Party and the Falklands War*, p. 186.

¹⁶²LHASC, LPA, NEC, ID/1981-82/July-202, *Resolutions on the Falklands Crisis*.

¹⁶³LHASC, LPA, Foot papers, MF/L/19, M. Foot to M. Thatcher, 17 May 1982.

Although Margaret Thatcher did not provide any substantial reassurance, she committed herself to a new debate in the Commons, scheduled for 20 May. On the 19th, the Shadow Cabinet met. The crucial theme of the meeting was the urgent concern of the possibility of a vote at the conclusion of the debate.¹⁶⁴ The decision was made to invite the Government to exert caution with the use of force and not to abandon completely the idea of a negotiated solution, without stabbing the troops in the back. A vote at the end of the debate had to be avoided because it would have emphasised the differences within the party. Nevertheless, on the morning of 20 May, 24 Labour MPs sent out a press release to announce their intention of calling for a division of the House. The invitation that they made to their colleagues was to vote against the Government.¹⁶⁵ At the PLP meeting held in the evening, Foot recommended the Labour MPs to refrain from pressing for a division. Had such a vote eventually taken place, the recommendation of the Shadow Cabinet was to abstain. Martin Flannery, Reg Race, Ernie Ross, Hugh Brown, Ernie Roberts, Leo Abse, John Maxton and of course Tony Benn and Judith Hart expressed their opposition to Foot's advice. For them, it was fundamental to mark distance from the Government, even for those who, like Brown, had not agreed with the way Benn had handled the issue in the previous weeks. The minutes of the meeting record, in support of the party leadership, the speeches of Ennals, Clinton Davies, David Clark and Stanley Newens. Alexander Lyon, who was always opposed to the leadership's approach, declared himself to be 'tired of the issue being argued purely from the "left" or "right" angles' and appealed to the need to maintain party unity.

During the debate Michael Foot and Denis Healey did in fact accept the inevitable recourse to the use of arms, but forcefully affirmed the necessity of not giving up negotiations. The Government must actively support the efforts of the United Nations, even during the days to come. The entire first part of Foot's speech, moreover, was directed at the Labour minority, and constituted a justification of his own conduct since 3 April.¹⁶⁶ Of the nine Labour backbenchers who spoke, six

¹⁶⁴See speeches by Merlyn Rees, Eric Heffer, Gerald Kaufman, Neil Kinnock, and Michael Foot.

¹⁶⁵T. Dalyell, *One Man's Falklands*, p. 86; and T. Benn, *The End of an Era*, p. 223.

¹⁶⁶House of Commons, *Official Report*, 20 May 1982, vol. 24, cc. 484–489.

expressed their dissent from the strategy decided by the frontbenchers. Tony Benn¹⁶⁷ and Andrew Faulds¹⁶⁸ stressed the absurdity of fighting for islands that various British governments had sought to cede for twenty years. The same Thatcher Government, during the talks of the preceding weeks, had accepted the possibility of putting an end to UK administration of the Falklands. The reality was that military logic—imposed by the sending of the task force—was gaining the upper hand, as was the desire to save the reputation of the current Government. Benn warned that the military campaign would result in failure, because the USA would be opposed to it, as was the case during the Suez crisis. Dalyell also believed that the counter-invasion would prove to be a major fiasco, and emphasised that the only policy possible in South America was collaboration with Argentina.¹⁶⁹ For Jack Ashley, the counter-invasion was a reckless choice, and out of proportion with respect to the motives for combat. It was needful to resist aggression, but by means of a naval blockade and by intensifying sanctions, not by yielding to the emotional fervour created and whipped up by the popular press and ‘a vociferous group of Members of Parliament who have elevated that tail into a holy shrine and a matter of golden principle’.¹⁷⁰ Alfred Dubs also articulated similar arguments, proposing a UN Trusteeship as a possible long-term solution.¹⁷¹ Finally, Stuart Holland attacked the Government for never having pursued the option of economic sanctions, in order to avoid damaging those same economic-financial interests that it was favouring with its monetarist policy.¹⁷² The other three Labour MPs used very different tones. Geoffrey Robinson expressed support for the Government’s conduct, precisely in light of the document presented in the House, which communicated the terms of the final offer made to the junta of Buenos Aires. This document demonstrated the absolute good faith of the Government, and its seriousness in pursuing a compromise solution. Still, Robinson criticised the decision to withdraw the proposal at the moment of launching the counter-invasion. Fighting for the unconditional surrender of

¹⁶⁷Ibid., cc. 494–498.

¹⁶⁸Ibid., cc. 510–514.

¹⁶⁹Ibid., cc. 541–544.

¹⁷⁰Ibid., cc. 517–519.

¹⁷¹Ibid., cc. 536–538.

¹⁷²Ibid., cc. 530–533.

the Argentines would make it impossible to negotiate a definitive settlement.¹⁷³ Ken Weetch focused his speech on the need to defend the rule of law on the international stage, and on the parallel with the situation of the 1930s. His speech turned out to be the most favourable towards the Government, of those delivered from the Opposition benches.¹⁷⁴ Jim Callaghan praised the conduct of Foot and Healey, and expressed his support for the Government, while recalling that in the end a long-term solution to the problem would need to be made.¹⁷⁵ The most important part of his speech, however, was devoted to attacking Tony Benn, making very clear what was at stake for the Labour Party in that evening's vote:

I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, South-East (Mr. Benn) disclaims all personal ambition. I do not suggest that those who follow him tonight will do so on that ground. But Opposition Members who are disposed to support him should note that this is yet another example of what he has consistently done since the general election. I regret that he is not present to hear what I have to say. He has chosen to challenge the leadership of the party, whoever it may be, to set out his own position. Whether that was calculated for tonight or whether it is consequential, that is the result. My right hon. and hon. Friends must choose who to follow tonight. They must choose whether to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, South-East, and thereby create yet one more division, or to follow my right hon. Friends on the Opposition Front Bench. That is the choice. I strongly regret that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, South-East has put the party in that position again. However, if that is the challenge, it must be resisted. We must follow the advice of our Front Bench.¹⁷⁶

In the division at the end of the debate, the vast majority of the party abstained, and only 33 Labour MPs went into the No Lobby.¹⁷⁷ This was an essentially modest result, if one considers that the motion of 5 May had identified a much larger area of discontent within the PLP.

¹⁷³Ibid., cc. 525–527.

¹⁷⁴Ibid., cc. 500–502.

¹⁷⁵Ibid., cc. 504–507.

¹⁷⁶Ibid., cc. 506–507.

¹⁷⁷Leo Abse, Frank Allaun, Norman Atkinson, Tony Benn, Andrew Bennett, Hugh Brown, Dennis Canavan, Bob Cryer, Tam Dalyell, Alfred Dubs, Andrew Faulds, Martin Flannery, Judith Hart, Stuart Holland, Les Huckfield, David Lambie, James Lamond, John Maxton, Joan Maynard, William McKelvey, Robert McTaggart, Michael Meacher, Ian Mikardo, Robert Parry, Raymond Powell, Reg Race, Jo Richardson, Allan Roberts, Ernest Roberts, Ernie Ross, Dennis Skinner, Stan Thorne, John Tilly. Even the two Plaid Cymru MPs—Dafydd Thomas and Dafydd Wigley—voted against the Government.

4 THE LAST WEEKS OF THE CRISIS

The consequences of the split in the division of 20 May lasted for a few days. Leo Abse and Alfred Dubs pointed out that their vote was against the Government and not against Foot and their own Frontbenches.¹⁷⁸ Michael Meacher clarified that he disagreed with the line backed by Benn on many aspects: from the need to send the task force to the one to link any ceasefire to the implementation of Resolution 502. Meacher also acknowledged Benn's impropriety, because he did not consult with Foot before the action over the vote was taken and presented him with a fait accompli. However, Meacher had considered it worthwhile to vote against the Government because of two reasons: the immediate and future costs of a counter-invasion of the Falklands would have been enormous and unjustified compared to the real national priorities; and the fact that the negotiations had not reached a real impasse yet.¹⁷⁹ In fact not all who had voted against the Party whip could be labelled as Bennites.¹⁸⁰ Even Judith Hart stressed that the division in the House of Commons went across the spectrum of the party. It was not a 'stab in the back' for Michael Foot and it had nothing to do with the struggle for the leadership of the party. It was just the evidence of the will to avoid a bloodshed and save British and Argentine lives instead.¹⁸¹ Since she was the chairman of the Labour Party, Hart received many critics for her general stance and for her vote on 20 May. She argued that since the beginning of the crisis she had never 'gone beyond the policy of the NEC'. She explicitly counterposed the legitimation from the party members to the one from the PLP:

I am a fully elected member of the National Executive Committee, with six million votes behind me. I do not consider that I have to put on a Shadow Cabinet chastity belt during my years of chairmanship, particularly when I am receiving so many letters of support from Labour parties and trade unions all over the country who support my views.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁸See Abse's speech at the Welsh Labour Party Conference quoted in 'Labour Rebel Defends Stand', *The Guardian*, 22 May and Dubs's letter to Foot, 22 May 1982, LHASC, LPA, Foot papers, MF/L 19.

¹⁷⁹LHASC, LPA, Foot papers, MF/L 31/1/4, M. Meacher to M. Foot, 21 May 1982.

¹⁸⁰'The Party's Divisions under the Surface', *Labour Weekly*, 28 May 1982.

¹⁸¹'Foot Has Support for Dismissal of Rebels', *The Times*, 22 May.

¹⁸²G. Clark, 'Rebellious Dame Judith Encouraged by Letters', *The Times*, 25 May 1982.

Benn and Hart kept riding the wave of pacifist demonstrations.¹⁸³ Tam Dalyell attacked Foot frontally, accusing him of having given complete support to the government.¹⁸⁴

For its part, Foot strongly outlined the differences between the Labour Party and Thatcher's Government. On 21 May, during a press conference in support of the Labour candidate in Beaconsfield's by-election, the Labour leader once again blamed the Government for not having accepted the UN Secretary General's proposal for further negotiations and repeated that the Labour backing for the task force did not mean automatic backing for the Government. He also outlined one more time that 'no military settlement could be effective', therefore 'there would have to be a return to negotiations' soon or later.¹⁸⁵ John Silkin and Eric Heffer tried to emphasise the unity of the party beyond the incident of 20 May. They recalled the complex identity of the Labour Party, within which pacifism went hand in hand with the legacy of the struggle against fascism.¹⁸⁶ The need to defend the frontbenchers' line from the criticism of the minority remained constant until the last phases of the conflict.¹⁸⁷

The thorniest issue concerned the three frontbenchers who had defied the party whip: Tam Dalyell, spokesman on science; Andrew Faulds, spokesman on arts; and John Tilley, spokesman on home affairs. Their disloyalty towards the leader angered the majority of the PLP. A strong warning in terms of party discipline was needed. John Silkin publicly urged the three to resign.¹⁸⁸ Another member of the Shadow Cabinet, Eric Heffer, showed

¹⁸³'Peace Movement Grows as 7000 March Against the Fighting', *The Guardian*, 24 May 1982.

¹⁸⁴'Foot Accuses Government of Blunder over UN Proposals', *The Guardian*, 22 May 1982.

¹⁸⁵Ibid.

¹⁸⁶In a BBC Radio *World At One* interview, Silkin 'spoke of the honourable tradition of pacifism, and of the history of the armed struggle against fascism'; *ibid.* During a meeting in Hertford, Heffer said: 'There is a dilemma at the heart of this problem. The Labour Party cannot agree to a bunch of fascist military thugs being allowed to do what they like. At the same time, the party does not want an all-out war, with all that would mean'; *ibid.*

¹⁸⁷See, for example, Denis Healey in *Labour Weekly*, 28 May 1982; Neil Kinnock in *Tribune*, 28 May 1982, and Jack Straw's speech at Weymouth on 27 May; see also 'Foot and Owen Warn Against Surrender Demand', *The Guardian*, 29 May 1982.

¹⁸⁸On 21 May he declared: 'At the moment all our politics are dominated by the Falkland Islands. That is inevitable and I do not see how they can do their jobs properly holding the views they do'; P. Webster, 'Foot Has Support for Dismissal of Rebels', *The Times*, 22 May 1982.

a different stance. He appealed to the party to put into perspective what had happened in the Commons and stressed that ‘despite the vote it was clear that the party was united on the achievement of peace by negotiation through upholding the UN Charter and opposition to a full-scale war’.¹⁸⁹ On 24 May, Michael Foot eventually removed Dalyell, Faulds and Tilley from the frontbench team. Dalyell reacted vigorously, accusing Foot of having fired the wrong person. The Labour leader should have fired John Silkin, because of which the party had been tied to the line of recourse to force to support the Falklanders.¹⁹⁰ On the same day, Labour’s agriculture spokesman and member of the Shadow Cabinet, Gavin Strang, resigned. According to him the Labour leadership had in fact clearly granted the Government the support for the decision to reconquer the Falklands.¹⁹¹

Once again the NEC proved to be the most difficult battlefield for the Labour leadership. The meeting of 26 May witnessed a new confrontation between Michael Foot and Tony Benn. The leader and his deputy presented the following motion:

The NEC of the LP strongly condemns the refusal of the Argentine military junta to accept the fair proposals for a peaceful settlement of the Falklands dispute which were offered, a rejection which has led to the intensification of the fighting with all the hazards for British forces and others involved; offers continued support for the efforts of the Secretary General of the UN to assist in securing fresh negotiations; calls for renewed efforts to achieve a ceasefire linked with the implementation of UN Security Council resolution No. 502, and notes that this resolution underlines our country’s commitment to a diplomatic settlement of the dispute.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹Ibid.

¹⁹⁰Dalyell also warned Foot about the fact that his decision could have led to possible negative spillovers: the three frontbenchers had a large following in their constituencies and widespread sympathy among trade unions. Moreover, to sack them could create trouble in many Scottish constituencies. LHASC, LPA, Foot papers, MF/L 19, Dalyell to Foot, 22 May 1982. Some excerpts of the letter were published in ‘Shadow Spokesman Quits over Invasion’, *The Guardian*, 25 May 1982.

¹⁹¹According to Strang, none of the reasons given to justify the invasion could be considered valid: the British victory would not have favoured a democratic transition in Argentina; there was no real evidence that the Argentines would disregard the Falklanders’ civil and political rights; the UN had not mandated the UK to proceed in this way; the negotiations had not come to any standstill, indeed there was good room for an agreement. LHASC, LPA, Foot papers, MF/L 31/1/4, G. Strang to M. Foot, 24 May 1982. Gavin Strang did not vote against the party whip on 20 May, since he missed the debate; ‘Resignation as Labour Rebels Go’, *The Times*, 25 May 1982.

¹⁹²LHASC, LPA, NEC, *Minutes*, 26 May 1982.

Benn and Hart proposed to amend the motion, adding the following:

1. This meeting of the NEC deplores the mounting loss of life in the Falklands;
2. Supports the UN in its search for a peaceful settlement;
3. Condemns the Prime Minister for her decision to veto any Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire; and
4. Calls for an immediate and unconditional mutual ceasefire.¹⁹³

Benn presented the amendment as the appropriate tool to show finally a clear and different line from that of the Government. Foot and Healey reaffirmed this had already happened and that in fact ‘the Government had been forced to change its stance due to Labour pressure, which had forced concessions by Mrs Thatcher in negotiations’. Moreover, an unconditional withdrawal would have meant a success for Galtieri.¹⁹⁴ After a long discussion, the amendment was rejected by 14 votes, with nine against and three abstentions.¹⁹⁵ The motion was then approved by 15 votes, with nine against and two abstentions.¹⁹⁶

In the House, Foot continued consistently with the usual line. He repeatedly urged the Government to leave the door open for negotiations while intensifying military pressure.¹⁹⁷ In this perspective he again emphasised the distance between the Foreign Secretary on the one side and the Prime Minister—and the Defence Secretary—on the other. The former was said to be ready to negotiate even after the counter-invasion of the Falklands, while the latter now wanted a complete victory.¹⁹⁸ According to Foot the Government had to give

¹⁹³Ibid.

