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PRIME MINISTER

ENGAGEMENTS

Q1. Mr. Proctor

asked the Prime Minister if she will list her official engagements for Tuesday 25 May.

The Prime Minister (Mrs. Margaret Thatcher)

This morning I presided at a meeting of the Cabinet and had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further meetings later today, including one with the Australian Foreign Minister.

Mr. Proctor

During the course of a busy and exacting day, will my right hon. Friend take time to pay tribute, with the support of the whole House, to the bravery and sacrifice of our Armed Forces and merchant seamen in defence of British interests in the Falkland Islands? In the light of this, will my right hon. Friend give an assurance that there will be no negotiations on sovereignty with the Argentine or anyone else, because this would be unforgivable and unforgettable?

The Prime Minister

I respond gladly to my hon. Friend's invitation to pay tribute to the courage and skill of our Armed Forces and of the merchant marine in the splendid work that they are doing. Our object is to retake the Falkland Islands. They are British sovereign territory. We wish to restore British administration. There will be a good deal of reconstruction to be done and then the future [column 790] will have to be discussed with the Falkland Islanders. I shall be amazed if the Falkland Islanders are not now more hostile to the Argentinians than they were before.

Mr. Foot

I certainly join the right hon. Lady in paying tribute to the courage and skill of the British troops. May I turn to the second part of the matter to which she has referred? Can she clarify the attitude of the Government on the state of the possibilities of negotiation now? Does she agree that it is essential, in the interests of saving lives—British lives along with other lives—that the possibilities of negotiation should be kept open, along with the military action?

The Prime Minister

Security Council resolution 502 has yet to be implemented. If it were implemented and the Argentine troops withdrew from the islands, peace would follow.

Mr. Foot

That is not the question that I put to the right hon. Lady. The reason why I put it—we have every right to put it and the country has the right to put it to her—is that the Secretary of State for Defence appears to us to speak in these matters in somewhat different terms from those used by the Foreign Secretary at the end of the debate on Thursday. I wish therefore to give the right hon. Lady a full opportunity to reply to this question. Does she agree fully with what was stated by the Foreign Secretary at the end of the debate on Thursday, when he said that we remained ready to negotiate and expanded upon what he meant. Does the right hon. Lady confirm that the Government absolutely adhere to what was stated by the Foreign Secretary on that occasion?

The Prime Minister

Yes, but I do not think that the right hon. Gentleman has quite got the import of what I said. The end of the conflict would occur if there were a withdrawal of Argentine forces in accordance with resolution 502. Unless that occurs, I do not think that any negotiation would get very far.

Mr. Foot

The right hon. Lady cannot leave these matters here. There are the questions that may be raised by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, as he is entitled to do. I ask the right hon. Lady clearly: does she or does she not agree with what was said by the Foreign Secretary at the end of the debate on Thursday, when the decision to send in British troops had already been made?

The Prime Minister

I do not think that Francis Pym the Foreign Secretary would disagree for one moment with what I have said, or with what I am saying now. I make it perfectly, fully and abundantly clear that there can be no progress without Argentine withdrawal.

Sir Timothy Kitson

Will my right hon. Friend give an assurance to the House that, however difficult it may be, she will encourage those Falkland Islanders who can to leave Port Stanley before a major military confrontation takes place?

The Prime Minister

A number of Falkland Islanders have already left Port Stanley. I do not think that I can do more to encourage them to leave. Many of them have already gone to the camps, and I am sure that they will be the best judges of their interests.

Mr. James Lamond

When the right hon. Lady is repeatedly asked if she adheres to what her Foreign Secretary says in a debate in this House, why does she not simply answer “Yes” ?

[column 791]

The Prime Minister

Because, like me, Francis Pymmy right hon. Friend has made about five different speeches. I wish to know precisely—*[Interruption.]*—He has made five different speeches, as the circumstances have changed. It would be amazing if circumstances had not changed. I agree with the Foreign Secretary's speeches, and the Foreign Secretary agrees with mine, which is totally unlike the Labour Party.

Sir John Biggs-Davison

When the Prime Minister is received by the Queen, will she consult Her Majesty about the early return of her representative to liberated British territory?

The Prime Minister

I understand that my hon. Friend is saying that with the restoration of British administration there should be an early return of the governor. That is under consideration.

Q2. Mr. Cunliffe

asked the Prime Minister if she will list her official engagements for 25 May.

The Prime Minister

I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply that I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Cunliffe

Does the right hon. Lady agree with another view of her Foreign Secretary, that once British rule is back in force on the islands and a period of resettlement follows—between six and 12 months was the period quoted—Britain will then seek, the Foreign Secretary has hinted, the aid of other Governments within the area, a means of guaranteeing the long-term security of the islands? Can the right hon. Lady assure the House that these Governments will not be of a Fascist or military character, and especially that the despicable policy of South Africa will not be involved in any participation arrangements?

The Prime Minister

I hardly think that Fascist or military Governments would be the appropriate guarantors for any democracy.

