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From: Deputy Director Protocol and
Assistant Marshal of the
Diplomatic Corps

**Protocol Directorate
Room 1/56
Old Admiralty Building
London SW1A 2PA**

Tel: 020 7008 0989

Fax: 020 7008 1024

E-mail: jackie.barson@fco.gov.uk

22 July 2009

Mr Alex Skene

By e-mail: request-251-59300832@whatdotheyknow.com

Dear Mr Skene,

I am writing to follow-up my letter of 10 February, in which we informed you of the result of the internal review you had requested of our decision not to release details of the Government Hospitality wine cellar stock list. I apologise for the length of time it has taken to respond while we have examined in detail the public interest issues involved, as well as considering what information we might be able to release, which would not compromise the commercial interests of both Government Hospitality and its suppliers, in the way that your request for a redacted stock list would.

As previously explained, we are satisfied that the withheld information is covered by Section 43(2) of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act 2000, which covers Commercial Interests. Section 43(2) states:

"2. Information is exempt information if its disclosure under this Act would, or would be likely to, prejudice the commercial interests of any person (including the public authority holding it)."

Use of this exemption requires the application of a public interest test. As I mentioned in my reply of 10 February, one of the main factors in favour of release of the information is the public interest in transparency in the expenditure of public funds. Against this is the potential for the commercial interests of the relevant public authority to be damaged, and the interests of its suppliers.

I consider that the public interest is best served by withholding the redacted version of the stock-list in the form you have asked for because disclosure is likely to adversely affect Government Hospitality's relationship with its suppliers. As a public authority, GH has a duty to achieve the best possible value for money, and I believe that the value for money arrangements we have would be compromised by the disclosure of the stock details you have requested.



However, we have given detailed thought to what information it is possible to release without compromising our ability to acquire wines on a good value for money basis. I attach a list of some wines held in the cellar stock (Annex1), which outlines the range and variety of wines Government Hospitality has purchased over a number of years. This list is illustrative only, and is not a comprehensive list of the cellar contents. The list shows wines from various countries of origin, with a particular emphasis on wines from the French regions, which represent nearly 80% of the overall stock of the cellar. This is because wines from France have traditionally leant themselves well to an extended period of cellaring.

When considering your request, both we and the Government Hospitality Advisory Committee for the Purchase of Wine (GHACPW) have taken the view that the public interest is not served by publishing a full cellar stock list, which would clearly indicate, in many cases, from where wines have been sourced. As previously indicated the considered view of both the GHACPW and ourselves is that this would damage the ability of GH to achieve value for money in the future, and damage the commercial interests of GH's suppliers.

A demonstration of the level of value for money that the cellar can provide occurred recently over the wines used at the London Summit in April. You may have seen some coverage in the media indicating that the government used £1400 worth of wine at the 8 official dinners and lunches organised on 1 and 2 April. We calculate that, at a conservative valuation, it would not have been possible to acquire those wines directly in the London wine market for less than £6 000, more than four times the actual cost to the taxpayer. For example, at least two of the wines used are not available to purchase in London now, but were bought by Government Hospitality nearly 20 years ago when young and have been aged in the cellar until ready for use. Government Hospitality's policy of buying wines young and while relatively inexpensive delivers wines of greater quality and value for money than would otherwise be possible. In order to preserve this ability to achieve value for money, and in order to preserve the commercial interests of our suppliers, we have released the limited list attached at Annex 1.

If you are not content with this response, you may write directly to the Information Commissioner. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at:

The Information Commissioner's Office,
Wycliffe House,
Water Lane,
Wilmslow,
Cheshire SK9 5AF.

Yours sincerely,

Jackie Barson