¹⁹⁴J. Langdon, ‘Foot Wins Backing from Divided Labour Executive’, *The Guardian*, 27 May 1982.

¹⁹⁵In favour: Frank Allaun, Tony Benn, Eric Clarke, Judith Hart, Douglas Hoyle, Les Huckfield, Joan Maynard, Jo Richardson, and Dennis Skinner. Abstaining: Laurence Coates, Eric Heffer and Sam McCluskie. Against: Gwyneth Dunwoody, Roy Evans, Michael Foot, John Golding, Alan Hadden, Denis Healey, Neil Kinnock, Joan Lestor, Gerry Russel, Shirley Summerskill, Syd Tierney, Eric Varley, Russell Tuck and David Williams. LHASC, LPA, NEC, *Minutes*, 26 May 1982.

¹⁹⁶Against: Allaun, Benn, Clarke, Coates, Hart, Huckfield, Maynard, Richardson and Skinner. Abstaining: Heffer and Hoyle. In favour: Dunwoody, Evans, Foot, Golding, Hadden, Healey, Kinnock, Lestor, McCluskie, Russel, Summerskill, Tierney, Varley, Tuck and Williams. Ibid.

¹⁹⁷Cf. ‘Thatcher Rejects Argentine Ceasefire Campaign’, *The Guardian*, 26 May; and ‘Kamikaze Foot Fights to the Last Peruvian’, *The Times*, 26 May.

¹⁹⁸House of Commons, *Official Report*, 25 May 1982, vol. 24, cc. 789–794.

up the idea of an unconditional surrender and leave the junta with a way out,¹⁹⁹ perhaps taking advantage of the new UN Security Council resolution voted for on the 26th which invited Secretary De Cuellar to a new negotiating effort.²⁰⁰ Once again this marked a convergence with the positions of the Foreign Secretary, who was committed at the end of May to convince his colleagues and the Prime Minister of the need to negotiate a post-war settlement that would avoid making the Falklands a burden for British strategic and financial resources.²⁰¹ Also for Foot the crucial point was now the unsustainability of the return to the status quo. This allowed the holding together of the principle of welcoming the UN's ongoing appeals with the tactical opportunities of offering help to Pym and the more moderate MPs within the Conservative Party.²⁰² Again on 8 June, while the war was now turning towards the final stages, Foot took the cue offered by the UN Security Council meeting on 4 June and proposed the following motion to the International Committee of the NEC:

The NEC believes that the draft resolution supported by the majority of the UN Security Council last Friday (which included provisions for the withdrawal of Argentine forces from the Falkland Islands and an immediate ceasefire) provided a basis for a negotiated settlement and the avoidance of further loss of life. We regret the imposition of the UK veto and support the Secretary General in his further efforts. To assist his efforts, we call upon the Government to put forward its own resolution, designed to achieve a ceasefire linked with the implementation of the Security Council's resolution 502, and to indicate the Government's willingness to achieve a negotiated settlement which links the withdrawal of the Argentine forces with negotiations about the future of the Islands.

¹⁹⁹'Thatcher Rejects Argentine Ceasefire Campaign', *The Guardian*, 26 May 1982.

²⁰⁰House of Commons, *Official Report*, 27 May 1982, vol. 24, cc. 1049–1052. See also 'Foot and Owen Warn against Surrender Demand', *The Guardian*, 29 May 1982; and 'Foot and Owen Voice Concern', *The Times*, 29 May 1982.

²⁰¹'Foot Sides with Pym on British Commitment', *The Times*, 1 June 1982.

²⁰²'Colleagues Vilify Pym as Split with Thatcher Widens', *The Times*, 31 May 1982; 'SDP Leaders Split over Talks Before Final Assault', *The Times*, 2 June 1982; and 'Healey Urges Thatcher to Delay Attack', *The Guardian*, 5 June 1982.

The situation on the field was now such that any division would have been superfluous: the motion was backed even by Benn and was approved without opposition.²⁰³ During Question Time on 8 June Foot spoke accordingly.²⁰⁴ He also wrote to the Prime Minister on the 9th.²⁰⁵ A few days later the Argentine troops hoisted the white flag.

The final act of the Labour Party tribulations on the Falklands issue was the attempt to remove it. Two days after the Argentine surrender, the NEC approved 'the withdrawal' of the whole section on the Falkland Islands from the Draft Manifesto which would be submitted to the Party Annual Conference next autumn.²⁰⁶

²⁰³LHASC, LPA, NEC, *Minutes of the International Committee*, 8 June 1982.

²⁰⁴House of Commons, *Official Report*, 8 June 1982, vol. 25, c. 17.

²⁰⁵LHASC, LPA, Foot papers, MF/L 19, M. Foot to M. Thatcher, 9 June 1982.

²⁰⁶LHASC, LPA, NEC, *Minutes*, 16 June 1982.



The SDP-Liberal Alliance

In the twenty years prior to the 1982 conflict regarding the theme of the Falklands, the Liberals had abided by the principle of defending the right of self-determination for its inhabitants.¹ This was completely consistent compared to the ideal principles of the party. At the same time, however, this position established the Liberal Party as being totally in line with the effort to respect the wishes of the islanders, which was the main political obstacle to the solution of the Falklands problem. In the parliamentary skirmishes the reference to the right of self-determination could be used to put the Government in office, which would have been willing to reach an agreement with the Argentinians without having first obtaining the consensus of the Falklanders, in difficulty.² All of which happened also with regard to the leaseback project drawn up by the Thatcher Government.³ Furthermore one must remember that since the 1960s within the group of Liberal MPs there was a member of the Falklands

¹See, for example: Russell Johnston, House of Commons, *Official Report*, 20 November 1969, vol. 791, c. 1523; Alan Beith, House of Commons, *Official Report*, 2 February 1977, vol. 925, c. 555; and Jeremy Thorpe, House of Commons, *Official Report*, 13 July 1977, vol. 935, c. 405.

²See Jeremy Thorpe, House of Commons, *Official Report*, 11 December 1968, vol. 775, c. 426 and 12 December 1968, cc. 611–612; Jeremy Thorpe, House of Commons, *Official Report*, 7 December 1977, vol. 940, c. 1362.

³Russell Johnston, House of Commons, *Official Report*, 2 December 1980, vol. 995, c. 130.

Lobby, the MP for Inverness, Russell Johnston, who, successively, would have become the Party Spokesman for Foreign Affairs.

As far as the new Social Democratic Party (SDP) is concerned, it could count on the presence within its ranks of David Owen, who, as Foreign Secretary, had had a prominent part in the Anglo-Argentinian crisis of 1977.⁴ However, amongst the Social Democratic MPs of 1982 was also a member of the Falkland Islands Lobby, Eric Ogden. He was the only SDP MP to speak in the Commons debates during the 1982 crisis, other than Owen, and with a line that passed over the latter with a more right-wing approach.

In his memoirs, David Owen wrote that the SDP MPs, with their 'full-hearted support to the Government' during the Falklands war, 'stiffened the Liberal Party'.⁵ If it is without a doubt true that the Liberal MPs did not fail to support the British task force, it is more difficult to affirm that this was the result of the line adopted by the Social Democrats. During the crisis, the two parties moved on a common ground, but not without their differences, in as much the tones as with regards to some specific issues.

1 THE FIRST DAYS OF THE CRISIS

The tone of the first official statements of the Liberal Party in response to the news of the invasion of Argentina were conditioned by the fact that its Foreign Affairs spokesman, Russell Johnston, was also an important representative of the Falkland Islands Lobby at Westminster. On 2 April Johnston made it immediately clear that Britain could not 'let down the Falkland Islanders'. In fact they were a group of people who had 'an undisputable right to live there and a total reliance upon' the United Kingdom. According to Johnston, the alternative put forward before Her Majesty's Government was clear, just as the decision that one had to make was clear:

We have a simple choice. Either we accept the situation and appease our consciences by pious utterances of shock and outrage, or we take action to help our people. I have no doubt what our course of action should be. The Royal Navy should send to the Falklands a force strong enough to blockade the Islands from the Argentines. That force must remain on station

⁴A. Donaghy, *The British Government and the Falkland Islands, 1974-79*, pp. 160-172.

⁵D. Owen, *Time to Declare*, p. 548.

until the Argentinians leave or until, if necessary, we can plan measures required to remove them. The government has up to now put its trust in diplomacy and, as part of this has shown a willingness to weaken our physical presence in the area most recently by its announcement of its intention to withdraw HMS Endurance. It is also clear that they have failed since the South Georgia incident to make adequate contingency planning for a worsening of the situation. The government must now act decisively to come to the aid of the Falkland Islanders.⁶

The Britishness of the Falklanders was beyond discussion and the Government had the duty to regain full control of the islands, expelling the Argentinians, by force if necessary. Johnston also underlined the shortcomings and the most striking faults of the Thatcher Government, without however striking the fatal blow by asking for a resignation. In fact the main question for the Liberal MP remained that of a rapid response and decision to help the Falklanders.

On the evening of 2 April even the leader of the Liberal Party spoke out about the emergency of the moment, putting forward an element that during the crisis would have constituted one of the main arguments of the attacks of the Alliance against the Government. Speaking at the Edinburgh Scottish Liberal Club, David Steel underlined how the immediate check by the Government in the Falklands was proof of the inadequacy of the defensive policies followed by the Conservative Government, all centred on the renewal of the British nuclear deterrent at the cost of the Royal Navy.⁷

On the morning of 3 April a statement by the National Executive Committee, which had been approved with only one vote against,⁸ laid out the official position of the Liberal Party. The statement was, at least in part, in line with what had been said the previous day by Johnston. In fact, in the statement, the Argentinian invasion was condemned and the British Government was invited 'to take action to secure, by force if necessary, the immediate withdrawal of all Argentinian troops from British soil and the liberation of the Falkland Islanders'. In addition, however,

⁶Russell Johnston's statement was published in *Liberal News*, 6 April 1982.

⁷London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) Archives, STEEL B/1/7/5, Parliamentary Liberal Party, Press release, 2 April 1982.

⁸LSE Archives, Liberal Party, 16/73, letter by Russell Johnston, 15 April 1982. Alan Beith related the same to Michael Jopling, see Jopling's minute to Francis Pym, 6 April 1982, www.margarethatthatcher.org/document/122872.

they tried to limit the margins of governmental actions, clearly securing the British response to the defence of the principles of the UN Charter. Moreover, the NEC made it clear that the result of the incapability of the Government in this circumstance could not be anything short of the resignations of the Secretaries of State for Foreign Affairs and Defence.⁹

Johnston's speech during the emergency debate on 3 April remained within the appointed frame set by these initial statements. Firstly, he highlighted the value-based aspect of the crisis at hand: 'the rights and freedoms of individual people' were at stake. Secondly, he underlined 'the Government's lack of preparedness'. Lastly, he expressed his support for the Government's decision to send in a task force. Different to the statement made the previous day, however, this time Johnston limited his support to the hypothesis of a naval blockade, without leaving the door open to the hypothesis of a stronger military effort. He took advantage of the time available to him to make his value known as a member of the Falkland Islands Association and to underline that the current crisis was the fruit of the constant neglect of London towards the Falklanders:

We have looked weak in the Falkland Islands for a very long time. The Foreign Office has not been the friend of the Falkland Islands. ... They have been starved of money, with the result that a situation has now arisen in which vast amounts of money will have to be spent and in which results may be very difficult to achieve.¹⁰

Johnston was the only Liberal MP to speak in the Commons on 3 April. David Steel thought it opportune not to take the floor, preferring to reason 'from an Alliance point of view' and thus leaving more space to David Owen; even more so because the debate occurred within a contingent time. It was a risky move. A few days before, on the occasion of a Commons debate on the acquisition of the Trident system, Steel and Owen had agreed that the Social Democratic MP would have spoken on behalf of the two parties of the Alliance. The result of which was a speech that left a part of the Liberal Party unhappy.¹¹ In his memoirs, the Liberal leader explained his decision on 3 April as follows:

⁹See *Liberal News*, 6 April 1982.

¹⁰House of Commons, *Official Report*, 3 April 1982, vol. 21, cc. 655–656.

¹¹On Monday 29 March, Owen had stated: 'Both parties agree that, for as long as the Polaris fleet provides a useful part of a NATO deterrent, it should continue to fulfil that role. Moreover, both parties agree that the decision on whether to replace it need not be

As leader of the third party in the House the Speaker always gave me a priority, but I decided that it made no sense for this occasion. After all, David Owen had not only been Foreign Secretary, he had actually dealt with a previous Argentine threat to these islands. If I used my position, he would be called well down the list. Consistent with my view of the Alliance, I decided we should play our best card. He should speak up front with Russell Johnston, our Foreign Affairs spokesman, adding a Liberal voice later in the debate. David appreciated the gesture at the time. ... My critics say it was yet another example of my deference to SDP leaders. I would say it was fully justified, from an Alliance point of view.¹²

If the line of the Liberal Party in those first hours of the crisis seemed to have been well defined since 2 April, that of the SDP was outlined only shortly before the opening of the emergency debate. Bill Rodgers played one of the crucial roles. In the early hours of the morning of 3 April, he received a telephone call from David Owen who expressed his leaning to oppose a possible military action in the Falklands, judging it to be too risky. Rodgers strongly expressed his opposition to this regard. In his opinion, the SDP had to support military action both out of principle—the islands were seized in defiance of international law—and because, otherwise, the party would have seen their popularity greatly compromised.¹³ In his memoirs, David Owen acknowledged the importance of Rodgers in those moments in determining that specific political decision and in convincing the more reluctant Social Democratic MPs to use military force during a meeting immediately prior to the Commons debate on 3 April.¹⁴

taken now. ... Polaris can be retained until the end of this century'; House of Commons, *Official Report*, 29 March 1982, vol. 21, c. 40. Some senior Liberals were unhappy with that phrasing because Liberal policy was 'that Polaris should be quickly phased out.' As a consequence, in a meeting held on 31 March, Liberal MPs 'unanimously' agreed that parliamentary SDP spokesmen would not again 'be authorized to make policy statements on behalf of their alliance partners'. 'SDP Not to Speak for the Liberals', *The Times*, 1 April 1982.

¹²D. Steel, *Against Goliath: David Steel's Story*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989, p. 231.

¹³B. Rodgers, *Fourth Among Equals*, London, Politico's, 2000, p. 229.

¹⁴D. Owen, *Time to Declare*, p. 546.

David Owen fully exploited the time available to him, with a speech given together with the criticisms of the Government in office for the humiliation suffered and the support for the decision to retake the islands. His speech¹⁵ was very effective as he could counter the experience of 1977 to the humiliation suffered by the Thatcher Government. The crucial question was why the Government had not arranged any contingency plan whatsoever in the month of March, when just by reading the British newspapers, it was clear that the situation in the South Atlantic had been deteriorating. Five years before, the Labour Government had had to face a similar situation. They did so by deploying a ‘naval force’ to use as a lever in the negotiations with the Argentinians. Such a thing was possible because ‘the Prime Minister of the day took complete control of that issue’ and the Secretary of State for Defence followed the directions of the Foreign Secretary—i.e. Owen himself—to deploy such a naval force. For the Social Democratic MP it was not the moment to linger on controversy about incompetency and the responsibility of the government in charge. This was supposed to be delegated to a full inquiry to be started once the then present crisis had been solved.¹⁶ What was instead required was to guarantee full support for the Government in spite of its grave errors because British servicemen’s lives could be put at risk. According to Owen the humiliation could be redeemed and the islands ‘repossessed by a combination of firm diplomacy backed by the use of the Navy’. It was initially necessary to declare an exclusion zone around the Falklands, create a naval blockade and send in some submarines as back-up support for the surface fleet. However, if the House had to assure its full support to the governmental efforts in following the objective ‘to return the Falkland Islands and the freedom of the islanders to British sovereignty’, it was necessary to restore ‘the Government’s authority’. The ministers principally in charge had to ‘now consider their position and the quality and strength of the Government during the next few critical weeks’. This was a clear request for resignations, which Owen renewed further when John Nott gave him the opportunity in the closing moments of the debate.¹⁷

¹⁵House of Commons, *Official Report*, 3 April 1982, vol. 21, cc. 646–647.