Mr. Eggar

Although the good economic news that has come out recently has naturally been eclipsed by events in the Falklands, would my right hon. Friend care to comment on the tremendous improvement both in the retail price index and factory output prices? Is this not good news for competitiveness and, thus, for jobs?

The Prime Minister

The excellent news of a continually falling retail price index, a falling wholesale price index and input index is good news for British industry, for British sales overseas and good news for jobs.

Mr. David Steel

I wish to ask the Prime Minister a question on the distressing but necessary subject of compensation for the dependants of those who have been killed—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker

Order. The right hon. Gentleman is entitled to ask his question.

Mr. Steel

Can the right hon. Lady, with her authority as Prime Minister, advise those members of the public who naturally wish to contribute something—*[Interruption.]*—whether——

Mr. Speaker

Order. This behaviour is not fair on the right hon. Gentleman. He must be allowed to complete his question.

Mr. Steel

Will the Government publish a list of existing organisations that already cater very well for those problems?

[column 792]

Mr. Arthur Lewis

Give them some of your radio and television earnings.

The Prime Minister

My right hon. Friend John Nott the Secretary of State for Defence announced earlier the setting up of a South Atlantic fund, which will have full charitable status, under the Ministry of Defence.

Mr. John Townend

Does my right hon. Friend agree that the reported proposal of the Irish Government to table a resolution calling for a ceasefire at this stage is most unhelpful? Will she reassure the House that we shall not agree to a ceasefire until the Argentines agree to withdraw their troops or when the occupation of the islands is complete? Will my right hon. Friend use the veto if necessary?

The Prime Minister

Yes. There can be no ceasefire without full withdrawal of Argentine troops. That is in resolution 502 and if necessary, if there were an attempt to have a ceasefire without that, we would have to use the veto.

Q3. Mr. Flannery

asked the Prime Minister if she will list her official engagements for 25 May.

The Prime Minister

I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply that I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Flannery

In view of the confident assertion yesterday—some people might think over-confident—that the days of the Argentine garrison are numbered——

Mr. Nicholas Winterton

They are.

Mr. Flannery

—may we now have a cessation of hostilities? *[Interruption.]* I know that the bloodthirsty hooligans on the Tory Benches do not want that, but could we not discuss future sovereignty of the Falklands under the aegis of the United Nations, especially in view of the fact that the Tory British Nationality Act has deprived at least a third of the islanders of British nationality? What shall we do with those islands once we have them? Are we to have a permanent fleet on a vast scale there indefinitely, and are we to have an army down there indefinitely to protect them?

The Prime Minister

That is about seven questions. I wonder which to start on. The hon. Gentleman referred to the phrase in my right hon. Friend's speech that the days of the Argentine garrison are numbered. Does the hon. Gentleman not want those days to be numbered? We wish them to be numbered. He then called for a ceasefire while the invader was kept in occupation. We totally reject that. It would leave the whole paraphernalia of tyranny in place. Perhaps two answers will be enough for the hon. Gentleman.

Miss Fookes

Is my right hon. Friend satisfied with the flow of mail to and from the Falkland force, because I have received one or two complaints from my constituents about delays, and mail is important for morale?

The Prime Minister

I am sure that everything possible under the circumstances is being done to get mail both to the Armed Forces and from them. I recognise the importance of mail, and I am confident that everything is being done.

Q4. Mr. Bidwell

asked the Prime Minister if she will list her official engagements for 25 May.

The Prime Minister

I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply that I gave some moments ago.

[column 793]

Mr. Bidwell

While in no way condoning or wishing to condone the Fascist junta's military aggression against the Falkland Islands, may I ask whether the Government are studying the situation being conveyed to us about the state of the junta in Argentina and the possibility of being able to make overtures to saner voices there? In that context, would it be better if the right hon. Lady dropped the idea of not allowing some Argentine families eventually to settle on the islands?

The Prime Minister

The islanders have enjoyed democratic Government for quite a long time. What the hon. Gentleman has spoken of is a matter for the executive and legislative councils under British administration. The present law must continue until it is changed through the proper authority of those councils.

Mr. Fairbairn

Will my right hon. Friend ensure that no order is given restricting military action of the task force in any way that could possibly jeopardise one life of our forces, whatever the cost to the enemy?

[column 794]

The Prime Minister

We are concerned for the safety of our task force. We are also concerned not to have one more life than is necessary lost. We rightly rely totally on the professional views of those who are in charge. We have every confidence in their judgment and in their care for human life.

Mr. Race

As Argentina is likely to become a nuclear weapon State in the near future, is it not essential to recognise that that would raise the stakes considerably in the South Atlantic? Does not that point to the need for a rational negotiated settlement on a permanent basis for the Falkland Islands?

The Prime Minister

I should not have thought that the second question followed from the first. Argentina has nuclear power stations. I understand that those who have supplied the requisite uranium have done so under the authority of the International Atomic Energy Agency, which supervises its use extremely carefully. Naturally, one hopes that countries such as Argentina that have nuclear power stations will join the nuclear non-proliferation agreement.