

Written evidence from BioDiplomacy

Introductory

1 BioDiplomacy is a pro bono informal network established by Iain Orr after he retired from the UK Diplomatic Service in 2002. BioDiplomacy's main interests are in human rights, the environment and good governance, especially in the UK's Overseas Territories. Most of Iain's diplomatic career was spent dealing with China, including a secondment to the Hong Kong Government when HK was still a UK Dependent Territory. In his last job in the FCO he was responsible for negotiating the Environment Charters signed in 2001 between the UK and its Overseas Territories. The *St Helena Environment Charter* is attached as Annex A. The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) is invited to consider which of the commitments on the part of HMG and of St Helena are relevant to the committee's inquiry into the St Helena Airport. This submission also explains the political and bureaucratic factors underlying HMG's difficulties in dealing with its overseas territories. Unless these are addressed, it will be even harder to realise the intended benefits of the airport project.

Detail

2 St Helena air access is the largest project ever undertaken by DfID in the Overseas Territories. But the airport is not yet fit for its intended purpose of facilitating a profitable tourism sector. Six months after the airport as designed was completed no scheduled passenger flights have been possible, due to the late identification of a major wind shear problem. Air Services Support International (ASSI <http://www.airsafety.aero/Home.aspx>) have therefore been unable to provide the necessary safety certification for the long-distance jet aircraft on which DfID's business case for financing the airport was based.

3 This led to the airport being - understandably - described during the PAC's evidence session on 2 November, as a "white elephant". Nevertheless, the qualification should be added "so far". The crucial question which DfID appears to be unwilling to discuss in public is "What can now be done to establish the feasibility of further work on the airport which may make it possible to secure safety certification for long-range commercial air services to and from St Helena?" (See the Permanent Secretary's reply at Q 51 of the oral evidence session on 2 November.) That option should be explored at the same time as DfID and the St Helena Government are trying to find whether commercial air services on a much smaller scale than is envisaged in the DfID business plan can be developed as an interim measure (which may need to be in place for several years). That will require a successful open tendering process and safety certification being obtained from ASSI for the proposed routes and aircraft. That should also include discovering whether ASSI will be prepared to provide safety certification for any scheduled passenger service between Ascension Island and St Helena.

Governance and the Overseas Territories

4 Many problems concerning the airport and other infrastructure projects in St Helena relate to land use, public and private investment in tourism, conservation of the island's natural and built heritage (both key factors for attracting visitors), and improved and less expensive internet access. Up to now far too much secrecy has surrounded the way public policies in St Helena are developed and implemented. This would not be possible if we were discussing, for example, a UK public airport. To its credit, the St Helena Legislative Council has recently established an Open Government Sub-committee (see at Annex B the report of 7 October in the *St Helena Independent*).

5 However, difficulties over good governance in the overseas territories across the board have a long history. Despite White Papers in 1999 (*Partnership for Progress and Prosperity – Britain and the Overseas Territories*, Cm 4264) and in 2012 (*The Overseas Territories – Security, Success and Sustainability*, Cm 8374), several select committees have identified continuing problems, notably the Seventh Report of the 2007-08 Session from the Foreign Affairs Committee (HCP 147-I & II) on *Overseas Territories* and the Tenth Report of Session 2013-14 of the Environmental Audit Committee, *Sustainability in the Overseas Territories* (HC 332). The PAC's report on the St Helena Airport should encourage all select committees to coordinate better their overseas territories work.

6 An underlying issue is that “[s]uccessive Governments have said that the overseas territories are a first call on the [DfID] budget.” (reply by Mr Mark Lowcock to Q 1 of the 2 November evidence session). More than that, under the International Development Act 2002, DfID has the major statutory budgetary responsibility for the overseas territories. As a result while good political and social governance in the UKOTs is primarily an FCO responsibility, global environmental governance a Defra lead, and international defence and security issues fall primarily on MOD desks, if major expenditure is needed this comes from DfID. However, for DfID officials their central mission is reducing global poverty, which, given their populations and economies, has no relationship to expenditure by DfID in the overseas territories. That does not – nor should it - count towards the UK's commitment under successive governments to devote 0.7% of the UK's GDP to international development.