¹⁶David Owen had already prospected the previous day the necessity of a ‘massive inquiry’ to scrutinise in full the responsibility and shortcomings of the Government; P. Webster, ‘House in Crisis Session Today’, *The Times*, 3 April 1982.

¹⁷House of Commons, *Official Report*, 3 April 1982, c. 666. See also Chapter “[The Conservative Party](#)”.

If the choice made by Steel of not taking to the floor had been dictated by the idea of reinforcing the collaboration between the Liberals and the Social Democrats, Owen's speech made it possible to see some gaps forming between the two groups. Differently to that sustained by the NEC of the Liberal Party, the Social Democratic MP did not make any reference to the role of the UN, at least in this first parliamentary speech. If, from the Liberals' point of view, the reasons for the British response relied upon the defence of the islanders and of the rule of law, Owen appeared extremely sensitive also to the reference of the principle of sovereignty and the need to redeem the humiliation suffered. In general, it was his rhetoric and linguistic style that made his speech, on the whole, more supportive of the Government, despite the criticisms towards it. Naturally he maintained his distance, taken previously, from the Government, especially with regards to the necessity not to confuse the restoration of British sovereignty in the Falklands with the reinstatement of the status quo in the South Atlantic. Owen saw to it to clarify this point in some of the statements released in the days immediately after the debate of 3 April: the Government had obtained the withdrawal of the invaders, but it had to be accompanied by agreements capable of guaranteeing the safety of the Falklanders without a massive British military effort, perhaps by conceding to Buenos Aires the opportunity to exploit the oil and fishing resources alongside the British in the contested archipelago.¹⁸

On the evening of 5 April, the Parliamentary Committee of the SDP expressed its complete agreement concerning the fact that it was necessary to continue along the line taken by David Owen on 3 April, without 'weakening or wobbling the position'. It was therefore necessary to support the Government 'in its resolve to restore the Falkland Islands to a situation whereby the Falkland Islanders could determine their own future'. However, he should do so without giving too much away in proposing specific military measures, leaving the Government fully responsible in this field. The Parliamentary Committee also decided that the SDP would not have asked for other resignations after that of the FCO team given that same morning.¹⁹

¹⁸One can see the excerpts of two radio interviews reported in A. Bevins, 'Thatcher "Should Have Resigned"', *The Times*, 6 April 1982.

¹⁹'A Note of a Special Meeting of the SDP Parliamentary Committee', 5 April 1982, The Albert Sloman Library, University of Essex, SDP Archives, Parliamentary Committee, box 26 A.

The divergences between the Liberals and the Social Democrats came to light in the following days. While David Steel started to prospect ‘the possibility of turning the Falklands into a United Nations dependency’, the Social Democrats strongly felt that negotiations had to focus ‘on a return to British sovereignty’.²⁰ This accompanied the Liberals’ attempt to fading the resoluteness about the use of military force prospected by Johnston in his statement of 2 April. In addition to these reasons tightly connected to the crisis in the South Atlantic, there was another relative to the internal dynamics of the forging of the alliance between the parties in view of the general election. The triggering of the crisis pushed forward a hypothesis of ‘an early general election’.²¹ Meanwhile, Steel commissioned the liberal negotiators ‘to speed up their negotiations on the division of parliamentary seats with the Social Democrats, completing the carve-up before the new deadline of April 20’. This move was not appreciated by the allies of the SDP who branded it as ‘irresponsible at a time when all parties in the Commons’ should have had to rally ‘around the Government in its resolve to win back the occupied territory’. Hence, for the Social Democrats, talk ‘of an early election, United Nations dependency and qualifications to the use of force’ contributed to undermine ‘the Government’s position’.²²

2 DIPLOMACY AT WORK

On 7 April, the second parliamentary debate on the Falklands confirmed the existing differences between the Liberals and the Social Democrats. On behalf of the former, this time David Steel spoke, since Russell Johnston was absent.²³ Having paid tribute to Lord Carrington for having ‘restored to its full dignity the doctrine of ministerial responsibility’ with his resignation and after having criticised the Government for

²⁰A. Bevins, ‘Alliance’s Boat Rocked by Steel’, *The Times*, 7 April 1982.

²¹The hypothesis of ‘an emergency general election’ was also prospected by the SDP Steering Committee in the meeting on 5 April. See ‘Minutes of the Meeting of the Steering Committee’, 5 April 1982, p. 2, The Albert Sloman Library, University of Essex, SDP Archives, Steering Committee, 1982, box 3. In the following meeting on the 19th it was evaluated how realistic the hypothesis of an election would be at a distance of 18 months.

²²A. Bevins, ‘Alliance’s Boat Rocked by Steel’, *The Times*, 7 April 1982.

²³It was what Johnston himself stated in his speech in the third Commons debate on the Falklands on 14 April.

its errors and renewed his request for an inquiry once the crisis came to an end, the Liberal leader took up the idea from Jim Callaghan's previous speech to put forward a crucial issue for his Party: that of the British nuclear deterrent and the defence budget.

We have witnessed a deliberate policy of priority decisions, particularly in forward spending, which have involved the resignation of the Minister responsible for the Navy and change in the Secretary of State for Defence. Further, as a result of those decisions, of the two aircraft carriers leading the expedition to the Falkland Islands one is already under sale to the Australians and the other is due to be scrapped. When this immediate episode is over, I do not think that the House can do other than return to the question of defence priorities and the defence budget.²⁴

Steel also went back to the support for the task force, reiterating it, but at the same time presenting it as the outcome of being forced into it by the Government. Support, therefore, was understood as being limited to a precise aim: 'the safeguard of the lives and freedom of the Falklanders'. This had to be the objective of the Government and not 'the recovery of imperial territory' or 'to save the Government's reputation'. The outcome of the crisis had to be the creation of diplomatic conditions in which the Falklanders could 'make a free choice about their future'. Steel, however, guarded himself well from referring to the doctrine of the paramount need to honour the 'wishes' of the islanders, speaking exclusively about the need for safeguarding their 'interests'. Therefore he urged the Government to take into consideration the realistic and sustainable hypotheses and to acknowledge the impossibility of a return to the status quo. The Government had to aim for a long-term settlement based on the hypotheses already prospected in the past such as the leaseback or the condominium, and explore the possibility of the involvement of the United Nations Trusteeship Council.²⁵

Owen's speech was in sync with that of Steel's with regard to the Government's conduct and the ends that it should have reached. Even Owen reiterated support for the task force, mentioning however that it was 'not totally without conditions'. The limits were those established by the UN Charter and by Resolution 502. Owen himself returned to

²⁴House of Commons, *Official Report*, 7 April 1982, vol. 21, c. 977.

²⁵*Ibid.*, c. 978.

the need for an inquiry in order to understand better the Government's responsibility in the weeks leading up to the Argentinian invasion: only if the Prime Minister had answered satisfactorily on this matter, would the House have been able to abstain from continuing to pursue her on this issue. Owen, like Steel, argued that the pursuit of a diplomatic solution was needed for the crisis and thus the task force should be used only as a means of negotiating from a position of power. Hence, also for the Social Democratic MP it was necessary to be realistic and not 'more militaristic, more stubborn or more zealous in the protection of the interests of the Falkland Islanders than the islanders themselves would be'.²⁶

Once again, however, a different modulation of an overall rhetorical style was evident. For Steel, the support of the task force was given almost reluctantly:

The Prime Minister has chosen not to consult other party leaders on the expedition. The country, therefore, is not on a war footing. We, who have to maintain a responsible position in the House leading other political parties, have no choice but to support our service men, in the expectation that the Government do have a strategy and know precisely what they intend to do.²⁷

Owen, however, presented his support for the task force as the outcome of a decision that had been reached positively and collectively:

On Saturday, I committed my right hon. and hon. Friends to support the Government's decision that the Royal Navy should set sail for the Southern Atlantic. I see no reason to qualify that support in any way today. It is of paramount importance that the House should demonstrate to the world that there is no weakening or wobbling and that the decisions and judgements that were reached collectively on Saturday remain as firm and resolute today.²⁸

Both Owen and Steel warned the Government about pursuing unrealistic and anachronistic objectives. But in establishing their conditions, Owen recognised that 'the House must give the Government the benefit

²⁶Ibid., cc. 985–989.

²⁷Ibid., cc. 977–978.

²⁸Ibid., c. 985.

of the doubt'. There was even a difference in the reference to the UN. While Owen limited himself to underlining the need to operate within the designated confines of the UN Charter and Resolution 502, Steel prospected an active role from the organisation in the solution to the Anglo-Argentinian crisis.

Owen was not the only Social Democrat to speak in the debate on 7 April. In fact, even Eric Ogden took the floor. As a member of the Falkland Islands Association he gave a rather more warmongering speech than his party colleague. Ogden urged:

to commit every resource at our command, every asset at our disposal, every endeavour and device of peace or war, without reserve or qualification and with courage, thought, quiet determination and conviction to restore to the people of the Falkland Islands what they have lost through no fault of their own.²⁹

The first duty of every British Government was that of defending the national territory and the freedom of British citizens everywhere in the world. The Falklanders were British to every effect and, as such, had to be considered. Reaching a negotiated settlement constituted a preferable result, but if it were not possible, one had to be ready to fight. In fact, this steadfastness had to be shown immediately; only if the Argentines had been convinced that the British threat were a real one, would they have been ready to reach a negotiated settlement. A negotiated settlement, however, that should not forestall any effort at a definitive long-term settlement. For this reason, it was necessary to watch carefully the conduct of the Foreign Office, which did not appear to share the Prime Minister's effort to 'regain our sovereignty over the Falkland Islands'. In addition to this were the risks connected to the initialisation of US mediation. Hence, for Ogden all the ingredients were there to be untrusting and to make these words resonate in the House, words that would have come from the mouths of some Conservative MPs: 'I smell the smoke of appeasement. I smell a sell-out. ... I sense a new Pym/Haig pact that will have too much in common with that of Hoare and Laval'.³⁰

On 8 April, while the Liberals and the Social Democrats cashed in on the Prime Minister's promise 'to some form of review' on the

²⁹Ibid., c. 1030.

³⁰Ibid., cc. 1030–1034.

Government's conduct in the months leading up to the invasion,³¹ the start of Alexander Haig's shuttle diplomacy obligated everyone to face the concrete hypotheses that had been put forward. In his statement made on 7 April, Owen had clearly positioned the US mediation as a crucial resource for a solution to the crisis, just as for a long-term settlement. With the American attempt in progress, the strategy was to show themselves to be open to the hypotheses in question, in this way offering a lifeline, above all, to the Foreign Secretary. Therefore, on 13 April, Owen fully welcomed the three-step hypothesis put forward by Haig (Argentinian withdrawal—interim administration—negotiations for a lasting settlement) and also foresaw a direct involvement of the UN in the transition phase between the Argentinian withdrawal and the end of the Anglo-Argentine negotiations. With the presence of a UN peace-keeping force in the Falklands, Great Britain could have avoided sending in its own troops. The UK would have limited itself to reinstating a pre-war administration and to restore the Governor. That would have offered the Argentinians a 'face-saving route', especially if it had gone against the request to keep the Argentinian flag flying in the archipelago during the transition phase. Owen could not accept the presence of the official Argentinian flag because it would have meant 'that British sovereignty had been conceded, and we would not be prepared to do that'. However, it could allow that 'some Argentinean flag' could fly next to that of the UK and the UN.³² The desire to find a compromise on the prospected hypothesis during the American mediation was also confirmed by the SDP Parliamentary Committee. In the meeting of 14 April it decided to pursue the line that had already been set out, that is the one of 'the necessity for the return of British administration to the Falkland Islands' without prejudging the question of sovereignty. In other words, 'it was agreed to continue to support the Government', but at the same time it dictated directions to David Owen to make it clear that the SDP expected 'a strong commitment to negotiation'.³³

³¹ See Margaret Thatcher's written answer to Jo Grimond, House of Commons, *Official Report*, 8 April 1982, vol. 21, c. 416W and Margaret Thatcher's answer to David Owen during Prime Minister's Question Time, *ibid.*, c. 1085.

³² 'Let Them Fly Their Flag on Islands, Says Owen', *The Times*, 13 April 1982.

³³ 'A Note of a Special Meeting of the SDP Parliamentary Committee', 14 April 1982, Albert Sloman Library, University of Essex, SDP Archives, Parliamentary Committee, box 26 A.

In his speech to the Commons in the afternoon of the 14th, Owen moved exactly on the basis of these directives. He welcomed fully the Government's arguments that it would not be possible to submit to the House the precise terms of the current negotiations. He reiterated that it was necessary to resist firmly 'any form of armed aggression' and thus to affirm that the Government had done well to send in the task force to reinforce its position of negotiation. He stated that the British presence in the Falklands was not connected to the possible existence of oil resources, but the desire to satisfy the wishes of their inhabitants. The British Government's response to the Argentinian invasion, therefore, inserted itself perfectly within the defence of the right to self-determination and the frame outlined in the UN Charter. Owen, however, also underlined the need to respond positively to the international pressure for a peaceful conclusion to the crisis. The diplomatic support of the USA, the Commonwealth and the countries of the European Community were fundamental, and it was necessary to maintain it. This implied the ability to combine the resoluteness of not giving into aggression with the readiness 'to negotiate for peace'. According to Owen, 'the spirit behind the debate' in the Commons was 'one for peaceful settlement without a shot being fired'. Consequentially, the SDP declared its support for the Government, while temporarily inviting it not to remain the prisoner of an excessive rigidity:

I suspect that some compromises will be necessary from every hon. Member before a peaceful solution is achieved. It would be wrong to go to the international community with an image that we are so resolute that we are not prepared to look at any concessions or at any necessary face-saving arrangements.³⁴

Just as in the debate of 3 April, the speech by the Liberal Spokesman for Foreign Affairs followed that of Owen. Johnston did not distance himself too far from what had been said by the Social Democrat MP. Differently to this, however, was that he went back to the fact that the current crisis had been determined by the specific shortcomings of the Government in office. The central aspect of his speech, however, was that of relaunching a request already made by David Steel in the debate of the 7th. Since in the current crisis there had emerged a certain 'degree of common ground'

³⁴House of Commons, *Official Report*, 14 April 1982, vol. 21, cc. 1154-1157.

with regard to the response that had to be given to the Argentine aggression, it was unfathomable as to why the Prime Minister had not ‘sought fully to consult the party leaders’. For the Liberals, that was an essential path to maintaining the agreement in Parliament:

It might not be possible to sustain a consensus for any length of time—one does not know—but it should be tried. In exactly the same way as the coded messages ... clearly encouraged the Argentines, equally, the more we articulate doubts and uncertainties from a position of some ignorance of the military position on the spot, the more we encourage the Argentines to maintain their position and the more we weaken our own diplomatic clout and capacity to succour the Falkland Islanders without actually using force.

Hence, the Liberal support for the Government was presented as little more conditional compared to that of the Social Democrats, though without arriving at shared positions with Labour MPs. Close to the positions of the Labour MPs, instead, was another element that Johnston used in his own speech: if it had come to using force, it would have to be used as little as possible. Even in the following weeks, this argument would come back amongst those used by the Liberals in order to define their own attitude in the crisis. Lastly, Johnston concluded his speech with a firm commitment to defending the right of the Falklanders to self-determination.³⁵

The Liberals renewed their request for consultations between party leaders at the reopening of Parliament after the Easter recess, both on 20 April by Geraint Howells³⁶ and 26 April by Russell Johnston.³⁷ In the Social Democratic camp this request was also made by Roy Jenkins, the most avid supporter of the need to collaborate strictly with the Liberals.³⁸ In any case, the fact that the Leader of the Opposition had already rejected a similar hypothesis as inappropriate permitted the Prime Minister to break free easily from similar requests until the first days in May.³⁹

³⁵Ibid., cc. 1171–1173.

