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CONFIDENTIAL.

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NOTES OF AN INTER-DEPARTMENTAL MEETING HELD
AT THE AIR MINISTRY (ARIEL HOUSE) AT 3 p.m.
ON FRIDAY, DECEMBER 30th, 1938.

to discuss

MEASURES WHICH COULD BE TAKEN TO STRENGTHEN
THE CLAIM OF HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT TO THE
OWNERSHIP OF CHRISTMAS ISLAND.

Present :-

Air Ministry:

- Mr. W.P. Hildred, O.B.E.
Deputy Director General of Civil Aviation,
(in the Chair).
- Mr. W.W. Burkett, O.B.E., M.C.
- Mr. J.J.W. Herbertson, O.B.E.
- Mr. V.H. Raby
- Mr. F. Entwistle
- Wing Commander R.M. Foster, D.F.C.
- Lieutenant Commander J.L.L. Drummond, R.N. (Retd.)
- Squadron Leader F.L.C. Butcher
- Mr. F.J. Christie, (Secretary).

Foreign Office:

- Mr. W.L. Gorell Barnes.

Dominions Office:

- Mr. C.W. Dixon, C.M.G., O.B.E.

Colonial Office:

- Mr. A. Bevir.
- Mr. W.J. Biggs.

Admiralty:

- Major G.W.M. Grover, R.N.

The Chairman explained that the meeting had been called to consider what measures could be taken to give effect to the conclusion arrived at by an inter-departmental meeting held at the Foreign Office on November 24th last that the possibility should be explored of taking further steps to strengthen the British claim to Christmas Island and that the Air Ministry, in view of the vital importance of the Island in connection with a trans-Pacific air service, was the appropriate Department to take initial action with regard to this investigation. The Air Ministry had considered this recommendation and thought that in view of the desirability of taking some positive measures it might be possible for them to establish a meteorological and wireless station on the Island. The Chairman suggested that before proceeding to discuss these proposals it would be convenient to ascertain the views of the other departments on the general aspects of the question. He asked Mr. Gorell Barnes what were the views of the Foreign Office.

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2. Mr. Gorell Barnes stated that the Foreign Office had reason to believe that the United States of America might be intending to lay claim in the near future to the Island and that the Department, whilst they did not feel in a position to make concrete suggestions as to what should be done, would welcome any measures which could be taken to strengthen the claim of this country.

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3. The Chairman inquired as to our legal title to the Island in order that the Treasury could be informed on the point when the Air Ministry sought that Department's financial authority to proceed with their proposal. Mr. Gorell Barnes said that the Foreign Office considered our claim to the Island to be very strong and they were prepared to refer the matter to arbitration if the necessity should arise. The U.S. Government did not demur, and had not since challenged, the formal notification of 1888 that Great Britain had annexed the Island. Mr. Bevir said that it was not impossible that the Government of the United States might attempt a coup as at Canton. It was clearly undesirable for the U.S. Government and H.M. Government to have to go to arbitration on such a matter, but if necessary it would have to be done. He added that articles had appeared in the U.S. Press urging the desirability of the U.S.A. laying claim to the Island.

4. Mr. Herbertson inquired what grounds the U.S.A. could adduce in support of their claim and observed that on a map of the Pacific Ocean published by the National Geographic Society (of America) it was shown as belonging both to the U.S.A. and Great Britain. Major Grover considered that we could base our claim partly on the discovery of the Island by Captain Cook in 1777. The formal annexation of the Island by H.M.S. "Caroline" in 1888 and the regular visits paid by H.M. Ships since that date constituted a better claim. He expressed the opinion that the establishment of a meteorological station on the Island would be a further useful measure in deterring the U.S.A. from contesting British ownership.

5. The Chairman inquired as to the number of inhabitant on the Island and was informed that they consisted of a British administrative officer, one or two European but non-British employees of a French trading company and a number of natives. Mr. Bevir stated that the administrative officer had been resident on the Island for about two years. His salary was paid for by the Colonial Government, who were reimbursed by the Treasury on the ground that the main reason for posting him there was Imperial rather than local interests.

6. In reply to the Chairman, Mr. Gorell Barnes said that there was in existence a Foreign Office memorandum showing the basis and relative validity of our claim and that of the U.S.A. to the Island; and he undertook to supply a copy to the Air Ministry.