7 That point came out clearly in the oral evidence session on 2 November. As Q 68 and Q 69 make clear, the business case for the airport was only “marginal”. Seen, however, from DfID's internal perspective a huge departmental benefit was anticipated - being able, over time, to end the current annual support for the island. But that projected benefit, as Mr Stephen Phillips said, “was based on a 737 delivering 120 tourists to the island each time” – which the present airport cannot do.

8 Many DfID ministers and officials take seriously their responsibilities for the overseas territories. But, institutionally, DfID acts as if it would rather they did not exist as a drain on DfID's human and budgetary resources. That marginalization of work on the overseas territories is mirrored in the FCO. What is "foreign" about British sovereign territory where we can - and in some circumstances do - rule by use of the Royal Prerogative, bypassing parliamentary scrutiny? The same goes for other Whitehall departments in respect of work involving the overseas territories. The St Helena Airport project deserves being examined holistically, not just seen as an opportunity to put DfID officials on the rack. The actions of many other departments and stakeholders will determine whether the benefits of this project for St Helena can be realized. However, the following questions cannot be answered fully without evidence from other individuals and organizations:

a) On the wind shear problem, who made the decision not to proceed with the recommended full testing schedule with different payloads on different days?

b) Will the full W S Atkins report be made public (not just the paragraphs released by Lord Ashcroft)?

c) How transparent has been the process of awarding contracts relating to the tourism sector in St Helena?

d) What discussions have there been between SHG, FCO, MOD, the Department of Transport (and ASSI) and the US authorities over the possible use of Ascension for scheduled passenger flights between St Helena and Ascension? Why such secrecy?

9 All of that said, DfID deserves considerable praise for its concern for St Helena's economic and social well-being. The department could have just resigned itself to the long-term costs of supporting a remote small island with a stagnant economy and a declining population. So, while DfID is embarrassed by the failure so far to realize its vision of a revitalized economy and society, that vision must guide the work that is still needed.

A Tristan Postscript

10 As a postscript, another DfID transport infrastructure project indicates the risks of the alternative, piecemeal, approach. For years it has been known that Tristan da Cunha's Calshot Harbour had been poorly designed and improperly located, making sustainable repairs impossible. It has been under constant threat of collapse during winter storms. Major repairs - which can only be temporary - have been repeatedly needed. Currently the MV Baltic Trader is being loaded in Cape Town with materials needed for the annual DfID funded emergency repairs to this unsustainable harbour, without which the Tristan community cannot survive. But it is often easier bureaucratically to make the case for repeated repairs than for the capital expenditure

on a long-term solution. A report on these alternatives vastly overestimated the cost of a new harbour, underlying an entire series of poor decisions in recent years that have wasted more than a new harbour would have cost.

*Iain Orr, BioDiplomacy
November 2016*

Annex A (St Helena Environment Charter)

<http://www.ukotcf.org/pdf/charters/sthena.pdf>

Note especially commitments 1, 7 and 11 on the part of HMG; and commitments 3, 4, and 5 on the part of the Government of St Helena.

Annex B – Open Government

St Helena Independent

7 October 2016

OPEN GOVERNMENT SUB-COMMITTEE

An 'Open Government' sub-committee to the Social & Community Development Committee was established on Thursday 22 September 2016, with the remit to improve transparency between St Helena Government and the community.

The Open Government sub-committee is chaired by the Honourable Mike Olsson and comprises the following members:

Mrs Carol George, Corporate Services Executive Manager

Mr David George, Deputy IT Section Manager

Miss Kerisha Stevens, Head of News, SHG Press Office

Ms Laura McMullan, Crown Counsel (Civil & Child Protection)

Miss Emerald Newman, Representative for Non-Government Organisations

Mr Gregory Cairns-Wicks, Private Sector Representative

The sub-committee is tasked with the following:

Drafting Freedom of Information Legislation·

Drafting Data Protection Legislation·

Drafting Public Records Legislation·

Developing proposals for a Consultation Policy

Developing proposals for improvements to accessibility of SHG information

Developing proposals for a modern engagement strategy that leads to improved dialogue and confidence in Government

The chairperson of the sub-committee will report to the Social & Community Development Committee on a monthly basis, and to full Legislative Council bi-monthly.

SHG

3 October 2016
