



11th March 2009

Rt Hon Gordon Brown MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London
SW1A 2AA

Dear Prime Minister,

We are writing on behalf of British citizens of the UK Overseas Territory of St Helena, respectfully to request that your government honours its promise to the people of St Helena that an airport will be constructed on the Island.

As you will know, on 8th December HMG announced a "pause" in negotiations with the preferred contractor over the proposed airport, effectively bringing the project to a halt. The announcement, made within days of the anticipated signing of a contract has left the Islanders stunned.

In January 2002, a large majority (at home and abroad) had voted in favour of an airport and in April 2005 the British Government announced plans to construct the airport. Now, after constant reassurances, seven years of preparation, promises made and innumerable consultants, the loyal citizens of Saint Helena are disappointed, angry, and bewildered. It is a bitter blow to their hopes of becoming more self-sufficient and less reliant on the UK.

The promised airport was never seen as a panacea but the St Helena government and its people had been constantly encouraged to look at all the possibilities, to invest in the future, to take risks and think positively. There was a feeling of optimism, some people have already returned to the Island and invested in tourism related businesses. Others are poised to do so.

Now there is anger that they have kept their side of the agreement while the British Government has broken theirs. Three months on there is still no sign of an end to the "pause". The longer it continues, the greater will be the feeling of hopelessness.

St Helena has changed in recent years from the idyllic paradise of past memories. Life is becoming increasingly desperate for many people. The close family unit upon which Saint Helena prided itself is fast breaking down. The population is increasingly comprised of the elderly and children.

The average salary for local people is £4,500 a year, but goods and food are more expensive than in the UK because of freight charges. For this reason, and the fact that there are only limited opportunities for skilled workers and young people, many Saints are being forced to leave their families to seek work abroad. Over a hundred and fifty children and young adults are now in informal foster care as a result.

The Health Department has the painful and sensitive job of selecting which seriously ill patients qualify for further care and treatment in Cape Town or the UK. With an ageing population, there is greater need for elderly care, but there is less of it, with resources increasingly stretched. Education is becoming more problematic as classes shrink, but demands for a broad curriculum continue. Finding teachers is also increasingly difficult.

The consequence of all this is that as revenue decreases whilst social need increases and the Island will become more dependent on British Aid and its viability will be eroded yet further by isolation and economic decline.

The airport is vital to reduce the isolation of the inhabitants who are loyal British citizens and give them and thousands of other "Saints" in the UK and other countries hope for a better future. The airport provides the only real hope of reversing their dependence on UK taxpayers by enabling them to develop tourism and other businesses. A sustainable high value, low volume tourism industry would inject cash into the community whilst minimising negative impacts. In short, St Helena needs the airport to survive.

We are given to understand that the stalling of the airport project is due to the current economic and financial recession. Yet the long-term cost to the UK taxpayer will be greater without it. Decisions made in the past by governments with short-term views have left us with an ageing ship with limited capacity, which will require significant investment in the next couple of years to keep her going. A continuation of the present arrangements will therefore mean a continuation of subsidies at an ever increasing rate whilst economic activity declines and dependency increases.

Saints do not want UK handouts. Being able to provide for themselves would restore a pride and motivation to their community which has been put on hold with the government's "pause". DFID wants them to be more self-sustaining, to develop industries which will contribute to the cost of running the Island, but how are they to do it without reliable communications? Without an airport, another ship and a decent jetty will be required and these do not come cheap either. But even these will not enable a tourism industry and other new businesses to develop. Only an airport will do this.

The construction of an airport on the Island is therefore crucial its economic future. Without it there is no future for St Helena except continued, steady economic and social decline and UK taxpayers' money will have been wasted.

We therefore respectfully ask that you end the "pause" now so that negotiations for the construction of the airport can proceed without further delay.

Thank you for your help.

Yours sincerely,



Kedell Worboys
UK Representative
St Helena Government



Bob Russell MP
Chair
St Helena All Party
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Owen George
President
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