³⁶House of Commons, *Official Report*, 20 April 1982, vol. 22, c. 119.

³⁷House of Commons, *Official Report*, 26 April 1982, vol. 22, cc. 613–614.

³⁸House of Commons, *Official Report*, 20 April 1982, vol. 22, cc. 121–122.

³⁹Margaret Thatcher’s answers to Geraint Howells and Roy Jenkins can be seen in Prime Minister’s Question Time of 20 April.

Another two issues had the parties apparently moving in unison. On the one hand there was the attempt to take advantage of the South Atlantic crisis to attack the Government's defence policies and insist upon a revision of the White Paper. The two parties had different positions with regard to the British nuclear deterrent. The disputes with Argentina, however, offered them the possibility to exploit the points that they had in common to pull the Government effectively into controversy. Therefore, both the Liberals and the Social Democrats firmly underlined how the events in progress obviously demonstrated that the United Kingdom should maintain an adequate fleet for its real needs, assigning it resources that the Government had otherwise diverted to the renewal of the nuclear deterrent.⁴⁰

On the other hand, the two parties of the Alliance confined themselves to a line of support for the diplomatic action brought forward by the Foreign Secretary. If in the initial stages this materialised in support for American mediation, they had already laid the foundations for a possible UN involvement. There had already been an opportunity to make clear references to the UN's possible role in the speeches of Owen, Steel and Johnston. On 18 April, the leader of the Liberal Party met Perez de Cuellar in New York. They agreed that some UN participation in reaching a long-term solution could become relevant.⁴¹ The connection between UN participation and a 'long term solution' was reiterated by Steel in the Commons on 20 April⁴² and then again on the 21st.⁴³ In this light it was necessary to get away from the idea of 'the paramouncy of the wishes of the islanders' and adopt the point of view of which 'while their wishes and interests' were 'uppermost in our minds, the long-term issue' was 'a paramount one for the House to resolve'.⁴⁴ Even

⁴⁰See Owen's speech in Chichester, 20 April 1982, Albert Sloman Library, University of Essex, SDP Archives, *SDP Foreign Policy Statements/papers (D. Owen)* and Steel's in Cardiff on the 23 April, LSE Archives, STEEL B/1/6/5 and 'Steel Presses Arms Case', *The Guardian*, 24 April 1982. Moreover see David Steel's speech during Question Time on 22 April, House of Commons, *Official Report*, 22 April 1982, vol. 22, cc. 416–417.

⁴¹'Steel Visits UN for Talks About Falklands Crisis', *Liberal News*, 27 April 1982.

⁴²House of Commons, *Official Report*, 20 April 1982, vol. 22, cc. 120–121.

⁴³House of Commons, *Official Report*, 21 April 1982, vol. 22, c. 273.

⁴⁴See Steel's intervention during Question Time on 20 April.

after reconquering South Georgia and with the emergence of Alexander Haig's failure at mediation, David Owen renewed the urgency to resort to the UN to verify the possibility of making the Falklands a strategic trust territory, 'before any major escalation of violence took place'.⁴⁵

In general, however, there seemed to remain a greater humouring by the SDP of the Government. Since 21 April, the SDP Parliamentary Committee had reiterated the desire to continue to provide support for the Government. The Committee underlined that the central issue even for the SDP remained that of obtaining the withdrawal of the Argentinians and the reinstatement of the British administration, exactly as the Prime Minister had proclaimed at the beginning of April. The committee expressed itself positively also with regard to the support to be given in the event that the Government announced 'an extension of the exclusion zone around the Falkland Islands to include aircraft', even if 'this would not necessarily be giving them a carte blanc for invasion'.⁴⁶ On 27 April David Owen summarised the line of the Social Democrats on this issue in the following terms:

We must demonstrate a readiness constantly to search for peace. In achieving a negotiated settlement there also has to be an understanding that there is a readiness to back our patience with resolution and firmness. It is this balance in the way we mobilize peaceful negotiations and the readiness to act in self-defence that the world will judge Britain over the next few weeks and months.⁴⁷

Owen invited the Government to show flexibility to keep negotiations going. At the same time he stressed the importance of avoiding any parliamentary split which would have weakened the British negotiating position. For this reason he also criticised Michael Foot for having lost his nerve during the Question Time on 27 April.⁴⁸

⁴⁵House of Commons, *Official Report*, 26 April 1982, vol. 22, c. 612.

⁴⁶'A Note of a Special Meeting of the SDP Parliamentary Committee', 21 April 1982, Albert Sloman Library, University of Essex, SDP Archives, Parliamentary Committee, box 26 A.

⁴⁷P. Webster, 'Foot, Steel and Owen Counsel Restraint', *The Times*, 28 April 1982.

⁴⁸J. Wightman, 'Cabinet Mood of Gloom', *The Daily Telegraph*, 29 April 1982.

Even David Steel remained steadfast on the necessary presence of the task force in the South Atlantic in order to strengthen the United Kingdom's diplomatic pressure. However, while Owen seemed to want to leave a certain margin of freedom for the Government when he expressed a substantial consensus on behalf of the SDP for the use of force that remained within the boundaries of self-defence, Steel established greater limits in this respect. He declared himself in agreement with the tightening of the Falklands with a naval blockade, but, for any act of war that went beyond this, the Government had to undergo some form of scrutiny. The question was also raised by the Labour Party, but Steel had asked it in a less apodictic way. On 23 April he asked Margaret Thatcher once again that the Government might find a way to share more information about the future actions on the Falklands crisis with the opposition parties. The fact that the Government ignored the request on the same day on which it authorised action in South Georgia could not but irritate the Liberal leader. Interviewed by BBC Radio on Sunday 25 April, Steel underlined how the only outsider involved in the War Cabinet decisions was the Chairman of the Conservative Party.⁴⁹ This was an implied accusation that the Government was undermining, with its conduct, the unity of intent shown by the large majority of the Commons until that moment. On 27 April, Steel returned to this point:

I must re-emphasise that Parliament has not been—because in secret diplomacy it could not be—consulted on the proposals Mr Pym brought back from Mr Haig in Washington. We do not know what they are. The only person consulted outside the inner ‘war cabinet’ is the Chairman of the Conservative Party. This is wholly improper. If we have to make a choice between accepting a diplomatic compromise or committing our forces to a necessarily bloody battle that is a choice on which on privy council terms the leaders of the other parties should be consulted in a round table discussion. Without such consultation I am not willing to commit Liberal Party support to escalating military conflict.⁵⁰

⁴⁹‘Prime Minister Should Consult, Says Steel’, *Liberal News*, 27 April 1982.

⁵⁰Extract from a speech by the right Hon. David Steel MP at Sutton Manor High School, 27 April 1982, *Liberal News*, 4 May 1982. See also J. Wightman, “Go to UN” Plea by Foot’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 28 April 1982.

The differences returned upon the announcement of the TEZ. During the Commons debate on 29 April, Owen expressed his full support, defending it as the right move in order to increase pressure on Argentina. The Social Democrat MP was clear in deducing and accepting all of the consequences that would have probably derived from it:

If the House accepts, as I believe that there is a readiness to accept in the debate, the total exclusion zone, we must recognise that from noon on Friday our Armed Forces may, with no warning, have to take military action. We have to accept that, and we must accept that some of the decisions will have to be taken extremely rapidly. I recognise that the Government will need to take decisions at very short notice. I merely ask that if they have to take those major decisions they should do their best to talk to the parties in the House so that we may retain as much unanimity as possible.⁵¹

Naturally, military force would be used gradually. There still remained however the second principle of which diplomacy had to 'be buttressed by force'. As a consequence,

in the last analysis, the Government must remain free to take action. If they do so, then they alone can make that decision. They have at least the right to ask that whatever doubts we may have we shall give them the benefit of the doubt and that nothing that we say in this country— [Interruption.] If it is necessary for our Service men to take action, I hope that nothing that we say in this country will be taken as revealing a great political divide.⁵²

Hence, Owen presented the SDP as being readily available to concede necessary margins of manoeuvre to the Government to solve the crisis. It was for this very reason that he renewed the invitation made on other occasions to the Prime Minister by Liberal MPs to consult with the leaders of the other parties in case the Government was forced 'to take military decisions before the recall of Parliament'.⁵³ As for the rest, the request to pursue every attempt to obtain the withdrawal of the

⁵¹ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 29 April 1982, vol. 22, c. 1000.

⁵² *Ibid.*, c. 1001.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, c. 999.

Argentines via negotiations obviously remained, as did, in the same way, the request to abandon the idea of a return *sic et simpliciter* to a *status quo ante*, and instead to reason in view of a long-lasting settlement even by negotiating the sovereignty in the Falklands once the Argentinian occupation came to an end.

Russell Johnston's speech,⁵⁴ once again, did not contradict that of Owen's regarding the support for the Government, neither with regard to the TEZ nor to the necessity to apply Resolution 502. Even the Liberal MP invited everyone to 'make every effort to work through the United Nations', before taking up arms. Nevertheless his general tone revealed a reduced readiness of the Liberal Party to concede a freedom of manoeuvre to the Government without clear compensatory measures. The crucial point always remained that of giving formal acknowledgement to the request of keeping the party leaders informed of the diplomatic and military developments of the crisis. Owen had presented this request in very generic terms. Johnston, on the other hand, repeated Steel's words of two days before and asked once more that the Prime Minister met the leaders of the opposition parties on Privy Council terms. If the Government asked the House to share the objectives and choices, it was fair to ask for more information and to give a formal representation of that national unity.

Johnston's speech differed from that of Owen's on a second issue, relating to the problem of sovereignty. The Social Democratic MP had expressed his conviction with regard to the necessity of discussing the sovereignty of the Falklands, as well as the existence of a 'cross-party majority' in favour of this. Owen had also pointed out that this did not mean 'to exclude the views of the Falkland Islanders', as well as that caring about these last did not imply overriding the House's 'rights overall to make a judgement'. He also prospected two concrete possibilities: that of seeking out the Hague Court or that of making the Falklands a strategic trust territory on the basis of articles 83 and 83 of the UN Charter.⁵⁵ Differently from Owen, Johnston remained firm on the traditional stance of the Falklands Lobby. Drawing on the speech made by Tony Benn, the Liberal MP said: 'I cannot understand why, because an island is 400 miles from a country, it should inevitably be regarded as part of

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid., cc. 999–1000.

that country's territorial integrity'. And again, in response to Benn's hypothesis to resettle the islanders in the UK, Johnston exclaimed: 'Nor ... do I understand what conceivable moral basis there can be for arguing that an inoffensive people who have lived for six or seven generations on an island should be compelled to leave because it is thought to be inconvenient'.⁵⁶

3 ESCALATION, THE SINKING OF THE BELGRANO, COUNTER-INVASION

On the eve of the start of the British military operation in the South Atlantic, Margaret Thatcher finally decided to welcome the request made, above all, by the Liberals.⁵⁷ In the War Cabinet meeting of 30 April she took the decision to invite the leaders of the Labour Party, the SDP and the Liberal Party in order to brief them on the situation on Privy Counsellor terms. The meeting was arranged for 4 May.⁵⁸ Before it could take place, the sinking of the *Belgrano* seemed to have made the conflict nose-dive. During the meeting, Steel and Owen made their concern evident as to the risks connected to an eventual escalation. The SDP's MP highlighted the danger of the Argentines answering back by striking British ships, and such a situation would have brought about the bombing of the on-land Argentinian bases. This was a fear also shared by the Labour MPs, as has been seen in the previous chapter. There was also the problem of how long the task force could be kept on standby, without it influencing negatively its capacity for employment. The central question that Owen asked, therefore, concerned the time frame that the Government foresaw before proceeding with a counter-invasion. Ultimately, he invited the Government to explain in detail the reasons for the sinking of the *Belgrano*, in order not to lose the support of international public opinion. Owen declared himself relieved over the

⁵⁶Ibid., c. 1026.

⁵⁷According to J. Wightman, 'Party Talks in Balance After Foot Refusal', *The Daily Telegraph*, 4 May 1982, the Prime Minister changed her mind because 'some of her colleagues suggested that she could do more to maintain all-party unity in the Commons for the Government's Falklands policies'.

⁵⁸www.margaretthatcher.org/document/122324, *Minutes of the 21st Meeting*, OD(SA) (82) 21 Meeting, 30 April 1982, 9.45 a.m.

reassurances the Prime Minister gave about the Government not attacking mainland airfields and that a landing was not in the offing. Steel on his own behalf made it clear that in the event of a bloody land battle, he would have had great difficulty in holding the line in his Party. As for the diplomatic issues, the Foreign Secretary revealed the news that had emerged from his meetings with the UN and in Washington, just as the proposals by Peru were put forward. Away from the details, what Owen underlined was the need to make clear what the British bottom line was in negotiations. This would have been fundamental in the following days so as not to lose the support of the allies, when international pressure on the UK would have grown.⁵⁹

The two weeks following the meeting of 4 May supplied clear evidence of the difficulties preannounced by David Steel about the struggle to make his own party accept an escalation. Already on that same day *Liberal News* published a letter by Robert Fyson, the secretary of the Liberal CND and Peace Group. Fyson provided a distinction between condemning Argentinian aggression and a future offensive employment of the task force. Only for the former could there be a consensus within the Liberal Party, but not for the latter. Fyson then asked that the mistake was not made of identifying the moods and opinions of party members with the words said by Liberal MPs and Lords. Not even the declaration of the NEC on 3 April could any longer be considered binding for the line of the party, since it had been voted on before the deployment of the task force 'had made plain the scale of the military operation'.⁶⁰ A couple of weeks later it was Lord Davies who wrote on the subject in the columns of the Liberal newspaper,⁶¹ inviting a halt to the escalation. Firstly it was necessary to free the field from any rhetoric connected to the memory of Munich 1938, which was a 'totally inappropriate' parallelism. Secondly, they had to consider that there was no national interest at play. The same principle of the paramount need of the Falklanders wishes had to be applied in proportion to the cost of human lives and materials required in order to defend them. Lord Davies then attacked the Government, inviting it 'to drop the demands that'

⁵⁹ www.margaretthatcher.org/document/123996, N° 10 record of conversation (Thatcher-Pym-Steel-Owen), 4 May 1982.

⁶⁰ See Robert Fyson's letter in *Liberal News*, 4 May 1982.

⁶¹ Lord Davies, 'Does Principle Justify the Military Means?' *Liberal News*, 18 May 1982.

could not ‘be met and truly negotiate[d]’ whilst remaining a prisoner of the Tory Right. On 20 May Lord Hooson expressed his total opposition to an escalation, resorting to a particularly evocative parallelism such as that of the Vietnam War. The US intervention in South East Asia had been justified by many noble principles, but ended up fuelling an extremely dangerous extremism. The United Kingdom ran the same risk with the Falklands. It was necessary to look at all the facts from the right perspective and to recognise that an escalation was contrary to the interests of the United Kingdom just as to the interests of the Falklanders. Moreover once a large-scale military operation was underway, it would have been difficult to limit it. It was therefore necessary to acknowledge that the only response proportionate to the reality of the circumstances passed to the acceptance of a negotiated settlement.⁶²

In a similar context, David Steel moved in three directions. He renewed his invitation to the Government to maintain the use of force at a level which was ‘measured and controlled’ and to give instructions ‘to the fleet commander that all action’ had to ‘be taken only if it’ was ‘totally unavoidable’.⁶³ Secondly, he reiterated that the Liberal Party support of the task force was to be taken exclusively to defend the exquisitely Liberal principles of the rule of law and the right of self-determination. The United Kingdom, therefore, could not impose its actions ‘on the shakier argument about sovereignty’, with all the consequences that it would entail.⁶⁴ When the events reached the decisive moment, Steel urged the Government to make its latest proposals for a negotiated settlement public in the event that the Argentinians would have rejected these proposals.⁶⁵ This would have allowed it to verify the effective inevitability of a counter-invasion and thus provide a political cover for the support of the Liberal MPs. Lastly, Steel continued to

⁶²The speech given by Lord Hooson in the House of Lords on 20 May was published in *Liberal News*, 1 June 1982.

