



[Letter to C. Scott Mackenzie]

Park House,
Marybank,
Isle of Lewis.

28th January, 1970

C. Scott Mackenzie Jnr. B.L.
County Buildings,
Lewis Street,
Stornoway.

Dear Mr. Mackenzie

Re-classification of Weavers

I refer to your letter of 20.1.70 together with the submission relative to the above matter, and strangely enough I was on the point of phoning you on this subject when your letter came to hand asking for comments.

I have serious reservations regarding the proposal contained in your submission, and also I have grave doubts as to the merits of the scheme which proposed to tie certain weavers to a manufacturer as direct employees. I am not convinced that this course is in the best interests of the Weavers or the Industry, and of course, I have not heard anyone explaining how the small producer was to participate.

In the first place the proposal is in conflict with the way of life in these islands and also in conflict with the image of the Industry.

In the second place the mechanics of the scheme was not revealed if even considered seriously and after all surely it is only proper to draw up a scheme and put it to the people concerned so that they may be in a position to judge if it is going to be in their best interests to change from the present position. At this point I must criticise the Questionnaire sent to the weavers in order to obtain their signature. The most serious point is that in my opinion the signatures were collected under threat. I quote the covering letter as follows. 'Failure to return the form could result in your name being omitted from all weaving lists'.

I spoke to many weavers who felt they had no alternatives but to sign this form and at the same time they felt they were not given any information as to how the proposal would affect themselves.

In the absence of a detailed scheme giving the benefits as well as the disadvantages of remaining as at present or alternatively joining the new Scheme. I feel that it is not right to take seriously the present figures of Weavers who are supposed to be for or against Class 1, and in any case signatures obtained under a threat do not mean anything.

I could say more on that side of the subject but for the present, I wish to turn to the present firm proposal to try and get the Board of Trade to make a Definition Order under Section 7 of the Trade Description Act 1968 in order to seek a greater degree of legal protection to the words 'Harris Tweed' than the Industry at present enjoys.

I wish to emphasise most strongly that I do not wish to do or say anything that might be detrimental to the Harris Tweed Industry and the Welfare of the community, nevertheless I am not full of enthusiasm for the present scheme and I am convinced my objections are not against the best interest of the Industry, but indeed are valid objections which can easily be proved to be as by a study of the History of the Industry, or a look at the present position with its anomalies. For instance, half the production of the Industry is sold in the Home Market at a price which is shillings below the cost price, if one is to calculate the cost price from the price the spinners sell their yarn at. In this way the growing Home Market is completely outside the reach of all except the spinners.

In the circumstances I do not think it is too harsh a judgement to say that the spinners have proved themselves to be unfair to discharge the responsible duty that devolves upon them as a result of the unique position they hold in this industry, and the protection and image the Orb trade mark confers upon them. It was never the

intention of the promoters of the Trade Mark or the Board of Trade that the spinners should adopt tactics that are tantamount to the complete exclusion of all crofters and small producers from the Home Market, and this is now the case for many many years, because of the low price of Harris Tweed in the Home Market or the high price of yarn from the spinners, whichever way one looks at the problem.

The small Producers were given solemn promises at the time they were asked to support the Hunter Litigation. They were told they had a place in the Industry and were assured of yarn supplies from all the spinners at a price which would enable them to compete with the spinners. Let the Board of Trade conduct an investigation and see if the spinners have honoured their solemn pledge. Not only was and is the activities of non-spinners restricted as a result of the price of cloth, but I can testify that one of the leading spinners who promised to supply small producers with yarn and recognised they had a legitimate place in the Industry at the time of the court case declined without any satisfactory explanation to supply me with any yarn at all, and I had in my hand a 14 piece order for which his shades would do. He also declined to supply me with a few pounds of yarn of various shades in order that I might have made new pattern ranges based on his yarn shades.

I am not too sure that history has not already demonstrated that the small producers put their eggs in the wrong basket at the time of the Hunter court case, and the present proposition will seal the fate of Crofters and small producers wishing to manufacture a tweed as in their legitimate right and heritage. If the Board of Trade were to grant the present prayer the spinners would have a complete monopoly and we know from past bitter experience what the spinners would do with more power. If necessary I could elaborate on the above and show how the present and past policy of the spinners injured the whole Harris Tweed Industry, including the spinners own best interests and the interests of the weavers as well. The spinners are irresponsible and should not be given any more power by the Board of Trade.

If you say to me that it is the Harris Tweed Association that is seeking extra protection for the good of the whole industry, then my reply is that I am not that naïve. No matter how the H.T.A. protests, they are and always were the willing tool of the spinners. I have never known them to have had enough backbone to any or do anything to rectify the anomalies of the Industry. As I understand it, they are the custodians of the 'Orb' trade mark and they should administer that mark in the interests of all sections of the Industry. However, whenever there is a problem the best of the H.T.A. can do is to remind us that they only administer the trade mark and cannot intervene in the problems of the Industry. If the 'Orb' is monopolised by one section of the Industry to the exclusion of others as it is virtually at present, is the H.T.A. still administering the mark properly on behalf of the Industry? Some of us think not, and that is why I feel they should not be given any more power than they have at present.

As the representative of the spinners you will recall I have written to you many months ago drawing attention to the price of Harris Tweed in the Home Market, and as yet I have had no reply from you, neither is there any change in the problem I brought to your notice then. You will recall I said at that time I was considering an approach to the appropriate authorities on the question of the Home Market prices. I have been patient and refrained from taking any steps as yet in the hope that the spinners would adopt a more sensible policy. Likewise in this case I am prepared to be patient and hear what the spinners have to say before I object to your submission to the Board of Trade.

Considering the nature of the present proposals I feel I should send a copy of this letter to the H.T.A. Ltd., Mr. Edwards and the secretary of the weavers union.

Yours faithfully

[ends]

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