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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

8 November 1982

WICK AIRPORT

The Prime Minister had a meeting at 1000 this morning with the Economic Secretary to discuss his minute to her of 28 October.

The Prime Minister said she was not willing to write to Mr. Donald Stewart, MP on the lines suggested by the Economic Secretary. Wick was in an area of high unemployment, and she did not feel she could argue that customs facilities should not be provided there on the grounds that this would run counter to the Government's policy of reducing the size of the public service. After a short discussion, she agreed to write to Mr. Stewart explaining that the Customs and Excise already provided certain services at Wick, such as the handling of oil-related and "business-user" traffic. To extend the services at Wick to full customs clearance would encourage calls for similar services at at least half a dozen other airports: Dundee, Belfast Harbour, Carlisle, Elstree, Sunderland, Swansea and Newquay. The letter should explain that an extension of services to all these airports could not possibly be justified, and would also create additional security problems for the Home Office and for the police, as well as the type of problem described in her letter to Mr. Stewart of 9 September.

SA

I should be grateful if you could provide a revised draft on these lines by Monday 15 November if at all possible. It would be helpful if you could also return our file of papers with your draft.

W. F. S. RICKETT

C.D. Harrison, Esq.,  
H.M. Treasury.



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Kontainers / Oil / Timber -  
Security

FROM: ECONOMIC SECRETARY  
DATE: 28 OCTOBER 1982

May we have a  
wind?  
Monday  
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Prime Minister

PRIME MINISTER

WICK AIRPORT

John Bone - Gardyne continues to protest. He describes his greatest worry overleaf. Are you willing to sign the letter at A? Or would you like to discuss this with the Economic Secretary?

WR  
29/10

Your Private Secretary's note of 25 October to my Private Secretary reported your view that since the service needed by Air Ecosse could be provided by the existing staff of Customs and Excise from Wick, it ought to be so provided.

I have looked at this again with care: but I do not honestly see how we could hope to keep Wick on its own. Although it is true that no similar claim for the provision of Customs clearance on the grounds of local availability of staff could be made in the case of Shobdon, there are several other small airports currently the subject of strong lobbying where a very similar justification could indeed be advanced: Dundee, for example, or Belfast Harbour, Carlisle, Elstree, Sunderland, Swansea (where, as you know, Nick Edwards has made a strong plea for reconsideration), and Newquay (where a number of our South-West backbenchers are leading the hunt). In each of these cases Customs staff are available in the close vicinity and at several of them, as at Wick, already have to make frequent attendances to handle oil-related and other special traffic. I have no doubt at all that we should have a row on our hands if we conceded Wick and then continued to resist the others (and indeed if any of the others were then referred to the Ombudsman we could be pretty confident he would find against us).

Of course we could concede them all. Obviously, as I have mentioned before, we could not then proceed with the recommendations of the Rayner scrutiny on Customs attendance. And having done so, I would be worried that since in a number of instances the services for which clearance is demanded are of pretty doubtful viability we could find ourselves with Customs status established and provided, and nobody to use it.

But I think my greatest worry is this. We are, as you probably know, facing enormous difficulties in bringing Customs and Excise manpower remotely within hailing distance of the target originally set for it at 1 April 1984: much greater difficulties, I think it is fair to say, than with any of the rest of Geoffrey's departments. If we were now to require Customs and Excise to commit even a handful of their staff to what they certainly regard as a wildly uneconomic and wasteful purpose, then I have no doubt that our ability to close the gap at least in part would be greatly diminished.

Needless to say, I am at your disposal to discuss all this at any time.



JOCK BRUCE-GARDYNE

Coat March, Apr '82, Wick Airport



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

Thank you for your further letter of 5 October about the provision of Customs facilities at Wick Airport. I was glad to see that you acknowledge the problems which we would have in providing Customs facilities on demand. But sadly I am afraid your suggestion that we should second a Customs Officer from an office close at hand does not really offer a solution.

One of the underlying aims of our policy of reducing the size of the public service is our wish to see that the remaining staff works with maximum efficiency. Customs Officers employed in other offices will be fully occupied with their jobs, and will be unable to take on other duties.

I do understand your concern and am only sorry to be unable to find an acceptable way of meeting it.

The Rt. Hon. D. J. Stewart, M.P.

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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

25 October 1982

BF

Thank you for your letter of 22 October about Customs facilities at Wick Airport and the Prime Minister's correspondence with Mr. Donald Stewart.

As I told you this morning, the Prime Minister feels that, if there is indeed a Customs and Excise office in Wick itself, then it is not unreasonable of Mr. Stewart to ask for Customs facilities to be provided at Wick Airport. She notes that such services would only take up at most two days of one officer's time, and this could hardly be said to undermine the Government's campaign to reduce Civil Service numbers. She is aware of the pressure to provide similar facilities at other airports, such as Shobdon. But it is not clear whether there are already Customs and Excise offices near these airports as there are at Wick. If there are no such offices, then extending Customs facilities to Wick Airport could not be said to set a precedent.

The Prime Minister feels strongly that we should do whatever is possible to meet Mr. Stewart's request. She is concerned about the industrial and economic situation in Scotland, and has commented that the Government should do what it can to help.

I should be grateful if you could consider the Prime Minister's comments, and let me have a revised draft reply to Mr. Donald Stewart as soon as possible. I am sure that the Prime Minister would be willing to speak to the Economic Secretary about this case if he so wishes.

W.F.S. RICKETT

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C.D. Harrison, Esq.  
HM Treasury.