⁶³House of Commons, *Official Report*, 4 May 1982, vol. 23, c. 33. See also the Extract from David Steel’s speech at Huddersfield Polytechnic, 4 May 1982, LSE Archives, STEEL, B/1/6/5.

⁶⁴D. Steel, ‘Let Us Get Rid of This Shaky Argument About Sovereignty’, *The Times*, 12 May 1982. The piece was reprinted with the title ‘Sovereignty No Longer an Issue’, *Liberal News*, 18 May 1982.

⁶⁵Extract from a speech by the Rt. Hon. David Steel MP in support of the SDP- Liberal Alliance candidate at the Beaconsfield by-election, 17 May 1982, LSE Archives, STEEL B/1/7/5.

relaunch the need of an inquiry that would shed light on the events that had led up to the Argentine invasion.⁶⁶

Being a party, which still had to find its own electorate of reference, the problem of having to deal with the moods of one's own base was less accentuated for the SDP. It, nevertheless, was not completely absent. On 14 June and speaking with hindsight about the events of the previous two and half months, Polly Toynbee voiced the discontentment of many members in the SDP for the position taken by the Parliamentary Party. According to her, this was because they 'over-committed the SDP to the over belligerent attitude of the government'. She also expressed 'some disquiet' because the Steering Committee did not have the chance to discuss the Falklands issue.⁶⁷ There was, however, no lack of divergence amongst the Social Democrat MPs either. They were, in a certain sense, leaning towards those present in the Liberal Parliamentary Group. In fact, even if the majority of the Parliamentary Committee of the SDP fully supported the line taken by David Owen, a minority felt that the party had not supported the government enough.⁶⁸ Eric Ogden was certainly part of this minority. I have already mentioned his speech to the House on 7 April. On 11 May, in a particularly delicate moment in the talks being led by the UN Secretary General,⁶⁹ Ogden put forward his request to adjourn the House and discuss with urgency the new diplomatic issues that were on the horizon, 'before the Falkland Islanders' were 'betrayed for a second time'. The Social Democrat MP had no doubt as to who was to blame:

the apparent willingness of the Foreign Secretary and his advisers to abandon the three principles of unconditional withdrawal of Argentine forces from the Falkland Islands, the restoration of a British administration for

⁶⁶House of Commons, *Official Report*, 13 May 1982, vol. 23, c. 971; Extract from a speech by the Rt. Hon. David Steel MP in support of the SDP- Liberal Alliance candidate at the Beaconsfield by-election, 17 May 1982; Extract from a speech by the Rt. Hon. David Steel MP in support of the SDP- Liberal Alliance candidate at the Beaconsfield by-election, 25 May 1982, LSE Archives, Liberal Party, 16/73/1.

⁶⁷*Minutes of the Meeting of the Steering Committee*, 14 June 1982, The Albert Sloman Library, University of Essex, SDP Archives, Steering Committee, box 4.

⁶⁸See the report by John Roper, *ibid.*

⁶⁹See Chapter "[The Conservative Party](#)".

the people of the islands and the right of self-determination for the people of the British Falkland Islands, against the quite specific promises given by the Prime Minister to this House and to the people of the Falkland Islands.⁷⁰

The presence of this warmongering minority hindered a strong political position of those Social Democrat MPs who were more uncomfortable with the line of substantial support for the Government led by Owen. Roy Jenkins remembered having been ‘instinctively ill at ease’ with the Government’s disproportionate reaction: ‘I found bathos,’ he wrote in his memoirs, ‘in treating it like a latterday recapture of Karthoum by Kitchener’. Nevertheless, Jenkins avoided firmly supporting his own point of view, partially because he had just been re-elected and had still to assess the House, which had deeply changed ‘in the style’ to which had been the one when he had left in the mid-1970s. But partially his reticence was also due to the fact that a clear political stance against the line of the Government ‘would have split the SDP wide open’.⁷¹

Hence, there was no lack of divergence within the SDP either, even if it was less obvious compared to those of the Liberals. The outcome in this case was one of greater propensity to humour the line of the Government whilst trying somehow to point out the difference to it. Thus, Owen reiterated that for the SDP there had to be ‘a clear link between any ceasefire and a withdrawal of the Argentine forces’, as maintained by the Government and as established by Resolution 502.⁷² Having said this, he strongly posed the need to follow a diplomatic line that would increase the likelihood of finding an agreement. This implied widening the number of viable options. On 4, 5 and 7 May, Owen came back to a hypothesis which had already been suggested by Steel in the first days of the crisis—the idea of UN Trusteeship.⁷³ According to Owen, this solution also offered an advantage for the United Kingdom to show that it was not fighting with neo-colonial intentions, but rather in defence of the Falklanders and international rights. On 7 May,

⁷⁰House of Commons, *Official Report*, 11 May 1982, vol. 23, c. 603.

⁷¹R. Jenkins, *A Life at the Centre*, London, Macmillan, 1991, p. 566. The observations on the changes of the House of Commons are on p. 565.

⁷²House of Commons, *Official Report*, 7 May 1982, vol. 23, c. 398.

⁷³House of Commons, *Official Report*, 4 May 1982, vol. 23, c. 23; *ibid.*, 5 May 1982, c. 165; and *ibid.*, 7 May 1982, c. 398.

David Alton renewed the support of the Liberal MPs for the idea of a UN Trusteeship.⁷⁴ The revival of this option gave support to Francis Pym, especially after the sinking of HMS *Sheffield* and the reintroduction of the UN Secretary General in talks aimed at a diplomatic agreement between the UK and Argentina. In effect, if on 4 May the Foreign Secretary had let the argument drop, by 5 May he changed his tune:

The United Nations trusteeship concept is most certainly one of the possibilities and may eventually prove to be a highly suitable one. Whether it will match the needs of the situation later, I do not know, but I would not exclude anything. I think that I can give a reasonably positive response to the right hon. Gentleman on that, but that is in no way to prejudge the matter. It is certainly among the concepts that can be considered.⁷⁵

Despite all of this, however, the Government gathered the fruits of the meeting of 4 May on the occasion of one of the most delicate moments of the entire crisis: the parliamentary debate of 13 May. During Prime Minister's Question Time that morning, Michael Foot had renewed his criticisms of the Prime Minister for not wanting to concede to the House 'the chance to examine the position' of the Government, in case the mediation aided by the UN Secretary General had a negative outcome. Margaret Thatcher had once again opposed the full right of the Government to act as it saw fit, remaining 'answerable to the House' for its actions.⁷⁶ Subsequently, opening the speeches for Labour in the afternoon debate, Denis Healey, though underlining the fact that the Opposition lacked 'the secret military information ... necessary for a sensible judgment', maintained that 'a prolonged blockade' of the Falkland Islands was the best option on a military level.⁷⁷ The leader of the Liberal Party used the first part of his speech⁷⁸ to defend the Prime Minister's point of view with regards to the Government's prerogative and to criticise the Labour frontbenchers' arguments and conduct. Steel said that he was in full agreement with the Prime Minister on one

⁷⁴House of Commons, *Official Report*, 7 May 1982, vol. 23, c. 400.

⁷⁵House of Commons, *Official Report*, 5 May 1982, vol. 23, c. 166.

⁷⁶House of Commons, *Official Report*, 13 May 1982, vol. 23, c. 943.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, c. 963.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, cc. 969–972.

essential point: it was the Government that had to decide on the negotiations and conduct them.

I dissent from the line that the Front Bench of the official Opposition has taken on the matter. Opposition parties must, of course, be free to criticise, to question and to express their views. I recall that at the time of the negotiations with the illegal regime in Rhodesia the then Labour Administration conducted negotiations on their own. The House of Commons was not consulted on their course. We were invited to reflect on them and debates were held on them after they had been concluded and published in the form of papers. There was never any suggestion then that the House of Commons as a whole should be regularly involved in the discussions.⁷⁹

It was for this very reason that the meetings between party leaders were a fundamental occasion. They allowed a full discussion on all aspects of the negotiations, without limiting the rights of the participants to speak freely in the House. The same was also true for all the military aspects of the crisis:

In my view it is not right for the right hon. Member for Leeds, East (Mr. Healey) to come to the House and ask about the position of ships or the exact stage of negotiations. It would be helpful for the conduct of these debates in the future if the official Opposition availed themselves of the opportunity that the Prime Minister has offered. It is a very strange principle of parliamentary democracy that an Opposition should be free through ignorance to talk nonsense.⁸⁰

Steel expressed his support for the negotiating line brought forward by the Government and he recognised its willingness to soften its position compared to the initial one. This had occurred with the issue of the interim administration alongside its availability to negotiate sovereignty. Another credit to the Government was that of having abandoned the idea that the Falklanders views were ‘paramount over any other consideration’. The fact that the Government was moving well was confirmed by its being able to keep the European Allies together on the topic of sanctions against Argentina. Steel made only two criticisms of the Government, though they did not specifically deal with the crisis at hand.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, c. 969.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, c. 970.

The first had to do with the ‘the defence implications’ of what was happening and with the position of the Liberal Party with regards to Great Britain’s nuclear deterrent:

Leaving aside the subject of weaponry on our ships, which the Select Committee on Defence is now considering, there is the whole question of how much of our defence budget will be pre-empted by the commitment to Trident and the extent to which our shipyards will be committed to Trident-bearing submarines as opposed to further expansion in hunter-killers.⁸¹

Secondly, Steel invited the Government not to make the mistake again, in the future, of happily selling arms to governments that were undemocratic and unreliable, suggesting a common European initiative to be extended to NATO and the UN. The closing of the speech made it clear, however, that support for the Government was limited to the solution of the crisis at hand, without taking away any of the blame for whoever triggered it:

The House must not forget that the cost of this exercise for this country is extremely heavy both in lives and in financial terms. When it is all over, we shall have to decide whether we should have the kind of commission that was set up by the House in 1916 after the Dardanelles campaign to examine the origins of this conflict and exactly how it arose. We must never lose sight of the fact that what we have been discussing in these repeated debates is the greatest debacle in our foreign and defence policy for 25 years.⁸²

Even for David Owen⁸³ ‘the Government’s negotiating position’ deserved ‘the endorsement of the House’. Even he expressed appreciation for the flexibility shown, though underlining that this same flexibility had to have been put in action ever since Alexander Haig’s shuttle diplomacy. He also criticised Foot’s arguments, as the Government had to be ‘in a position to respond to urgent situations’. The House had to entrust to the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, the Home Secretary

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, c. 971.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, cc. 984–987.

and the Defence Secretary⁸⁴ ‘the responsibility for taking decisions that’ could ‘have to be taken at short notice’. Furthermore, the Social Democrat MP stated that he saw no difference between the positions of the Prime Minister and those of the Foreign Secretary, thus answering in this way the provocations of Enoch Powell in his speech.⁸⁵ Owen also tried to play down Edward Heath’s criticisms of the Government. According to the former Prime Minister, the Government’s conduct had to be regulated only by the defence of British national interests, which clearly indicated the necessity to avoid war with Argentina.⁸⁶ Owen asked the House to consider those interests ‘in the round’, without therefore neglecting either ‘the interests of honour’ or the obligations towards the Falkland Islanders. At the same time he recognised that

those interests have to be married with the stability of Latin America, the ever-present temptation for the Soviet Union to exploit this episode in a most damaging and divisive way and the necessity of retaining our friendship with and the cohesion of our alliance with the European Community, and of that precious alliance with the United States.⁸⁷

‘A balanced judgment of Britain’s interests overall’ could not but confirm in the end the correctness of the approach of the FCO with the pursuit of the withdrawal of the Argentines from the islands, on the one hand, and the attempt to negotiate a way out on the other hand, by maintaining within clear boundaries the use of military force. Owen had no doubt as to which was the most important aspect:

The House should, however, remain resolute on the issue of withdrawal of the occupation forces from the Falkland Islands. If it has to apply extra force to achieve a withdrawal, those of us who have willed the end must be prepared to will the means.⁸⁸

⁸⁴I.e. the political components of the War Cabinet, excluding Cecil Parkinson about whom David Owen specified: ‘I do not include the chairman of the Conservative Party; that was an unfortunate decision’.

⁸⁵See Chapter “[The Conservative Party](#)”.

⁸⁶See also Chapter “[The Conservative Party](#)”.

⁸⁷House of Commons, *Official Report*, 13 May 1982, vol. 23, c. 986.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, c. 987.

This clarification regarding the inevitability of the use of force if the Argentines had refused to retreat was the only difference of opinion between Owen and Steel in the debate of 13 May. After all, as the Liberal Leader himself had stated in the meeting on 4 May, a possible counter-invasion of the Falklands would have put his party in turmoil. From this point of view, the minority of the Conservative MPs who wanted war at all costs and who were backed by the popular press represented the principal concern. The risk which emerged threateningly on the horizon was that the “militant tendency” in the Tory Party hijacked the inner cabinet into full-scale military conflict.⁸⁹ This operation might be successful, because the Government could give into the temptation of using war to take away the attention of public opinion from its failures in internal policies. In this light, Margaret Thatcher’s speech at the Scottish Conservatives Conference was a dangerous alarm bell. Force had to be used only as a last resort. The Government had to offer reassurance that its efforts were all addressed to avoid any bloody battle on the Falklands.⁹⁰ Roy Jenkins also expressed the concern for a hardening of the Government’s position and that of the Prime Minister in his first public intervention about the crisis at hand. In front of the microphones at ITV’s *Weekend World*, Jenkins stated that it would have been a big mistake if the Government had assumed a harder position of negotiation once a counter-invasion of the Falklands had been decided. This would have had ‘a very bad effect both on the support of this nation and on the support of our friends and allies abroad’.⁹¹ Lastly, in the second briefing on Privy Counsellors terms, held on 19 May, Steel and Owen came back to the necessity of keeping a channel of communication open with the Argentinians even after on-land operations were underway. It was necessary to find some long-term solution. All possible options would have to be verified within the UN, from the Trusteeship to a renewed effort of the Secretary General. According to Owen, it would also have been

⁸⁹ Extract from a speech by the Rt. Hon. David Steel MP in support of the Liberal-SDP Alliance candidate at the Beaconsfield by-election, 17 May 1982, LSE Archives, STEEL B/1/7/5.

⁹⁰ Extract from a speech by the Rt. Hon. David Steel MP at Jedburgh, 16 May 1982, LSE Archives, STEEL B/1/7/5. See also ‘David Steel Slams Jingoistic Thatcher’, *Liberal News*, 18 May 1982.

⁹¹ Quoted in N. Comfort, ‘Last Chance for Talks at UN’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 17 May 1982.

opportune that the Government publicly stated its ideas for a long-term settlement in the South Atlantic. It would have indeed been impossible to justify a similar opening before the opinion of the British public after a bloody on-land battle.⁹²

This type of concern also emerged in the last Commons debate of 20 May, during which the non-opposition to the line adopted by the Government was reconfirmed in every way. Both David Owen⁹³ and Russell Johnston⁹⁴ expressed their appreciation for the Government's position of negotiation, exemplified by the last proposals sent to the UN Secretary General, just as they declared themselves in agreement over the inevitability of raising military pressure on the Argentinians. However, Owen made some clarifications on how take in this escalation:

I do not believe that the military option that faces the Government is a single option, as we are sometimes led to believe. I do not believe that the only option is a D-Day-like frontal invasion. But we are getting close to the necessity to put a substantial proportion of our forces on to the Falkland Islands.⁹⁵

The real point of difference, compared to the Government, regarded the Prime Minister's will to close the door definitively on any further negotiations. For the Social Democrats and the Liberals, the counter-invasion of the Falklands did not subtract responsibility from the Government to keep negotiating. As a loyal member of the UN, the UK Government had the responsibility 'to respond to any reasonable request from the Secretary-General'.⁹⁶ This would have helped maintain the support of the allies, without counting on the fact that, once the war ended, the UK would have to enter into negotiations with Argentina to guarantee the security of the islands, unless one wanted to go down the foolish path of 'fortress Falklands'.⁹⁷ The pure and simple reconquering *manu militari* might have made 'any rational economic development upon

⁹²www.margaretthatcher.org/document/124194, N° 10 record of conversation (Thatcher-Pym-Steel-Owen), 19 May 1982.

