

Daniel OWEN MP

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10 DOWNING STREET

*From the Private Secretary*

26 September 1984

BELGRANO

I enclose a copy of a further letter to the Prime Minister on this subject from Dr. Owen and should be grateful for material for a draft reply as soon as possible.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Colin Budd in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

(C.D. Powell)

Richard Mottram, Esq.,  
Ministry of Defence

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10 DOWNING STREET

*From the Private Secretary*

26 September 1984

I am writing on behalf of the Prime Minister to thank you for your letters of 24 and 25 September.

I have placed these before the Prime Minister and you will be sent a reply as soon as possible.

(C.D. Powell)

The Rt. Hon. Dr. David Owen, M.P.

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HOUSE OF COMMONS  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

25 September 1984

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CF PPS  
Prime Minister  
Reply in  
preparation  
C.D.P.  
26/9

The Rt Hon Mrs Margaret Thatcher MP  
Prime Minister  
10 Downing Street  
London SW1

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*David Owen*

As you know I am only concerned in relation to the decision to sink the General Belgrano on 2 May 1982 and indeed, arguably more important is the decision on military grounds to sink the 25 de Mayo on 30 April, that Parliament should now be given a totally truthful account.

I am afraid, having now studied Hansard in more depth and comparing this with the various letters you have sent, firstly to me and also to Neil Kinnock and George Foulkes, that there are still some areas where clearly the truth has still not been given to Parliament.

Firstly, many people have been surprised to discover that Ministers were not aware of the course and position of the General Belgrano on 2 May 1982. It was of course of even greater surprise to hear from Sir John Nott on the "Today" programme that he was still unaware of the course and position of General Belgrano on 4 May. I would like to draw your attention to Col 200 of Hansard on 16 December 1982 when you answered a Question from Tam Dayell as to whether the distance from the General Belgrano to the nearest British surface vessel at the time the cruiser was torpedoed was known to Her Majesty's Government, and you answered "Yes". Did you use the term "Her Majesty's Government" to mean that while civil servants in the Ministry of Defence knew, no Minister was aware of the course? If that is the case could you explain to me why that information which was known in the Ministry of Defence was not made available to Ministers on 3 May, (especially when for instance we know from the report in the Times of 15 September 1984 from HMS Conqueror's diary that the Conqueror was continuing to hunt the escort destroyers).

Are we also to assume, even more worrying, that both you and Sir John Nott were able to come down to the House of Commons on 4 May without still being briefed about the exact course and





position of General Belgrano at the time of the sinking? I, for one, would have found it perfectly acceptable if your defence of the inaccuracies of your statement at the House of Commons and Sir John Nott's of 4 May was that you had deliberately decided in the height of the war not to give the full factual information. Indeed I made that clear in my speech at Buxton.

But you have not yet sought to correct the record of what you said on 4 May, namely in Col 16 that the two accompanying destroyers "were not attacked in any way". Surely you were aware of the signal by then which was sent back by HMS Conqueror that three torpedoes had been fired, two had exploded on the General Belgrano and that one had hit one of the escorting destroyers though not exploded. It is also clear from your answer that you were aware of what Sir John Nott was going to say because you made reference to hearing from him about the heavy armaments that the cruiser carried.

As to Sir John Nott's statement, again it is very hard to understand how he could not have been aware from the cable received from HMS Conqueror late on 2 May, of the exact position and course of General Belgrano when it was sunk. It is worth recalling that the reason why the statement about the sinking of the General Belgrano on 2 May was made on 4 May was that it was a Bank Holiday on Monday, 3 May and Parliament was not sitting.

You said in your letter to Mr Foulkes that when on 4 May the Conqueror signalled she was returning to the area, she was ordered not to attack warships engaged in rescuing survivors from the General Belgrano. Judged from Admiral Fieldhouse's Despatch published in the London Gazette on 14 December 1982, it was his decision that Conqueror should not attack ships involved in the rescue operation. But it is very hard to understand why during the 39 hours that elapsed from the sinking of the Belgrano and your standing up in the House of Commons to answer Questions, you had not been told that one torpedo had hit an escorting vessel. I cannot understand why you felt it necessary to be so categorical that none of the escorting vessels had been attacked when you yourself had not unreasonably on 2 May - following the decision on 30 April to attack the Argentine aircraft carrier - had authorised any Argentine vessel to be sunk, not just the Belgrano.

Again if you had made a spontaneous remark in the House of Commons on 4 May in answer to Questions, which it is easy to do, why do you still refuse to correct the record? Even on 13 December 1982 in a written Answer you were asserting that "the General Belgrano and a group of British warships could have been within striking distance of each other in a matter of some five to six hours, converging from a distance of some 200 nautical miles". And again on 16 December 1982 in a written Answer you said, "The General Belgrano and her escorts had made many changes of course during 2 May."





Surely seven months later and just on the eve of the publication of the White Paper on the Falkland Islands you were by then aware that three torpedoes had been fired and that you were aware of the exact course and position of the General Belgrano and the fact that there had not been constant changes of course. Furthermore, I find it very hard to understand why the White Paper on 14 December and Admiral Fieldhouse's Official Despatch still referred to only having detected the General Belgrano on 2 May when, for the first time, on 13 April 1984 you admitted that an Argentine oiler accompanying the Belgrano was detected on 30 April and the Belgrano itself sighted on 1 May.

The more I look at this question, the more I believe the record can only be put right by the publication of a White Paper and a personal statement to be made by you to the House of Commons on the return of Parliament on Monday, 22 October.

It is not acceptable that a Prime Minister can have on record statements to Parliament which are now admitted to be incorrect and that we should have to rely on letters written to Members of Parliament or statements made by a former MP and Secretary of State for Defence on the "Today" programme.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'David Owen', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

David Owen

LONDON