

A mood to test the Iron Lady's metal

Outside: the sunshine, breeze and pale blue sky of a London spring; inside, for three hours on Saturday, the House was swept by storms not seen in this place since (ominous and, pray God, inapt comparison) Suez.

A huge queue had formed for the public gallery. The motive above all was no doubt curiosity. But there was also an air among the queuers of quiet, well-ordered concern. Argentina's equivalent at times of national crisis is the vast Buenos Aires rabble on behalf of whose depraved passions 1,800 Falkland Islanders have been set upon.

The civilized world will agree that we come best out of the comparison. Inside the Chamber, men whom we had long seen as Tory Party hacks or place seekers became people of independent mind and righteous anger.

It was clear that their feelings were genuine. Indeed, perhaps it was the previous timidity which was the pose: the sad, necessary requirement for getting into the House in the first place. On the routine exchanges about the economy which had made up the stuff of a British political career these 25 years, there could have been little point in expending true feeling. But here was a subject to engage the emotions.

For three hours, all time-serving was suspended. How long it will last, we cannot say. But the Government had not bargained for such a mood as the debate got under way. Mr Pym and Mr Whitelaw sat huddled together on the front bench, heads down, occasionally whispering to one another: nature's party men two former chief whips, professionals with half their lives behind them of string-pulling, elbow squeezing, thwarting backbenchers who were "unhelpful".

When they came into the Chamber on Saturday, they may even have thought the emergency debate to be a routine party unity job; the same sort of thing as a tricky law and order one. Must stop any witch hunt against Peter Carrington; must make sure enough backbench speeches helping poor John Nott.

But it was not to be as easy as that. Indignation swept and roared around the Government. Mrs Thatcher sat transfixed. She

understood the feelings involved all right. For a start, she undoubtedly shared them. Yet she was, at this opening phase of the crisis, still at the mercy of the experts who draft the briefs.

When she said: "Yesterday morning, at 8.23 am, we sent a telegram", she adopted a heroic tone as if what was sent at 8.23 am was a gunboat.

When Mr Enoch Powell reminded us that Mrs Thatcher had once gloried in the name of the Iron Lady, and when he added: "In the next week or two the House, the nation and the Prime Minister herself will learn of what metal she is made", she looked across at him, nodded slowly, and appeared to mouth something in agreement.

Mr Foot made the only speech since he became Leader that recaptured his old glory. Of course Mrs Thatcher was right when she said that, had the Government moved ships immediately, Mr Foot and his party would have raged at her for sabre rattling. But the Tory backbenchers did not want to hear that, for they were in no mood this day for the party game.

Throughout the debate, there was a closing of ranks against what so many see as Britain's traditional enemy: its foreign Office. "Someone has blundered", said Mr Cormack, a Tory.

When Mr Whitney, a diplomat turned Tory backbencher, counselled understanding of the Argentinian position, he made the most courageous speech of his political career, which was just as well because that career was manifestly finished by it.

With his crinkly black hair and shiny moustache, Sir Bernard Braine looks, if he will forgive the expression, like an Argentine. But he displayed a healthy hatred of them. "The thought that our people are in the hands of these criminals makes an Englishman's blood boil", he boiled.

Of Mr Nott we will say little, except that he is a self-confident, nimble debater who has never had much trouble at the despatch box before, which only went to show how wretched was his brief.

Let us hope, for the sake of the Falkland Islanders and our fleet sailing towards them, that the Government fares better in the debates that lie ahead.