⁹³House of Commons, *Official Report*, 20 May 1982, vol. 24, cc. 489–492.

⁹⁴Ibid., cc. 521–523.

⁹⁵Ibid., c. 489.

⁹⁶Ibid., c. 490.

⁹⁷Ibid., cc. 491 and 522.

which a decent life for the islanders' depended 'impossible for a long time'.⁹⁸ Therefore the support of the SDP and the Liberal Party for the Government could not extend itself to the point of accepting the Prime Minister's assumption, according to which the last of the British proposals for a negotiated settlement were to be considered 'off the table'.

I am saying not—David Owen stated—that we should enter into the negotiations on the basis of the document, but that the document is the offer. If in the next few days and weeks, as a result of economic and military pressures, the Argentines accept the document lock, stock and barrel, the Prime Minister should recognise that that is an honourable offer on which it is honourable to ask our forces and Service men to fight. The right hon. Lady should not hold out for a proposition that is as yet unheard of or for unconditional surrender.⁹⁹

4 THE LAST WEEKS OF THE CRISIS

The idea that the Government had to continue making efforts for a negotiated settlement was the principal one to which the Social Democrats and the Liberals remained anchored to after the start of the landing on the Falklands,¹⁰⁰ until the last phases of the war.¹⁰¹ Differently to what was stated by Jenkins and Owen some days before, however, it was acknowledged that the evolution of the on-land situation made it impossible to stick strictly to the proposals elaborated on 16 May.¹⁰² On one hand, the fact that the counter-invasion of the archipelago had begun and, on the other hand, that the on-land battle was in progress simultaneously with the campaigns for the by-elections in Beaconsfield and Merton, Mitcham and Morden's constituencies, increased the divisiveness of the issue. David Steel had to continue facing the internal

⁹⁸Ibid., c. 523.

⁹⁹Ibid., c. 491. See also c. 523.

¹⁰⁰See for example David Owen's interventions in House of Commons, *Official Report*, 24 May 1982, vol. 24, c. 650 and *ibid.*, 26 May 1982, vol. 24, c. 924.

¹⁰¹'Foot and Owen Emphasise Need for Negotiations, *The Guardian*, 2 June 1982.

¹⁰²See for example what David Owen said during Prime Minister's Question Time on 27 May (House of Commons, *Official Report*, 27 May 1982, vol. 24, c. 1051) and in his speech at Plymouth on 28 May ('Foot and Owen Warn Against Surrender Demand', *The Guardian*, 29 May 1982). See the extract from David Steel's speech in support of the Alliance candidate at the Beaconsfield by-election on 25 May, LSE Archives, Liberal Party, 16/73.

difficulties of his party regarding the use of force and thus insisted on the fact that it remained ‘measured and controlled’.¹⁰³ The leader of the Liberal Party continued insisting upon the necessity of an inquiry on the Government’s actions and to bring to the attention of public opinion the failure of the defensive policies of the Thatcher Government, with the clear aim of criticising the acquisition of the Trident system.¹⁰⁴ David Owen maintained that the ‘abandonment of negotiation’ would have meant ‘an abandonment of the United Nations Charter, our friends and allies and, even more importantly, Britain’s moral authority on the issue’.¹⁰⁵ On 1 June the SDP International Affairs Committee underlined the necessity to encourage any division within the Tory ranks regarding the issue of the Falklands. For the committee, the Prime Minister’s position was still precarious. The conflict could have still transformed itself into a long war of attrition, whilst, in the case of a rapid reconquering of the islands, there always remained the problem of what to do once the fighting stopped. The aim was that of being able to take advantage of everything that imposed on the attention of the British public opinion the need for a lasting settlement consistent with the internationalism, which constituted one of the pillars of identity of the SDP. At the basis of the Committee’s reasoning was the conviction that the populist and nationalist appeal of Thatcher’s policy on the Falklands would not have lasted. Once the war had ended, it would have been possible to show that the national self-interest was on the side of the internationalists even regarding the Falklands and that maintaining an intransigent position on British sovereignty, along with the huge cost of defending the islands against a potentially resentful and aggressive neighbour, ‘would not have been in the best interests of Britain, the Falkland islanders or the world’.¹⁰⁶

In relation to the matter of the Alliance, the most interesting aspect in the last weeks of the war concerned specifically the SDP. The Falklands crisis had allowed David Owen to rise to a front-row role. Not only did

¹⁰³‘Steel Puts Conditions’, *The Times*, 22 May 1982.

¹⁰⁴Ibid. See also the extract from David Steel’s speech in support of the Alliance candidate at the Beaconsfield by-election on 25 May, LSE Archives, Liberal Party, 16/73.

¹⁰⁵See David Owen’s speech in Plymouth on 28 May as reported by ‘Foot and Owen Voice Concern’, *The Times*, 29 May 1982.

¹⁰⁶The Albert Sloman Library, University of Essex, SDP Archives, *International Affairs Committee*, 38 (d)—report of 1 June 1982.

he act as Party spokesman in the House of Commons, but while waiting for the official choice of the Party Leader to be made, he took on the role of acting leader on the occasion of the two meetings with the Prime Minister on 4 and 19 May. Moreover he could benefit from good media exposure thanks to his personal experience as Foreign Secretary on the occasion of the Anglo-Argentinian crisis in 1977. All of this risked altering the balance between the four founders of the SDP and, consequently, the perception that it had from the electorate's viewpoint.¹⁰⁷ Shirley Williams expressed her concerns with regards to the change of image that the party risked suffering at the hands of the Falklands crisis on the occasion of the SDP Communication Committee on 26 May. The problem was that on the whole the party 'had a very low profile and only one member of the Four was getting any coverage in the media'. The risk was also that all of the attention was concentrated on the issue of the leadership, overshadowing that of the proposal of a new political formation. The committee discussed this at length and reached an agreement 'general, but not universal' regarding some issues. Other MPs, starting with the other three founders of the SDP, should have made public speeches on the Falklands crisis, especially on possible solutions. Moreover, it was necessary to encourage speeches and articles on policy papers as well as interventions in letter columns in regional, local and national newspapers. Even the campaign for the party leader election had to be carried out in such a way as to encourage public debate on the nature of the SDP.¹⁰⁸

Effectively, also thanks to the opportunity given by the two by-elections of Beaconsfield and Merton, Mitcham and Morden, between the end of May and the first days of June, Rodgers, Williams and Jenkins found a way to speak publicly on the issue of the Falklands next to

¹⁰⁷The collective leadership of the new party was conceived as a value to safeguard. In mid-April, a paper on communications strategy for the party expressed itself in these terms: 'Up to now it has been important to concentrate attention on the Four in order to reinforce the idea of collective leadership. With the election of a leader and a president, the media will be inclined to stress their role at the expense of others. It will then become important to find ways of reinforcing the idea of collective leadership on a wider basis than the Four. We ought to press home the idea that we already have a team of well qualified ministers-in-waiting'. The Albert Sloman Library, University of Essex, SDP Archives, Steering Committee, 1982, box 3, SC 40/4/1982, *Communications Strategy*, 15 April 1982, §5.

¹⁰⁸The Albert Sloman Library, University of Essex, SDP Archives, Steering Committee, 1982, box 4, *Communications Committee. Minutes of the Meeting Held on 26th May 1982*.

David Owen. However, the result was not exactly a happy one. Shirley Williams avoided personal attacks on the Prime Minister and invited the Government to work for a lasting settlement and, specifically, to renew the proposals of 16 May to Argentina.¹⁰⁹ On the other hand, Bill Rodgers moved to a personal level, defining Margaret Thatcher as ‘a one-woman disaster area for Britain’ in what *The Times* labelled as ‘one of the severest attacks on the Prime Minister over the Falklands episode by any senior politician, apart from Mr Wedgwood Benn’.¹¹⁰ But it was Roy Jenkins who spoke the words furthest from Owen’s line, also probably for the need to mark out a difference compared to his rival in the running for the SDP leadership. Speaking on BBC Television’s *Newsnight* on 1 June, Jenkins expressed his opposition towards the idea that the British Government was to continue negotiations with Argentina before a complete military victory:

It seems to me it is very difficult when you are within 12 miles of completing this, to hold back. You would probably get in a great mess if you do that. I think we should complete the reoccupation of the Falkland Islands but we should then act with magnanimity.¹¹¹

Three days later *The Times* published a speech made by Jenkins in which he reiterated the necessity of negotiating a lasting settlement with Argentina, but only ‘after our victory’. This was essentially because of three reasons. Firstly, the exorbitant costs of a defence of the Falklands to the bitter end. Secondly, having to keep a look out for the interests of the USA in South America. Lastly, the economical development of the islands. Jenkins ended up leaning on the idea of the UN Trusteeship, which had already been advocated by Steel and Owen. The most important part was the step in which Jenkins defended Francis Pym’s actions and wished that the Prime Minister would reconcile herself to it.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹‘Foot and Owen Emphasise Need for Negotiations’, *The Guardian*, 2 June 1982.

¹¹⁰‘Thatcher a Disaster Area, Says Rodgers’, *The Times*, 28 May 1982.

¹¹¹Quoted in J. Haviland, ‘SDP Leaders Split over Talks Before Final Assault’, *The Times*, 2 June 1982.

¹¹²R. Jenkins, ‘Our Honour Upheld: Now Comes the Time for Statesmanship’, *The Times*, 4 June 1982.

These differences at the top also deeply reflected a fundamental difficulty, which was acknowledged at the end of the war by the Steering Committee of the SDP:

The Falklands had been a difficult issue for the Party because two of its major policy approaches were a cool and rational approach to International Politics, and an opposition to internal factionalism. It was impossible to reconcile these during the Falklands Crisis. It was suggested that in the current mood it was very difficult to do anything but put down markers for our future attitude.¹¹³

There was no lack of difficulties in the Liberal environment either. On the whole, though, the two parties were able to cope well at a parliamentary level, which was also aided by the fact that they did not have to assume the weight of acting as the official opposition.

¹¹³The Albert Sloman Library, University of Essex, SDP Archives, Steering Committee, box 4, 14 June 1982.



Conclusions

1 THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE CRISIS

The Anglo-Argentine crisis of spring 1982 had started a long time earlier. Not only because the dispute about the sovereignty of the Falklands goes back to the birth of an independent Argentinian state, but also, and above all, because the events of 1982 unfolded, at least in part, according to dynamics which answered to a logic that was outlined in the 1960s and 1970s. Like all governments before it, the Thatcher Government also tried to get rid of that annoying colonial inheritance. Just as with previous attempts, those carried out by Mrs Thatcher also became stranded in front of a conceptual totem of the safeguarding of the wishes of the Falklanders, fiercely defended by a cross-party group of combative MPs. Just as the other prime ministers before her, Margaret Thatcher chose not to undertake a battle for an issue considered to be secondary, and also dangerous on a parliamentary level.

The 'paramourncy of the wishes of the Falklanders' was the principle that blocked every attempt to reach a settlement between the governments of London and Buenos Aires. After the Argentine invasion, it took on a crucial role in the political battle within the House of Commons. The fact of being able to represent realistically this principle in the guise of the right to self-determination made it into the most effective conceptual weapon for all of those who wanted the restoration of the status quo in the South Atlantic, evidently starting from the Prime Minister. Margaret Thatcher flanked it with two other principles in order to define

the conceptual frame of the response to the Argentinian attack: the principle of sovereignty and the defence of the international rule of law. This obviously forced all parties, and also the individual MPs, to define their respective positions accordingly. None of the three opposition parties shared, for the entirety of the crisis, the aim of reinstating *sic et simpliciter* the status quo. Nevertheless, their attitudes towards those three principles were different. The SDP was the only party to acknowledge that, in the case of the Falklands, it was worthwhile defending the principle of sovereignty to the extreme. Labour MPs and the Liberals, on the whole, tried to diminish its importance as being almost an anachronism. However, David Owen was careful not to equate the defence of British sovereignty in the Falklands and the restoration of the status quo. All the parties declared themselves to be in agreement over the necessity to defend the right to self-determination and the rule of law. The leadership of the three opposition parties ended up giving the second principle the same meaning, different to the one given by the Prime Minister: that is the implementation of UN Resolution 502, which, beyond the Argentine withdrawal, called for negotiation between the two contenders and the achievement of a long-term settlement. Self-determination was a more difficult issue to deal with. On an ideal level it was the main problem for whoever judged it nonsense to decide to fight for the Falklands; yet it was impossible to return to the situation prior to 2 April. They tried, on the one hand, to make a distinction between the right to self-determination and detaining a true right to veto; and on the other hand, to balance the defence of the wishes of the Falklanders with the defence of their interests. The sliding from 'wishes' to 'interests' made it possible to go from an ethical level to that of a political one, from a subjective dimension to a more objective one. Lastly, speaking of interests allowed for a widening of the topic to the entire interests of the United Kingdom and for underlining the disproportionate response given by the Government compared to an effective threat against them.

This conceptual framework was reinforced by its interaction with an interpretative paradigm derived from a particularly critical moment in the national history of Britain of the twentieth century: that of the 1930s. The policy of appeasement was proposed as a point of comparison to assess not only the efficiency of the response of the Thatcher Government to the Argentine attack, but also, in some way, its morality. A paradoxical rhetorical convergence developed between Michael Foot

and that part of the PLP particularly sensitive to the anti-fascist tradition, on the one hand, and to the right wing of the Conservative Party on the other. The latter was efficient in instrumentally exploiting the topic that Foot introduced in the debate with all the weight of his personal experience as an anti-appeaser. The parallelism with the 1930s was used in the first stages of the crisis in order to put the Government in difficulty, though it ended up providing it with one of the most solid justifications for the line of Margaret Thatcher and actually created more problems for the Labour Party. Looking at the crisis through the eyes of the 1930s in fact meant legitimising an eventual call to arms. But this touched the real open nerve of the Labour Party. The more sensitive of the Labour MPs to the pacifist traditions of the party opposed the deployment and subsequently the use of the task force and elaborated an answer to these arguments, from the use of a different historical legacy that was connected to colonialism. It was this phenomenon that offered a more suitable viewpoint from which to analyse the crisis at hand and therefore outline the best exit strategy. This obviously meant turning the tables on what was maintained by whoever resorted to parallelism with the 1930s: there were no principles to defend in the Falklands, but only redemptions to be sought.

The resorting to the theme of colonialism allowed a connection to a particularly provocative specific memory: the Suez crisis. It gave motivation, both idealistic and pragmatic, for the opposition for the use of force in the South Atlantic. Recalling the memory of Suez meant remarking on the fact that the UK was perpetrating a similar overuse in the Falklands. In addition to this was the prediction of a similar fiasco to that of 1956, for logistic and diplomatic reasons. Instead, the Labour MPs who took different positions underlined the profound diversity of the two crises: Suez had been about matters of property, whereas in the Falklands fundamental rights were at stake. In any case, recalling to mind Suez also risked opening up a comparison with the attitude of the Labour Party at the time. The memory of Suez was even evoked by Conservative MPs. In this case it was the concrete fact of that defeat that was at the centre. In this light it could be exploited as a word of caution born out of the fear of another humiliation, or as an invitation to take advantage of the opportunity to redeem that of 1956.

