

Don't mess with Iceland

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Roy Hattersley

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Harold Wilson had been explicit. Hostilities must be abandoned during negotiations. If a cable was cut while the British delegation was in Iceland, we were to leave at once. We landed at Reykjavik at 4.30pm and were greeted with the news that two cables had been cut at 4. Huddled together, we considered whether or not the cable cutting had been a deliberate provocation. We decided that it had, but that - in our British way - we would rise above it and continue the negotiations. It seemed that our emolence had been rewarded. The first meeting would be preceded by a trip around the island.

It began with a history lesson. The entire Icelandic population had descended from a handful of exiled Irishmen who abducted a similar number of women and went into the unknown to find refuge from their enemies. Only men of indomitable will could have survived on a lump of volcanic rock in the north Atlantic. They had founded a nation of Norsemen who sailed the world in open boats, sacking and pillaging. When they discovered that they had landed in Venice - mistaking it for Constantinople - they sacked and pillaged anyway, since that was their trade. To my relief, the lecture then moved on to literature and the Sagas - all of which had titles like Blood on the Snow.

The tour of the island began at the site of the world's oldest parliament. Its members, who first assembled in AD930, must have been remarkable. They deliberated in the freezing cold while sitting on sharp pinnacles of rock which nature has arranged round an ice-covered lake. Near the parliament was the "punishment pool", into which (my guide explained) adulterous women were thrown. "Same time?" I asked. "Tenth century?" No, he told me. "The last one was 1912." He was lying. But his invention created the desired impression. At last I realised that the discussions would not be easy.

They were consistent. Day after day London instructed me to concede a little more, and day after day the Icelandic foreign minister rejected my concession. Jim Callaghan told me wistfully that we had invaded Iceland during the second world war; and Henry Kissinger, asked to help, confirmed his grossly overrated reputation by offering no more than a platitude which he attributed to Bismarck. "How great is the tyranny to which small nations can subject the great." I left for home and the harassing of trawlers continued.

When Iceland demanded that the talks resume, the British delegation assembled in Glasgow with a new brief. A Ministry of Agriculture under-secretary begged me, "Don't budge". I budged continually, but the Icelanders did not. On day four I decided to come home. The pilot of our chartered aircraft came into our cabin to tell me that, 20 years before, I had broken his nose during a football match. When he added that we were playing for the same team, the other members of the delegation looked as though they had found out why the cod war was turning into a British rout. Let us hope that Alistair Darling never forgets which side he is on.

Roy Hattersley is a Guardian columnist. He served in Jim Callaghan's cabinet and later became deputy leader of the Labour party. He has been a columnist with the Spectator, Punch and the Listener and has written biographies, novels and histories.