

EXCLUSIVE

IN AN atmosphere of increasing bitterness, Cecil Parkinson's friends yesterday rounded on Miss Sara Keays and her family, accusing her of a wilful campaign to destroy the career of her former lover. They also made it known that they did not accept significant details of her version of the affair and delivered point-by-point refutations of her statement to The Times last week.

Parkinson is leaving Britain for a three-week break after his ordeal, but has no intention of resigning as MP for Hertsmere. His friends are annoyed that, although the initial financial settlement will cost Parkinson over £100,000, he has been portrayed as the only villain in this affair.

Parkinson's friends specifically reject the claim, made in Sara Keays's statement in The Times on Friday, that their baby, was conceived in "a long-standing, loving relationship." They claim that there had been "a clear break" in the relationship.

In the Parkinson camp they emphasise several points which, they say, have been ignored:

■ At the time she became pregnant, Sara Keays was not under any impression that Parkinson would marry her.

■ On May 9, the day the election was called, she told Parkinson only that she might be pregnant.

■ On or shortly before election day, June 9, she confirmed that she was pregnant. On June 9, Parkinson told Mrs Thatcher: "I think I will have to marry her." It was "the unhappiest day" of his life. Parkinson telephoned Colonel Hastings Keays, her father, to say he "would stand by her". There was no meeting.

■ Then came the Parkinson family holiday in the Bahamas during which Parkinson changed his mind about divorce. After that, "He knew there was a timebomb ticking away."

A government minister said of Parkinson last night:

"It's remarkable that he kept going through the election campaign with that woman ringing him up twice a day and asking about the divorce. We should be grateful that he kept the flag flying."

Parkinson first proposed marriage to Keays in 1979. He did not go through with it, however, because one of his daughters was taking herion and he feared that a divorce and public family break-up would set back her treatment.

Parkinson's friends do not excuse his behaviour in resuming the affair,

though they say he was amazed when she told him she was pregnant. His political allies are particularly furious about Keays's complaint that he refused to keep the prime minister fully informed.

They say that he did not want to trouble the prime minister with such a scandal during the election campaign.

When Mrs Thatcher was told, she was not happy at the prospect of divorce. Her view seems to have been that the break-up of a marriage is the worst affront to Victorian values. Her main concern was for Ann, his wife.

Last night when Parkinson was told by The Sunday Times about friends rallying to his defence, he said: "Any friend who has the interests of me and my family at heart should refrain from any further comment."

But they clearly believe otherwise because they were angry that a lopsided story was being told. What they

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had to say yesterday was uncompromising and unanimous.