2 THE CRISIS IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

Before the debate started on 3 April, following the disgraceful attack by the Fascist junta, I was worried that too short a time was being given to debate so serious a matter. Therefore I forced a Division in which 115 hon. Members voted for a longer debate. I wondered then whether I was doing the right thing, but I know now that it was right. It would have been far better if on 3 April we had had a much longer debate so that more hon. Members from all parts of the country had the opportunity to put their point of view. We would not then have had claims by hon. Members who perhaps take a different view from me that they did not have the opportunity to state their case. If the debate had been longer, it would have given better guidance to the Government and they would have been strengthened by that guidance.¹

That was what David Stoddart said during a debate on 13 May, regarding his motion of 3 April. Before the emergency debate, Stoddart had argued:

the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and other senior Front Bench spokesmen will wish to put the point of view of the Government and of the Opposition. The House is packed with Privy Councillors, ex-Prime Ministers and ex-Foreign Secretaries, who are entitled to give the House the benefit of their long experience. There will therefore be very little time left for Back-Bench Members to give their views and those of their constituents.²

By recalling Stoddart's motion, in the PLP meeting of 12 May, Nigel Spearing underlined how 'time was a very important parliamentary factor in the democratic process'.³ Even for Spearing, the lack of time available to the backbenchers during the debate on 3 April was one of the determining factors in defining the climate. Tam Dalyell pointed out how the duration of the debate was one of the main causes that impeded the emergence of moderate and rational objections to the feat that they had been profiling:

¹House of Commons, *Official Report*, 13 May 1982, vol. 23, c. 991.

²House of Commons, *Official Report*, 3 April 1982, vol. 21, c. 629. See also similar remarks by another Labour MP, Arthur Lewis, in House of Commons, *Official Report*, 12 May 1982, vol. 23, c. 750.

³LHASC, LPA, PLP, *Minutes*, 12 May 1982, p. 2.

Had the debate lasted six hours, the normal time allotted on a routine parliamentary day, it would have been neither so tightly packed with MPs, nor so highly-charged. The hysteria acknowledged by seasoned parliamentary observers in the press gallery as unique in their experience, would not have become so combustible. As usual, MPs would have walked out after the opening speeches. Without doubt more junior MPs would have been called and questions about logistics would have been raised. (I tried to interrupt David Owen ... to ask how long we could sustain a war in the sub-Antarctic. Normally he would have felt bound to give way, but in view of the time allowed each speaker he was unwilling to do so.) In other words, doubts would have surfaced.⁴

This made the Labour Party appear to be compactly aligned behind its leader, with some sporadic exceptions on a personal basis. Tam Dalyell was said to be convinced that Margaret Thatcher would not have deployed the task force if the Labour Party had not offered that image of itself in the debate on 3 April. Dalyell also mentioned having met Foot prior to that debate to tell him that before committing the party to that specific issue he should have gathered both the PLP and the NEC.⁵ It was exactly the centralisation of the elaboration process of the political line that was another problem identified by Spearing around mid-May.

In addition to this was another theme, that of the management of the debates by the speaker. In a letter of 21 April, Tam Dalyell labelled him 'the Guardian of the Consensus' because he was managing the issue to favour the image of substantial consent to the sending of the task force by the House.⁶ Andrew Faulds was even more critical. During the sitting of 29 April, Faulds accused the speaker of bias in the conduct of the debate, as on previous occasions. This obviously cost him his expulsion from the House.⁷ Faulds had been absent on 3 and 14 April. On the occasion of the debate on the 7th, he had informed the speaker of his

⁴T. Dalyell, *One Man's Falklands*, pp. 54–55.

⁵Ibid., pp. 56–59.

⁶T. Dalyell to Mr Speaker, 21 April 1982, Churchill Archive Centre, Dalyell papers, TADA 3/5/16. In his pamphlet, Dalyell abstained from explicit attacks on the conduct of the speaker during the Falklands debates. Nevertheless, he reminded how Thomas, in the past, had dealt with the Falklands as Minister of State at the FCO, and highlighted how many of the MPs called upon to speak on the occasion of the report to the Commons regarding the Ridley Plan, belonged to the Falkland Islands Committee. T. Dalyell, *One Man's Falklands*, pp. 39–40.

⁷House of Commons, *Official Report*, 29 April 1982, vol. 22, c. 1042.

desire to make a speech, but he was never called upon. Neither was he called upon in the debate of the 29th. Instead, the speaker called upon Benn, Evans, Allaun and Foulkes, all of whom had already spoken in the previous debates. This triggered Faulds's reaction. In his opinion, there was a clear plan in progress, to make it seem as though there was the intent for a complete agreement within the House that, however, did not reflect the true nature of the facts. On one hand the speaker was avoiding calling those among the critics of the enterprise who could be identified as moderates, like Faulds or, in the Conservatory camp, David Crouch and Anthony Meyer. On the other hand, the speaker tried to keep an appearance of equanimity, giving space to the "looney left", because their opinions were dismissable. According to Faulds, another 20 Conservative MPs shared these doubts about the conduct of the speaker. They also declared themselves willing to undersign an Early Day Motion against him, if the Labour MP had presented one.⁸ It is difficult to say how true these criticisms were, and even more so to try to establish how much the presumable bias had effectively influenced proceedings.

There is an even more important aspect relative to the pace of the debates, that is the capacity of the leadership of the parties to manage their backbenchers and that of the internal groups within the parliamentary parties to be incisive. In the Conservative camp, for instance, there was no lack of recrimination against the management of the debates by the Chief Whip. In addition to the aforementioned recriminations on behalf of Alan Clark and Julian Critchley, there were also those of Anthony Meyer who referred to Andrew Faulds as having been pressured by the Conservative Chief Whip in order do not intervene in the debate of 29 April. The fact that the accusations came from the Right as much as the Left of the PCP, appears to suggest that the Government had been able to manage successfully the parliamentary business during the various contingencies of the crisis via the Whips' Office.

In any case, it seems to be without doubt that in the Conservative camp the right-wing MPs, or those in favour of an iron fist approach, were able to have more visibility in the House than those who were more dovish. Leaving aside the emergency debate of 3 April, which had a meaning of its own, in the one of 7 April, the Conservative MPs who spoke represented the two points of view at 50%. In the following days,

⁸Faulds to Foot, 4 May 1982, and Faulds to Mr Speaker, 10 June 1982, LSE Archives, FAULDS, 4/1/97.

however, the speeches supporting this hard line were greatly more numerous than those which supported a more accommodating line. Of the ten Conservative MPs that spoke on 14 April, Anthony Meyer was the only one who spoke against the line supported by the Prime Minister. On 29 April, the role of dissenter was played by Derek Walker-Smith and, partially, by Julian Critchley. In the debate of 13 May, only two out of the ten Conservative MPs who took the floor fully supported the line of the Foreign Secretary against that of the Prime Minister. In the debate of the 20th this figure became two out of eleven. This preponderance is visible even on the occasions of Prime Minister's Question Time and above all in those speeches on communications by the Foreign Secretary. In the Labour camp things went in the opposite direction. In the debates of 7 and 14 April contradictory interventions concerning the line of the leadership were decisively in the minority: 4 out of 14 and 2 out of 8 respectively. Nevertheless, when the crisis moved from the negotiations phase to that of a military one, the relationship changed considerably. On 29 April, four out of the eight MPs who spoke expressed their opposing positions compared to that of the party leadership. A fifth, Robin Cook, expressed his opposition in a more elliptical way. On 13 May, the ratio was six out of eight and by 20 May six out of nine. Hence, on the whole, while the Conservatives were able to offer an image of being compact, superior to what was the reality, Labour were able to do the complete opposite.

3 THE LEADERS

At the beginning of April 1982, the situation Margaret Thatcher found herself in was particularly critical. It was a situation whose effect on her destiny was, at least, absolutely clear: either she would be able to bring back the situation in the South Atlantic as much as possible to that prior to the Argentinian invasion, or she could consider her political career to be over. With this in mind, Mrs Thatcher quickly and immediately identified the objective that was to be reached and the determination with which to pursue it. Such determination was never disjointed, however, by the knowledge of having to commit herself until the very end in order to avoid an armed conflict, even at the cost of having to accept a settlement of compromise and to renounce a pure and simple restoration of the status quo. In this light, Margaret Thatcher's main ally was sheer luck, under the guise of the Argentinian refusals of all the proposals for a negotiated settlement put forward in April and May. To add to

the problems of the Prime Minister there was also the situation of the Conservative Party. In spite of fact that the first months of 1982 had started by recording a turnaround in the awful economical figures of her first three years as Prime Minister, the Conservatives were deeply divided on the main Government policies and on Margaret Thatcher's leadership itself. The Falklands crisis could have been the chance to determine the conditions for a change of leadership of the party and the Government. Francis Pym took on the role of potential successor. Already against Margaret Thatcher prior to the Falklands crisis, in the capacity of Foreign Secretary he elaborated and pursued a political line that was partially divergent from that of the Prime Minister. This allowed him to outline a possible meeting ground between some Conservative MPs and the opposition parties. Even if the contingent need forced him to avoid a too obvious emergence of divisions, and for reasons of political opportunity suggested an avoidance of appearing disloyal towards his own leader and Prime Minister in the event of a national crisis, the idea that a specific evolution of the situation would have determined an assault on the leadership was the "stone guest" throughout almost all the crisis. From this point of view, Margaret Thatcher's most difficult days were those between the sinking of the *Sheffield* and the Argentinian refusal of the last proposals for a negotiated settlement put forward by London. In those two weeks, also thanks to the pressure from the USA for a negotiated settlement at all costs, there was a convergence between the Foreign Secretary and his supporters within the PCP and the official opposition, and so she risked being caught in a lethal trap. The cries of opposition of the right-wing Tories for a new debate revealed the fear that the House of Commons could become a theatre for a cross-party majority against the Prime Minister. And the fact that in the debate of 13 May Ted Heath spoke for the first time since the start of the crisis, so as to express his explicit support for Francis Pym, was a clear sign that reaching for a future negotiated settlement would have triggered a *redde rationem* within the Conservative Party. Still in the final stages of the landing operations, Julian Critchley raised Pym's chances of succeeding Mrs Thatcher from the columns of *The Times*, 'were the Falklands imbroglio to end in disaster'.⁹

⁹Julian Critchley, 'From Cavalry Officer to Crisis Commander: The Quiet Pragmatist the Falklands Could Take to the Top', *The Times*, 24 May 1982.

In a certain sense, Michael Foot's problem was similar to Margaret Thatcher's: keeping his own party together and containing the actions of an internal antagonist, Tony Benn. Different to Mrs Thatcher, Foot had to deal with a party that was much more inclined to let the internal divisions from within explode publicly. This after all was made simpler by the fact of being in Opposition and thus not having to take on direct responsibility for the crisis management. Another difference concerned the diverse consequences of the Argentinian choice to refuse all of the proposals for a negotiated settlement. While that same choice allowed Margaret Thatcher to claim her consistency, compared to the objectives declared on 3 April, and to maintain the divergence within the Government and the Conservative Party under a safe threshold, it obligated Michael Foot to remodel constantly his own line for chasing after the minority in his own party. In the end he was not able to avoid a split completely. The crucial problem Labour had was represented by the use of force and the way of justifying its legitimacy, even in relation to the different ideological traditions of the party. Benn was much more lucid on this issue than Foot when he objected that backing the deployment of the task force would have made it impossible to oppose its employment. Foot and Healey tried to defuse the problem by setting the difference between a right and a wrong use of the task force: military force should be used at a minimum indispensable level and within a frame set out by Resolution 502 and by the UN Charter. In addition to this, as soon as it was possible, the request to arrange a truce was urged. All of this intertwined with the fight over the control of the party. From this perspective, there was another difference compared to the meaning that the Falklands crisis had intended for the Conservative Party. If for the latter the Falklands war was, in a certain sense, determining, since it marked a definitive exit of the Thatcher leadership from the previous state of constant precariousness, for the Labour Party the Falklands crisis was only an episode of the internal war that they had been fighting since the second half of the 1970s. Still, while Pym represented the traditional Conservative establishment and Margaret Thatcher the anti-establishment, the situation in the Labour Party was overturned. This allowed Benn the freedom of greater action compared to Pym, also considering the fact that the former sat amongst the backbenchers of his party. Benn's actions obviously developed on a parliamentary level but it was not his actual star principle. Following what was reported by Tam Dalyell, Benn's behaviour within the PLP was not disjointed by a certain

tactical caution aimed at avoiding appearing as an opposition leader to the official line on the issue of the Falklands. In effect the criticisms of the Foot–Healey line even came from MPs who could not be credited as being with Benn, starting with Dalyell himself. It was Dalyell who asked the speaker to vote at the end of the debate of 20 May. The aim was to avoid showing the dissent on the Falklands as an orchestrated manoeuvre by the Bennites. However, presenting this internal struggle in these terms was very convenient for whoever supported the action of the leadership. From this point of view, Callaghan’s speech in the debate of 20 May, for example, could also be read as being functional in reducing to a minimum the number of MPs who had the intention of voting against the whip. Actually Benn played his cards within the NEC, appealing to the base of his party, that is proposing a contrast between party members and the parliamentary party establishment. In this context Michael Foot’s margins of manoeuvre were ultimately limited. On the whole, he tried to avoid making the Labour Party seem anti-patriotic, but at the same time to highlight the differences compared to the Government. All of this, whilst trying to keep together a desire to impose constant parliamentary control over the conduct of the Government with the need to avoid reaching a vote in the Commons that would have risked splitting the Labour Party. Objectives that were partially antithetical: in fact the first implied increasing the likelihood of discussing in the House the various stages of the crisis, while the second implied reducing them to a minimum. Considering all of these problems and restrictions, Foot and Healey could not have done more than what they did and they stood on a line that, one must not forget, could have even been victorious if the Argentine junta had accepted one of the proposed negotiated settlements for the crisis, which had been elaborated between April and May.

As for the two forces of the Alliance, their role was obviously reduced, but not secondary. Both Liberals and Social Democrats guaranteed support for the task force, even if with a different degree of sharing of the choices made by the Prime Minister. The Liberals had more difficulty in accepting the use of force, while the Social Democrats, as a whole, revealed themselves to be more willing to welcome the reasons of self-defence on the basis of the principle of sovereignty. The two parties tried constantly to use the events in the South Atlantic to attack the defence policy of the Government and specifically the choice of reducing the surface fleet in order to use the available resources for the renewal of the nuclear deterrent. As for the two leaders, the crisis offered David

Owen the right opportunity to rise to a front-row role in the SDP and to candidate himself with credibility as a challenger to Roy Jenkins for the leadership. David Steel decided to assume a more estranged conduct within the House but did not miss the opportunity to make himself heard when he considered it suitable. He was also able to introduce within the debates elements that would have been embraced by the other opposition parties. Steel, for example, was the first to lay down the idea of the UN Trusteeship as a long-term solution for the Falklands problem. He was also the fastest to put his Liberal hat on for the idea of a UN intervention, attending meetings with the Secretary General De Cuellar before Healey and, obviously, Pym. Steel was also the first to give, and insist upon, the idea that the Prime Minister met the leaders of the parties in Privy Counsellor terms.

4 THE FALKLANDS FACTOR

The Falklands War had as a first effect the stabilising of the situation on the right flank of the political system. On the eve of the Argentine invasion the challenge launched by the Alliance for the conquest of the Government seemed to have some chance of success, thanks to the profound internal divisions within the two principal parties. If it is true that the popularity index of the Government and of the Conservatives at the beginning of 1982 had started to rise, it is equally true that the victorious outcome of the war stabilised this trend, and even more increased the popularity index of the Prime Minister herself. These facts had immediate repercussions. The Conservatives obtained—against the expectations of only a few weeks prior—optimum results in the local elections of 6 May 1982. They succeeded in holding on to the seat of Beaconsfield in the by-election of 27 May, in contrast to those of Crosby, Croydon and Hillhead, all of them contested before the outbreak of the war. At Merton Mitcham and Morden, on 3 June, the Tories managed to take the seat away from Labour: this was the first time since 1960 that the currently governing party had succeeded in removing a seat from the Opposition party in a by-election. There was the general perception that the military victory had begun to transform Margaret Thatcher from a liability to an asset for her own party. All of this put an effective end to speculations about the possible defection of Conservative MPs toward the SDP. Even more effectively, the war interrupted the momentum of the Alliance. On the one hand, the war had the immediate effect of drastically reducing

media attention on the Alliance. On the other hand, the Alliance was incapable of repeating its earlier successes, with the sole exception of Bermondsey in February 1983. In short, after the war the best result to which the Alliance could aspire was a realignment limited to the left side of the political spectrum.

