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From the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster
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Don Malcom

PUBLICISING GOVERNMENT GRANTS

Since coming to the DTI I have been struck by the fact that the Department does relatively little to obtain publicity for the financial assistance it provides to industry and commerce. There are exceptions whereby offers are publicised with the agreement of the applicant but the general position is that the information is commercially confidential, subject only to the arrangements for publishing lists of payments and offers under certain (mainly regional) schemes in British Business. Those arrangements are very low-key, more to do with the provision of information for accountability reasons than with publicity.

My general view is that where the Government is prepared to make support available it should take credit for doing so. At present we are often upstaged by local authorities and other bodies claiming credit, usually for much smaller amounts than Government Departments are providing, sometimes for the same projects. I therefore propose that sizeable offers of assistance - say over £100,000 - should be publicised by means of press releases. I would also intend to write to the MPs concerned. Smaller cases could be covered if they were of special interest, for example if the projects were located in inner cities. In the context of "freedom of information" pressures this could be presented as an example of the Government's willingness to be more open where circumstances permit.

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I propose that these arrangements should apply to Regional Selective Assistance and to certain purely DTI schemes under Section 8 of the Industrial Development Act and the Science and Technology Act. We would need to make clear that acceptance of the publicity arrangements was a condition of the assistance. There would however be provision for variations or exceptions to be made if companies were able to make a convincing case that disclosure of the information would damage them commercially, and for certain sensitive categories where disclosure would be in the interests of neither HMG nor the company concerned.

I should be grateful for your and Peter Walker's agreement to this change of practice as far as RSA is concerned. I am also copying this letter to the Prime Minister and to Nigel Lawson, Douglas Hurd, Norman Fowler, Tom King, Nicholas Ridley, John MacGregor, Paul Channon, John Moore, John Wakeham, Cecil Parkinson and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

KENNETH CLARKE