

CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY

cc Mr Whitmore ✓

Argentina

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10.v.

THE FALKLANDS: MEDIA

You will have seen that the Ministry of Defence has progressively been getting a worse press for its handling of the crisis. There were more critical articles in the Sundays (notably the Mail and Observer) and another today by Simon Jenkins, in the Times.

Press Association, ITN and the BBC tried to involve me on Saturday in a meeting with MoD over relations on board the Hermes. Apparently their correspondents had sent signals asking to be brought back because they felt they were not being allowed to do a proper job. (I refused to attend on the grounds that it was in the first instance for the MoD to cope with these problems). Then the attached telegram from Alan Protheroe, BBC, was awaiting me on my arrival in the office yesterday.

David Chipp, Editor in Chief, PA, rang me on Saturday evening to report some progress at his meeting, along with the BBC and ITN, with Ian McDonald (MoD) earlier in the day. It is possible that things will improve, but we cannot be sure.

I raise all this with you for two reasons:

1. MoD, with the support of the co-ordinating committee I chair each morning (comprising also FCO, COI and Cabinet Office), have asked me to try to secure an improvement; and
2. you have been given special responsibility for presentation by OD(SA).

Background

Before turning to the problem, it might be helpful if I outlined some of the background:

- MoD have had considerable difficulty from the outset in securing an adequate voice for public relations;
- I had to intervene very early in the crisis when I became the target for representations by editors who had not secured a place in the Task Force; the fact that I had some success then has made me a focus for media complaints;

- I have great sympathy with MoD public relations who are having to fight every inch of the way to keep up with, let alone ahead of, the public relations battle; they now want me to translate my sympathy into concrete action which secures results;
- as two illustrations of the way in which I am increasingly being forced to step in:
 - last week I had to get on to Mr Nott's private office to force the pace on an announcement over the loss of two Harriers - to ensure, among other things, that the Argentines were not able to claim that they had been responsible for the loss; and
 - yesterday, in some desperation to get public clarification of what was happening around the Falklands, I resorted to the tactic of relaying through MoD PR what I proposed to say at 5.00pm Lobby in the absence of any further guidance from MoD; we eventually got an MoD statement, but after the end of the 6.00pm news some 18 hours after the initial incident.

Diagnosis

The overall problem, which is not confined to MoD, is that the role of public relations in this crisis - as an arm in the Government's total weaponry - has been, and is being, neglected. Perhaps a more accurate diagnosis is that Ministers, while acutely conscious of the need to win the battle for public opinion at home and abroad, have not so far seen fit to forge a direct two-way link between OD(SA) and those at the sharp end of media relations.

The particular MoD problem is in part a reflection of this overall omission and a disinclination within the Department to take the PR function seriously.

Difficulties

The Government's prime objective must be to secure its aims with ^{minimum} maximum loss of life. It must also be accurate and have due regard for the families and particularly for the next of kin. All this is recognised and I have never found difficulty in arguing this case with journalists. But I find it impossible to sustain these arguments over a long period.

Take yesterday, for example. We awoke to reports from the Argentine that an invasion of the Falklands was under way. We are of course used to distortion and downright lies from that quarter and Buenos Aires is now thoroughly discredited. But there is seldom an Argentinian fire without some smoke and so it proved with an MoD statement - but not in any detail until after 6.00pm. I first heard Brian Hanrahan's front line account from the Hermes on the 9.00pm BBC news.

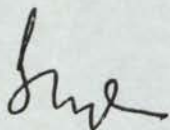
All the evidence is that Official and Service MoD, as distinct from MoD PR, are operating on an altogether too slow and possibly bureaucratic basis.

We ought to speed up our response to events if only in the interests of families back home. Yesterday they had to wait the whole of the day for an authoritative account of what was going on as distinct from a carefully-worded statement mid-morning which begged more questions than it answered.

Conclusion

We need urgently to secure an improvement in the liaison between official and operational MoD and MoD PR, and in the Department's speed of response to PR requirements. Unless we do we shall continue to do ourselves much less than justice. And the media's complaints will intensify. This will do no-one any good and least of all the Task Force and the families of the men out in the South Atlantic.

You may care to discuss.



B. INGHAM

10 May 1982