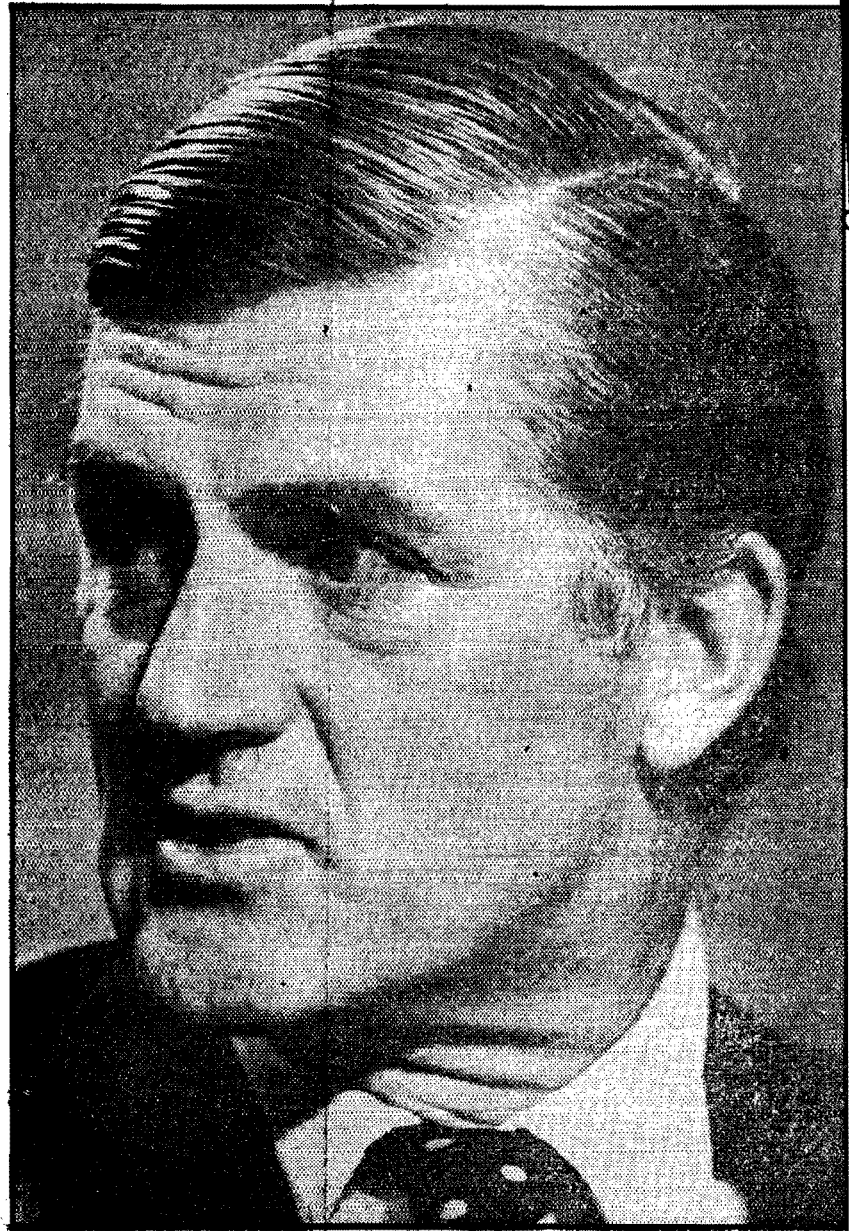
A crucial moment in the drama had been reached when Parkinson decided on a divorce.

Some of Mrs Thatcher's top aides are known to have approached Parkinson, asking him to stay with his wife. When confronted by Ann, Parkinson confessed the affair while the family were on holiday in the Bahamas in August. Friends say they would have expected his wife to sue for divorce, and are surprised that she and his daughters effected a reconciliation.

Sources close to Mrs Thatcher say the prime minister was delighted when Parkinson returned to the day to inform her there would be no divorce.

Six or seven weeks of legal negotiations followed. They were tortuous and bitter. Parkinson was prepared to admit that he had broken his promise to marry in 1979. But he would not agree to anything which implied that he had allowed her to become pregnant this year on the understanding that marriage would follow. When Private Eye floated the story, but wrongly implied that another MP was the baby's father, the crisis broke and a public statement became inevitable.

All of the Parkinson allies who spoke to The Sunday Times suspect that the Keays camp thought that statement alone would be enough to break Parkinson. They say there was mounting anger in the Keays camp when Parkinson survived the Panor-



Parkinson: off on holiday but stays as MP

Sally Soames

ama interview on BBC television last Monday night and then was well-received by the party conference in Blackpool on Thursday afternoon. Hence the Keays statement to The Times that night.

Keays referred in The Times to the Panorama interview as a breach of the agreement that both sides should say no more about the affair. Parkinson's friends say that he spoke only in the most general terms and entirely about the effect of the affair on his role as a cabinet minister. A reading of the transcript of the interview confirms this. Nevertheless, it was that interview which first triggered the Keays' counterblast.

There is now considerable bad blood between the rival groups of supporters in the affair. Parkinson's

friends claim that Sara's sister, Flora, has been the main influence in urging her to take a hard line.

Parkinson's friends realise that, by voicing their version of events they will provoke Keays into another damaging attack, but are determined to defend him.

Parkinson, his wife and their three daughters spent most of yesterday behind drawn curtains at their Hertfordshire mansion. One of the girls nervously dropped a bottle on the doorstep while taking in the milk. Emma, 21, cleared up with dust pan and brush. Sisters Joanna, 19, and Mary, 23, went shopping.

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At the Parkinsons' Hertfordshire home yesterday: smiles from Emma (left) and Mary Parkinson; Ann Parkinson's father, F A Jarvis

Ros Drinkwater