

GUNBOAT OR BURGLAR ALARM ?

It is bad luck on Mr Nott that the South Georgia incident should have blown up just when he is facing criticism at home (including that of his former colleague, Mr Keith Speed) for his decision to withdraw HMS Endurance from service, and while HMS Endurance herself is still in the South Atlantic.

It is fairly clear that the presence of the Argentine scrap-merchants on South Georgia is intended as a direct challenge to British sovereignty. Diverting Endurance to South Georgia was, in the circumstances, an obvious way of reasserting that sovereignty, but those in Britain who have claimed that this clearly establishes the case for keeping Endurance in service may be speaking too soon. Endurance is equipped for polar exploration, not for naval warfare. If the Argentines really mean to use their naval strength to seize South Georgia by force, Endurance will not be able to stop them. Her 20mm Oerlikon guns would be no match for the

Argentine frigates carrying Exocet missiles that are now in her immediate vicinity. And anyway, she cannot be kept cruising indefinitely off South Georgia.

The same, unfortunately, is true of the Falkland Islands proper, whose fate is a much more serious issue and is, no doubt, what is really at stake in the South Georgia incident.

South Georgia itself is not part of the Falklands in any but an administrative sense: it is nearly twice as far from them as they are from Argentina, and it has no permanent human population. The only "indigenous mammals", according to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, are seals, and in the present state of international law seals do not enjoy the right of self-determination. The people of the Falkland Islands do, or rather should. They have the misfortune to belong to a category of human beings for whom this right is not recognized by the majority of the United Nations General Assembly: those whose presence in their homeland is

historically linked to that of a colonial power, and whose territory appears "naturally" — by some rather ill-defined law of geography — to belong to a neighbouring state. The Belizeans got away with it — just. The Gibraltarians seem unlikely to in the long run. The Northern Irish are still going through their trial by ordeal.

The Falkland Islanders have to face the unpleasant fact that Britain is no longer a world power and that the rest of the world is unlikely to come to their rescue. If they are to stay where they are in the next century it can only be on the basis of an arrangement with their South American neighbours. Britain should help them get the best arrangement possible, and to do that should be prepared to put a military price on any Argentine smash-and-grab raid. But for that purpose two or three well-armed and speedy patrol craft, similar to those commissioned for service in the North Sea, would be a lot more use than HMS Endurance.