

E. R.

CONFIDENTIAL

① Sir E Bell 20/4
② POL 2/4

cc: PS/Lord Gowrie (L and B)
PS/PUS (L and B)
Sir E Bell ✓
Mr Marshall (L)
Mr Belloch
Mr Wyatt
Mr Gilliland
Mr Harrington (L)
Mr Abbott (L)
Miss MacGlashan

PS/Secretary of State (L and B)

NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE FALKLANDS DISPUTE

1. The Falklands dispute has naturally dominated the local headlines and squeezed out the White Paper. To some extent this, like the Easter break, has been helpful; politicians have not been under quite so much pressure to take up positions as might otherwise have been the case, and people have had more time to allow the proposals to sink in. But the Falklands affair has also taken on a local significance, especially to unionists, as a test of the British Government's commitment to the principle of self-determination for the islanders and the protection of their Britishness from an aggressive neighbour.

2. Unionists rapidly drew parallels between the Falklands and N Ireland. They noted that both territories are claimed by foreign states, though a majority of the population of each wants to remain British. Reports of past discussions between British Governments and Argentina over the future of the Falklands, including its sovereignty, have enhanced unionist fears that similar talks are taking place with the Republic concerning the future of the North and UK sovereignty here. The Powell/Molyneaux conspiracy theory of a FCO-led plot to sell the North to the Republic out of weakness and expediency has received a boost - reinforced by the reminder that talks with Spain on the future of Gibraltar are similarly taking place. Some unionists even ascribe the White Paper directly to the FCO, as part of the wider plot.

3. At the same time, and with apparently little awareness of the self-contradiction involved, unionists have taken satisfaction in the Government's initial display of determination in despatching a task force to the Falklands, and in their firm support for the principle of self-determination. Their growing conclusion seems to be that when alerted, the Government and nation can be brought to repair the damage created by the weak and dangerous appeasers in their midst, and that the Prime Minister, the unionists' chief defender, is willing to correct the errors

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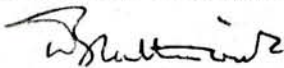
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of those such as Lord Carrington who were led astray. Unionists will watch closely the outcome of the Falklands affair in order to judge not only how far the Government is prepared to stand by its principles and commitments, but how deep the canker of appeasement, as they see it, has eaten into the Westminster political establishment.

4. Most of the minority have generally taken a rather bemused and more detached view. Comment has ranged from mild concern at the possible repercussions of the dispute to open disbelief at what they see as an out of date display of jingoism. There has undoubtedly been some rejoicing in Nationalist/Republican circles at a considerable humiliation for the 'Brits'. A sense of common injustice at British hands, coupled with a common religion, has led most Northern Catholics to feel some affinity with Argentina in its struggle to "liberate" the islands. The Irish Nationalist's stage Briton is a domineering, insensitive and self-righteous hypocrite; and these are the characteristics which the minority see brought out by the Falklands issue. They have not been slow to say so.

5. The Provisionals have repeated the old line about England's difficulty being Ireland's opportunity, and in West Belfast the first "Viva Argentina" graffiti allegedly went up within 24 hours of the Falklands invasion. The more moderate Nationalist who sincerely believes that Britain lacks the will to understand and tackle the roots of the Irish problem is cynically amused, but also mildly upset, over the effort and attention being lavished on a less important problem far away; we are seen to again get our priorities wrong, as well as everything else.

6. This basically is the reaction of the more thoughtful people on both sides of the community who would like to see political progress and who dismiss the facile Falklands parallel. They feel some concern that extraneous events may yet again divert attention from Northern Ireland affairs at a crucial moment. But the important judgements will not be made until the Falklands crisis is over, when both sides of the community will inevitably draw their own conclusions about how the Government, and the Opposition parties, can be expected to face up to pressures over Northern Ireland.



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