

Maggie fury over Heseltine

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By GORDON LEAK

MRS THATCHER was in a mood last night to sack Defence Secretary Michael Heseltine.

She was enraged over new attempts to embroil her in the Cabinet row over Westland helicopters.

Her fury erupted over suggestions that she may have had a part in the appointment of Mr Gordon Reece, her former political adviser, as the firm's public relations adviser.

Disclosure of the appointment yesterday fanned the flames of the raging row between Mr Heseltine and Industry Minister Mr Leon Brittan.

Defence Ministry officials attempting to force Westlands into a European rescue deal described Mr Reece's appointment as incredible.

It is suggested that Mr Reece's former association with Mrs Thatcher made his new role, at the height of the controversy, difficult to defend.

A smear

Mrs Thatcher did invite Mr Reece to Chequers to spend Christmas day with her and her family.

But I can reveal that no business was discussed and the Prime Minister had no part in arranging Mr Reece's association with Westland.

She regards the implications of the innuendo that she is taking sides in the row between Mr Heseltine and Mr Brittan as a smear story similar to others which have emerged in the last 10 days, but of a more serious nature.

Mr Reece has, in fact, been working for Westlands since October 14 but his association has only just been disclosed.

A public relations consultant Mr Reece, masterminded Mrs Thatcher's personal campaign during the 1979 General Election.

So far Mrs Thatcher has

stood aside from the row between Mr Heseltine and Mr Brittan, who prefers a link-up between Westlands and the American Sikorski firm.

● Mrs Thatcher has already set up a top level Whitehall inquiry into the leaking of a Cabinet document on Westland.

The document was used to demonstrate that Mr Brittan had sought a European solution to Westland's survival.

But it has been strongly denied he had "preferred" it and then changed his mind.

Cabinet Secretary Sir Robert Armstrong will report to Mrs Thatcher tomorrow on progress with the probe.