

MR WHITMORE

FALKLANDS DEAD

This note explains the Evening Standard (and other) stories which anticipated the answer to Mr George Robertson's question:

"If Her Majesty's Government has yet reached a decision about whether to permit the bodies of troops killed in the Falklands to be brought back for burial in the United Kingdom."

The wording of this Question placed us in an impossible position against the background of the Lobby's lively, indeed almost daily, interest in the outcome.

The facts are that we have been questioned more or less every day for some time now on whether the bodies would be brought home. The Lobby has formed the view, especially in view of the Borneo precedent, that it would be inconceivable of the Prime Minister to go against the wishes of those families who want the bodies to be brought home.

Thus all they were waiting for was to know when a Question was to be answered. Robert Carvel has this evening admitted to me that he had got all he needed when he knew that the Question was to be answered substantively.

Neither I nor my staff revealed the terms of the Answer. We said it would be answered substantively at 4.00pm. But I am bound to say that, quite apart from not misleading the Lobby (which would be wrong and counter-productive), I did nothing to lead them away from the correct conclusion. I fell back on your well circulated view, notably via letters to MPs and families of the fallen, that you hoped to meet the wishes of the families of those who gave their lives.

The Lobby then used me to refresh their memory of previous lobby discussion on other points, eg:

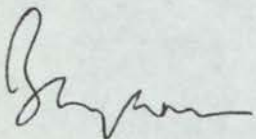
- families which had indicated the desire for the dead to remain in the Falklands; I could not help beyond newspaper reports about the attitude of Col. H. Jones's widow.



- whether Government pays for transport of bodies home or of relatives to the War Grave;
- how many bodies were buried on land; I didn't know precisely but thought about 80 out of 255;
- whether the Answer would deal with an extension of the Commonwealth War Grave in Port Stanley; I said that so far as I knew the Cemetary there would be adequate to cope with the unfortunate consequences of the Falklands campaign.

I was of course well aware of the Prime Minister's concern, after the problem earlier this week, about the timing of this Answer. But short of setting out positively to mislead, which would have carried other dangers, there was no way of avoiding reports foreshadowing a positive outcome. What one hopes in these circumstances is that the Lobby will couch its story in advance of the Answer being given in speculative rather than concrete terms.

We seldom get problems of this kind. The reason for today's problem is the history of the continuing discussion in the Lobby of the subject.



B. INGHAM

8 July 1982