7. The Chairman inquired as to the value of the Island from the defence point of view. Wing Commander Foster stated that it was on the outer edge of the area which would be covered by air reconnaissance of the approach to New Zealand from a northerly direction. The Island was, therefore, of direct interest to New Zealand who might, at some future date, wish to establish there an advance air base. As to who would pay for any facilities which it might be decided to provide, Wing Commander Foster expressed the opinion that in view of her already large expenditure on defence it was doubtful if New Zealand would be able, or ready, to shoulder the cost. Mr. Dixon agreed that

New Zealand expenditure on defence was a considerable item in her total expenditure but thought that she might possibly be willing to face some expenditure on the provision of facilities on Christmas Island, provided it was not too great. In support of this opinion he added that New Zealand were paying the cost of the survey of the group of islands of which Christmas was one.

8. The Chairman turned to the question of what practical measures could be taken by the Air Ministry to strengthen our claim to the Island. It appeared that this could, in the first instance, conveniently take the form of the establishment there of a meteorological reporting station with wireless equipment capable of transmitting to Apia. This would give effect to a recommendation of an International Conference, at which the U.S.A. had been represented, held at Wellington about a year ago for the purpose of concerting measures for the improvement of meteorological facilities in the Pacific. Until regular flying in the neighbourhood of the Island took place it would be sufficient if meteorological observations were transmitting to Apia four times during each period of 24 hours.

9. The Chairman added that the Air Ministry estimated that the capital cost of such a station, equipped with modern apparatus, would be in the neighbourhood of £5,500. Two operators would be required and it was estimated that the annual maintenance cost would be about £2,000. It was felt that the Treasury would regard this cost as somewhat high in relation to the services which would be rendered, but we could advance the argument that the provision and operation of the station would be substantial evidence of effective occupation should our claim to the Island be called in question.

10. Mr. Burkett stated that the estimate of £5,500 was for a station provided with up-to-date equipment, which was in advance of present requirements. It was possible that obsolete R.A.F. equipment, which might suffice until a regular service was established, could be provided at half this cost.

Major Grover stated that the Island was already provided with wireless transmitting and receiving apparatus capable of maintaining communication with Fanning Island, where there was a cable station. Mr. Entwistle stated that in this case, if the administrative officer on Christmas Island could be given the necessary instruction, he could act as meteorological observer - there was already a precedent for this - and it would not be necessary to station meteorological staff there. The requisite equipment would cost about £100. It could be placed in a small open air enclosure which could be provided at very little expense. He added that as soon as meteorological observations were regularly collected and transmitted from the Island it would be shown in international meteorological lists as a British observing and reporting station. He inquired how the equipment could be transported to the Island. Major Grover said that ships of the New Zealand Squadron had visited the Island two or three times a year of recent years and could convey the equipment there. The two cruisers of the Squadron carried trained meteorological officers, who could instruct the administrative officer in the taking of observations and could inspect the equipment on the occasions when they were in the neighbourhood.

11. After some further discussion on the point the meeting considered that it would be difficult to make out a case at the present stage for the full scheme. It recommended that the necessary meteorological apparatus should be provided and that the administrative officer should be given instruction in taking meteorological

observations and appointed to undertake meteorological duties. The observations should be transmitted to Fanning Island from whence they should be passed on by cable.

12. The Chairman inquired to what extent it was considered desirable to provide now the operational equipment which would be required on the Island when a service was operated. Mr. Burkett thought that all that would be necessary at the moment would be a jetty and moorings and the demarcation of a landing area. These could be provided at a cost of about £300 and the annual maintenance charges would be small. Wing Commander Foster suggested that we should seize the opportunity to provide at the outset all that facilities that would ultimately be needed on the Island, and inquired when it was expected that we would be in a position to start operating a service. Mr. Burkett stated that this would most probably be in 1941. With regard to the extent to which we should initially meet the full requirements of the station, he thought that it would take some time to obtain Treasury authority for all that was necessary, whereas that Department were unlikely to demur to the provision of the limited equipment which he had suggested. This would enable us to take positive action almost immediately and so give to the world signs of our active interest in the Island.

13. After some further discussion it was agreed that the operational equipment to be installed should be limited at the outset to a jetty and moorings and that steps should be taken to ensure the demarcation of a suitable landing area.