As a second effect, the war finally gave Margaret Thatcher a firm hold over her own political party. The victory in the South Atlantic was her triumph. If the Argentine invasion was the fruit of a lack of leadership in managing the Falklands issue, the positive resolution of the crisis owed much to Thatcher's instinct to react rapidly to the initial shock, to achieve and maintain firm control of the political handling of the crisis, to clearly identify objectives, and to pursue them with a persistence that never lost contact with diplomatic prudence. The episode, which could have caused her political death, ended up giving her unassailable force, for many years.

It is a well-known fact that until the spring of 1982, Margaret Thatcher's leadership was precarious.¹⁰ Her unpopularity in the polls, and the less than brilliant results of her first three years of Government, gave many Tories the notion that the Prime Minister was a problem, rather than a resource for their party. As a consequence, deep fissures opened up among Conservative MPs, as well as within the Government itself.¹¹ Mrs Thatcher sought to confront the situation utilising the means allowed her by her position of power as head of government. Hence the reshufflings that led to the expulsion from the Government of several wet Tories in January and September of 1981.¹² Nonetheless, such attempts to confirm her own political will through the use of power did not find a corresponding or sufficiently shared recognition of the authoritative quality of her guidance, as a winning resource for the party and for the nation. In other words, Mrs Thatcher tried to make up for a lack of *auctoritas* by resorting to mere *potestas*.

¹⁰C. Moore, Margaret Thatcher, vol. 1, Chapters 16–22; R. Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain. The Politics and Social Upheaval of the 1980s*, London, Simon & Schuster, 2009, pp. 75–133; J. Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher*, vol. 2, *The Iron Lady*, London, Jonathan Cape, 2003, pp. 1–125.

¹¹'People forget how vulnerable Mrs Thatcher was in her first years in office. Thatcherism was vigorously opposed by many backbenchers, senior Cabinet Ministers and much of the Party. True believers were in a minority. Keeping my fellow MPs on side was a hard labour', E. Du Cann, *Two Lives*, p. 214. 'We must have been the most divided conservative cabinet ever', J. Prior, *A Balance of Power*, p. 134.

¹²J. Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher*, vol. 2, pp. 104–125.

Victory in the Falklands War was the turning point. It decisively transformed the balance of power within the Conservative Party, to Margaret Thatcher's advantage. The consequences of the changed equilibrium were soon visible, even in the affirmation of a new 'style of governing', which Peter Hennessy has identified in the Prime Minister's wish to push her influence more deeply into the different governmental departments. The result was the attempt to limit the autonomy of single ministries and to confront more important questions in small ad hoc groups, demoting the Cabinet to a site for ratifying what had already been decided elsewhere.¹³

The impact of the 'Falklands Factor' went still further. Nigel Lawson has underlined how its force resided in its capacity to make a paradigm out of the energy and resolve of Margaret Thatcher and her Government, in comparison with the weakness of her predecessors.¹⁴ This same interpretation had already been articulated by Simon Jenkins:

The Falklands war was the quintessential act of political intuition. It required no election, no legislation, no inquiry, no cabinet discussion worth the name. It was one of the most definitive acts of prime ministerial rule Britain has seen this century. I believe it is this display of positive generation rather than the fact of victory, that underlies the 'Falkland spirit'. It is a display which will not necessarily be to Mrs. Thatcher's long-term advantage. The Falklands success rekindled the public's belief in the capacity of government to achieve stated aims. ... The public saw what government could do when stung into action. ... The war unlocked a conviction that government 'can do', which transcended and still transcends normal party political allegiance. That is why Mrs. Thatcher is still considered the best leader to cope with unemployment. The war proved that even the most pedestrian civil service can have its cynical assumptions blasted aside by an assertion of strong individual leadership.¹⁵

¹³P. Hennessy, *The Prime Minister. The Office and Its Holders Since 1945*, London, Penguin, 2000, pp. 397–436. See also P. Hennessy, *Cabinet*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986.

¹⁴'The reason why the so-called Falklands Factor was so powerful, and lasted so long, was that it was more than a military victory: it symbolized and reinforced the image of the government, and of Margaret in particular, as tough, resolute and different from previous wishy-washy governments right across the board, not least in economy policy.' N. Lawson, *The View from No 11. Memoirs of a Tory Radical*, London, Corgi, 1993, p. 245.

¹⁵S. Jenkins, 'The Birth of the Thatcher Factor', *The Times*, 31 March 1983.

The victory over Argentina was the proof that strong individual leadership—the personfication of the ‘transatlantic concept of “strong-leadership government”’, in Jenkins’s terms—was equipped to guarantee the attainment of predetermined objectives. This made the difference in the political consciousness of the British people, in contrast with what was seen as deficiencies and ineptitude of 1970s governments.¹⁶

Such positive appreciation was not a transitory phenomenon, but one that had a permanent impact on the way of perceiving and evaluating political leadership. The theme was brought into clear focus by a study commissioned by the Social Democratic Party in the summer of 1982. The war was an event that radically altered the previous general picture, because it had created ‘new criteria for “strength” and “leadership” for political parties’:

The Falklands, however, are fundamental to political judgements and in our view will remain so because they have seriously—possibly irreversibly—changed the evaluation of personalities. The Falklands crisis was more than a distraction, it served as an acid test for politicians (‘What did you do in the war?’).¹⁷

The study highlighted another structural element: public disaffection for politics and the consequent loss of enthusiasm for ‘participation’:

Participation seems to be an outmoded/overrated enthusiasm—indeed we found far more interest in the notion of ‘leadership’ and certainty of purpose than of participation and consultation on everything. This view extends from the area of government to industry—thus we constantly heard expressed the idea that at some point leaders must stop talking and start doing, the need for ‘decisiveness’ and so on.¹⁸

¹⁶Taking into account the 1970s and the early 1980s, H. Himmelweit, P. Humphreys, M. Jaeger, *How Voters Decide. A Longitudinal Study of Political Attitudes and Voting Extending over Fifteen Years*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1985, Chapters 13 and 14, highlights the rising scepticism of the British voters about the ability of both Labour and Conservative in tackling the main problems of the UK. The study also stresses that ‘voters’ attitudes towards the leaders have become increasingly important, even decisive’.

¹⁷The Albert Sloman Library, University of Essex, SDP Archives—Papers of Lord Rodgers, Box 33, *SDP Research: Final Report* (August 1982), p. 9.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 10.

These two interwoven factors played to Margaret Thatcher's advantage. At the moment when public opinion called for strong and efficacious leadership, the Prime Minister stood out as the only British politician able to satisfy such a request. The 'acid test for politicians' provided by the Anglo-Argentine war not only demonstrated that Thatcher was 'the *only* leader with "war-time qualities"', but also that, in the absence of an effective alternative, the said qualities were perceived as favouring the Prime Minister's capability 'to lead in *the economic war*'.¹⁹ The study also shed light on another crucial element. Margaret Thatcher was now identified as a leader in full control of her own political party. Her Government was judged not 'as a collection of types with a class interest, but a collection of henchmen working for a charismatic figure'.²⁰ Both these factors stood in even more marked contrast with the possible alternatives. The Labour Party, which split at the decisive moment of the Falklands crisis, offered a spectacle of pronounced infighting, and a leader of notable weakness. On the other side, even while it could count on leaders who held a certain appeal for the electorate, the alliance between Liberals and Social Democrats was still a long way from defining a unified political platform. Furthermore, the complex negotiation among them for the allocation of parliamentary seats, in view of future elections, gave public opinion the image of two traditional parties intent on squabbling with each other. This was the exact opposite of 'stop talking and start doing', in glaring contrast with what seemed to be the Government's capacity to realise objectives. As a result, even among the potential SDP voters the predominant idea was that of a lack of alternatives: 'there is not real *leadership* which rivals the Tories' manic strength'.²¹ This opinion was not based on a judgement of the Conservative Party's actual policies, which were neither fully understood nor even known, as much as on a judgement of the single person of the Prime Minister. There was the widespread notion that the Conservatives had 'a plan' for the country, and for this reason they were in power. Still, the essence of this project was inseparable from the figure of Margaret Thatcher: 'the plan, in short, is Mrs. Thatcher's personality'.²²

¹⁹Ibid., p. 9.

²⁰Ibid., p. 20.

²¹Ibid., p. 23.

²²Ibid., p. 20.

That evaluations of the leader had assumed decisive influence over the political fortunes of the respective parties, and that the Falklands war played a crucial role in such evaluations, are factors that appear not only in the revelations made a few weeks after its conclusion. They also are evident in the analyses of the results of the 1983 general elections. Beyond any differences among the various interpretations, there is substantial agreement that personal appraisal of the leaders of the three major groupings running in the 1983 elections was among the main motivations—if not *the* main motivation—conditioning the choice of the electorate, that resembled how appreciation for Margaret Thatcher’s leadership abilities were linked to her conduct during the crisis with Argentina.²³

It is in the light of all these circumstances, then, that one needs to evaluate the impact of the ‘Falklands Factor’ on the 1983 general elections. The standpoint for consideration of the facts is not offered by the question: ‘how many points of popularity, and therefore votes, did the Government acquire from the military conflict in itself and by itself?’ Instead the question is: ‘in what way and to what extent did the war condition public opinion regarding the Prime Minister’s abilities to achieve pre-established goals?’ In this context, it would make little sense to exclude the influence of the Falklands crisis over the results of 1983, on the basis of an absence of direct references to the crisis of spring 1982 made by Conservative candidates during the electoral campaign. The presence of the Falklands in the 1983 electoral campaign is not to be understood in terms of ‘how many times Conservative candidates made explicit citations of the reconquest of the islands’, but instead through consideration of the degree to which the Tories’ electoral campaign sought to valorise those leadership traits of Margaret Thatcher which emerged in fully evident ways during the 1982 crisis. Comparison with the preceding electoral campaign is illuminating. While in 1979 the

²³The most complete and convincing study on this aspect is H. Himmelweit, P. Humphreys, M. Jaeger, *How Voters Decide*. See also I. McAllister, R. Rose, *The Nationwide Competition for Votes. The 1983 British Election*, Dover N.H., Frances Pinter, 1984 and I. Crewe, ‘How to Win a Landslide Without Really Trying: Why the Conservatives Won in 1983’, *Britain at the Polls 1983. A Study of the General Election*, edited by A. Ranney, American Enterprise Institute Book, 1985, pp. 155–196. This study gives more relevance to Foot’s liabilities than to Thatcher’s strengths in order to explain the electoral results. Crewe’s analysis—published as ‘Why Labour Lost the British Election’, *Public Opinion*, July, 1983—is discussed by W. L. Miller, ‘There Was No Alternative: The British General Election of 1983’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 37, 1984, pp. 364–384.

Conservatives mainly concentrated on proposing specific political alternatives to the ones made by Labour, in 1983 the constant emphasis was on the characteristics that a Prime Minister must have in order to take on the problems facing the United Kingdom. The *resolute approach* of the 1983 manifesto was in fact the proposal of a precise model of leadership, which came off as a credible one, since it was already put to the test, with success, during the Falklands crisis.²⁴

The effectiveness of using the Falklands Factor—or better yet, the Thatcher Factor—calls for its being measured, indubitably, in relation to the actual electoral results. At the same time, it would be a mistake to limit analysis to a comparison between the percentage obtained by the Conservatives in 1983 (42.4%) with that of 1979 (43.9%), then register the decline of support, and consequently underestimate the weight of the Falklands Factor. The results need to be inserted into their context. First, it is plausible to suppose that the presence of the Liberal–SDP Alliance reduced, if only minimally, the amount of votes won by the Tories. Nor can one forget that the United Kingdom went to the polls with a rate of unemployment three times higher than that of 1979. Moreover, in every Western country hit by the economic crisis, where elections were held between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, the non-confirmation of the incumbent government was the rule. The substantial continuity of consensus maintained by the Conservative Party therefore can be seen as a definite success. In addition, one needs to consider that in 1983:

1. For 72% of the electorate, unemployment was the principal problem of Great Britain;
2. For 80% of the electorate, the Conservatives, if victorious, would not succeed in solving this problem;
3. with respect to 1979, the consensus for specific policies of the Tories diminished by 10%, while there was an increase of the percentage of voters who declared themselves opposed to possible tax cuts that would have negative repercussions for health, education and welfare.²⁵

²⁴H. Himmelweit, P. Humphreys, M. Jaeger, *How Voters Decide*, pp. 220–222; I. Crewe, 1985, pp. 160–161; M. Burch, 1986, pp. 65–76; and D. Butler and D. Kavanagh (eds.), 1984, pp. 288–294.

²⁵I. Crewe, ‘How to Win a Landslide Without Really Trying’; and H. Himmelweit, P. Humphreys, M. Jaeger, *How Voters Decide*, Chapter 14.

Given these statistics, the importance of the ‘Thatcher Factor’ to the electoral result is even more conspicuous. The impact of victory in the Falklands thus can be identified by the way in which it changed appraisals of the political leaders on the part of public opinion. In this regard, a final consideration needs to be made.

As has been rightly observed, the full force of such an impact was due to the ‘psychological need’ for ‘a success of some kind’, that would put a stop to an entire series of post-World War II events experienced by Britons as failures and humiliations.²⁶ Margaret Thatcher was adept in presenting such a specific success as tangible proof of the possibility of reversing the parabola of the British decline. At the same time, she linked this point with the necessity of a political leadership—her own—that could achieve a definitive rupture with the establishment held responsible for the decline.²⁷

There is yet one more element to consider. The possibility of fully profiting from the military victory also resided in Margaret Thatcher’s ability to exploit the patriotic re-awakening that the Falklands War had fostered. In this light, a crucial factor for Mrs Thatcher was the system of values in which she located her political and military response to the Argentine attack. Having defined the British position on the basis of values such as ‘self-determination’, ‘sovereignty’ and ‘international rule of law’, and on the basis of the risks associated with any kind of appeasement, she transmitted clear and resounding appeals to a tradition of foreign policy that had a unique, unparalleled identifying trait in the UK’s role as a bulwark against Nazism, 40 years earlier. Thus Margaret Thatcher’s use of Churchillian language in relation to the Falklands crisis cannot be deciphered as merely a rhetorical expedient.²⁸ It was an instrument

²⁶P. Jenkins, *Mrs. Thatcher’s Revolution: The Ending of the Socialist Era*, London, Cape, 1987, p. 163. See also S. Jenkins, *Thatcher and Sons. A Revolution in Three Acts*, London, Penguin, 2006, pp. 74–75. The topic of Great Britain’s decline is crucial in the British public debate after 1945. For an assessment of the issue see R. English, M. Kenny (eds.), *Rethinking the British Decline*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.

²⁷A. King, ‘The Outsider as Political Leader: The Case of Margaret Thatcher’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 2002, pp. 435–454.

²⁸D. Monaghan, *The Falklands War. Myth and Countermyth*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1998.

of connection with a crucial resource of national identity. In the Thatcherian narrative, victory in the southern Atlantic was the triumph of values essential to the past glories of the UK. The military triumph demonstrated that Great Britain was still able to fight with success in attaining its own objectives. This was the shining proof that the country's decline was not irreversible.²⁹ The Falklands War was thus presented as a kind of bridge between the past and the future. It is in the potential for nourishing hopes for the future, by stressing memories of a glorious past, that we perhaps can identify one of the 'secrets' of the Falklands Factor.

²⁹Mrs Thatcher's speech at Cheltenham on 3 July 1982 expresses this idea at its best. <https://www.margarethatcher.org/document/104989>.

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