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Party morale hit as macabre death overshadows Major campaign

Tories fight to limit damage over Milligan

BY PHILIP WEBSTER, POLITICAL EDITOR, AND STEWART TENDLER

JOHN MAJOR led a desperate attempt by the Tory high command last night to limit the political fallout from the death of Stephen Milligan as morale among Conservative MPs plummeted.

The Prime Minister's first session of his widely trumpeted campaign to take the Tory case to the party and country began last night against a background of sadness at the loss of a rising star, and bewilderment and embarrassment at the apparent circumstances of his death.

Mr Major travelled to Leicester for a meeting behind closed doors with senior party workers as his backbenchers bemoaned the return of ill fortune that has plagued the Government since the beginning of the year. An unexpected cut of 0.25 of a percentage point in interest rates passed almost unnoticed as Mr Major's back-to-basics crusade suffered another blow.

As MPs pondered the consequences, it emerged that Mr Milligan could have lain dead for nearly 48 hours in his west



Milligan: may have been dead for up to 48 hours



Kirkbride: relationship ended two years ago

the MPs flat at the time. As the Conservative Party awaited details of the manner of Mr Milligan's death, Sir Norman Fowler, the Conservative Party chairman, headed a chorus of ministerial claims that the affair, however tragic, would not knock the Government off course, or stand in the way of Mr Major's recovery. At the same time, the Defence Ministry moved to crush the most sensitive allegation, that as an aide to Jonathan Aitken, the Defence Minister, Mr Milligan was a security risk.

A spokesman said: "There is no security angle to Stephen Milligan's death. He had no access to classified information and he did not have an office in the Ministry of Defence."

Sir Norman said that the tragedy would not affect Mr Major's position as a strong leader, nor would it affect the Government. "Most people will take it for what it is, a personal tragedy. They will also take the view that it could happen in any political party, or in any organisation."

Tory strategists accept, however, that the by-election in Mr Milligan's Eastleigh seat, is almost certain to be lost, and are planning to hold it on May

with a view to getting the bad news out of the way at once.

There were calls yesterday for the back-to-basics campaign to be jettisoned. Emma Nicholson, Conservative MP for West Devon and Torridge, said that it was "taken originally to mean heightened standards of private and public morality. It has become a self-destructive slogan. I think we should drop it."

Mr Milligan, discovered by his secretary on Monday with a ligature round his neck and a plastic bag over his head, may have died accidentally as a result of an autoerotic practice, although police have still not ruled out the possibility there may have been somebody else present. He was naked apart from a pair of stockings and was reported to have an orange in his mouth.

Yesterday Dr West completed a post-mortem examination on Mr Milligan, after which he ordered toxicology tests. Asphyxiation has not been ruled out.

No drugs have been found. However, the tests will examine whether Mr Milligan might have taken a drug, possibly injected into the orange, which heightened the experience but killed him in



Police scientists taking equipment yesterday into Stephen Milligan's home

nitrate family, known as "poppers", are easily available and are sometimes used in sexual practices.

At the MP's house, a cupboard door and a table on which the MP was found were removed. Scientists will check them against any marks on the body.

Yesterday police interviewed Julie Kirkbride, a political journalist who had been a girl friend of the dead

friend. After sealing the MP's home overnight they also began to examine papers and diaries.

Ms Kirkbride tells in her newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* today of how she enjoyed a normal loving relationship with Mr Milligan that ended two years ago.

Conservative Party officials voiced anger yesterday at the manner in which the police had leaked details about the

It was said that Mr Milligan's parents had learnt of the news from television.

Sir Norman and Gerry Malone, his deputy, went to Hammersmith police station after Mr Milligan's secretary, who discovered the body, telephoned. The two party chiefs were told by senior police officers that they could not confirm the death while at the same time junior officers were leaking the news, party

Britain backs ultimatum to lift Serb siege of Sarajevo

BY PHILIP WEBSTER, GEORGE BROCK AND OUR FOREIGN STAFF

JOHN MAJOR signalled last night that Britain would support a Nato ultimatum to the Bosnian Serbs to pull back their siege guns from around Sarajevo.

Despite strong opposition to air strikes from the Russians, Nato's crucial North Atlantic Council meeting in Brussels today is expected to issue a one-week deadline for Serb withdrawal. Nato sources said draft plans required both Serb and Muslim militias to withdraw mortars and field guns outside a "security zone" around the city within seven days. The safe area would extend for about 20 miles and prevent shelling from the hills which last Saturday killed 68 people with a single mortar round.

The Government's position on air strikes was agreed at a meeting of the Cabinet's overseas and defence policy committee. Malcolm Rifkind, the Defence Secretary, briefed the committee after returning from his three-day trip to Bosnia during which he spoke to United Nations military commanders about air strikes. The Government is determined that the air-strike option should be "forward-looking", to prevent any repetition of the shelling.

Foreign Office officials said that despite apparent public differences, British and French positions over Bosnia were very close. Both believe some form of ultimatum must be given to the Serbs. However, the Government remains concerned about the impact of air strikes on British troops in Bosnia and on the humanitarian aid operation.

Russian officials in Moscow said any attack on Serb positions besieging the Bosnian capital would severely test relations with the West.

Mikhail Demurin, a Foreign Ministry spokesman,

said that Boutros Boutros Ghali, the UN Secretary-General, had exceeded his powers in asking Nato to seek authorisation for air strikes.

"Nato's readiness for air strikes is one thing but making a political decision to launch them is quite another," he said.

In the Commons, Mr Major said the UN might need force, including air power, to carry out its mandate. But he said air power should be used only for clear objectives. Continued mortar and artillery attacks on Sarajevo could not await an overall peace settlement, and the UN, with support from

France rejects no-action line

Alain Juppé, the French Foreign Minister, said last night that France would not associate itself with any failure to decide on action in Bosnia. France would have nothing to do with yet another empty warning to the Serbs, he said.

Nato, must apply immediate and strong pressure to halt the attacks, he said.

John Smith, the Labour Leader, said if nothing was done to protect Sarajevo from the shelling, the Serbs would conclude that no action would be taken against them.

In Brussels, British, American and French officials spent yesterday trying to assuage the objections voiced by the Canadian government which fears that air strikes will expose its 200 soldiers in the eastern Bosnian town of Srebrenica to retaliation.

Nato diplomats were also hopeful that Greece would not block an air-strikes decision.

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Parties stake out the European battleground

The main parties are now manoeuvring for advantage ahead of the European elections, rather than as generals did before the age of the tank and the aircraft. Each is

edges the belief of many Liberal Democrats in closer integration. It reaffirms the party's opposition to keeping foreign, defence and home affairs as matters for inter-governmental co-oper-

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