

LORD CARRINGTON'S HONOUR

The last time a Cabinet minister accepted full responsibility for criticisms of his department, and resigned, was in July 1954, when Sir Thomas Dugdale, Minister of Agriculture, accepted the criticisms of the Crichton-Down affair. His Parliamentary Secretary at the time was Lord Carrington, who offered to resign also, though Dugdale refused to let him do so. The Foreign Secretary's resignation yesterday, therefore, is consistent with a man who has served his party and country not only with distinction but more particularly with a sense of honour sadly rare in politics today.

The fact that it was the Foreign Office team that resigned rather than Mr Nott at Defence is also important. It emphasizes the unique responsibility the Foreign Office has in these matters of strategy — the primacy of diplomacy over the military. Though the immediate evidence of the Falklands debacle might have suggested a failure of defence planning, yesterday's resignation restored the position by making it clear that defence had and still has, a subordinate status in the matter. Mr Nott's loyalty to his colleague and his sharing of the collective responsibility in Cabinet, combined with an inept parliamentary performance on Saturday to induce a general loss of confidence in his capacity to carry on with that job.

As Mrs Thatcher said yesterday, however, he must stay at his post now that operations are in hand. One is nevertheless left with the feeling that, since these very operations entirely vitiate his proposed policy of reductions in our naval strengths, he is still rather on probation.

What therefore are the mistakes for which Lord Carrington, by implication, has accepted at least partial responsibility on behalf of his department?

It seems clear that the humiliation of the Argentine invasion owes more to lack of sensitivity on the part of the Foreign Office — perhaps even to too much of a certain insouciance — than it does to lack of preparations in the defence ministry. The intelligence of Argentine intentions, the assessment of the junta's position, and the modalities of deterrence were all matters for the Foreign Office. In the light of the result, they were all matters which the Foreign Office got wrong.

Naval preparations could have been made in time to deter the Argentines. They were not made; and the reason they were not made lies more with the advice received from the Foreign Office than with any negligence at the ministry of defence

What will now be the effect of Lord Carrington's resignation? It will have to be assessed in the three areas in which his political contribution was important — the party, the Cabinet, and the international arena. His reputation in the country and in his party is bound to be enhanced by it and it is unlikely that his good offices will not soon be put again at the service of his country. If he had surrendered his peerage in 1963, he could well have been leading his party today. Through the Thatcher years, it has only been his unavailability which has prevented her damper colleagues from finding a suitable challenger to her leadership. There are clearly no others worth considering in the Commons.

Lord Carrington represented a different style of conservatism to that of Mrs Thatcher. It was the landed, "Whiggish" tradition of Toryism, as opposed to that of the Party's poujadist wing of the petit bourgeoisie. They are both a valid and necessary element in contemporary conservatism, but their different roots give the key to why Mrs Thatcher has had such trouble convincing her landed colleagues that inflation, as seen by the middle classes, is a more corrupting social condition than are the painful consequences of curing it.

Mrs Thatcher's predominant interests and experience had been in domestic affairs, but she gradually became sucked into foreign affairs. It is the inevitable lot of all Prime Ministers; but Lord Carrington had nonetheless provided an essential bridge for her in the first two years of her premiership. She delegated wide responsibility to him, retaining for herself only certain clear-cut issues of principle such as our position on the great global argument of East and West the paramount problem of the EEC budget, and the previously inextricable conundrum of Rhodesia. Together the Prime Minister and her foreign secretary forged a partnership which was not only impregnable in Cabinet, but as participants at Lancaster House, or in the EEC Council

would attest, as formidable abroad.

In his letter to the Prime Minister Lord Carrington recognized that much of the criticism of his department was unfounded, and it is clear that his resignation was resisted by the Prime Minister during their discussions. She will miss him; and at this point of crisis it is obviously damaging for any government to lose one of its senior ministers, however honourably inclined. Britain's case, however, does not rest with him alone. His successor will have the same briefs and the case is a good one. Moreover, the office quickly elevates the man — never more quickly than in a crisis. Mr Pym will also discover that though the office elevates, it also tests its incumbents to their limits.

At home the Foreign Office resignations should provide that act of expiation which appeared necessary to syphon off some of the emotion and criticism which boiled over in the Commons on Saturday. Of course the Opposition will smell blood and bay for more blood from the Treasury bench. They should remember however that unless quiet resolve is now shown, real blood may soon be spilled in the South Atlantic. With that prospect before the country the time for recriminations should now be ended and the time for unity begun.

The next few weeks while the Fleet sails will be critical for the Government adjusting to a new centre of balance around the Cabinet table. It will be critical for Parliament. It has to come to terms with a waiting period which is bound to mulch out the doubts about the operation. The principle is not just about British sovereignty, but about keeping the world free from aggression wherever it occurs, and wherever we can do something about it. It will become suffused in a welter of logistical questions, second, third and fourth thoughts, and the language of sweet reasonableness which is sometimes called appeasement.

In all this welter, we should take a leaf from Lord Carrington's book and do what we know, in our hearts, to be right — whatever the short term or even the long term disadvantages might be. It is easy to see all sides of the question, as in a prism. A prism has many sides; a principle has one. In the south Atlantic an important principle is at stake.