

Estuary airport is the right aviation policy

Even with a third runway, Heathrow will be just as chaotic in 20 years as it is today. There are genuine alternatives, and the only solution is to build capacity in another location



Chris Mullin says that he learnt two things during his 18 months as minister for aviation in Tony Blair's government: that the demands of the aviation industry were insatiable, and that the Government usually gave way to them.

Over the past few weeks there has been a barrage of propaganda from business groups and airlines claiming that if the Government does not reverse its veto of a third runway at Heathrow, Britain's economic prospects will be severely damaged. A report by Oxford Economics commissioned by Heathrow's owner, BAA, predicts the consequences of failing to build a new runway in south-east England could mean a cumulative loss to the nation's economy of more than £100bn by 2028.

I have no problem with companies with multi-million pound lobbying budgets such as BAA, BA, and Virgin seeking to protect their very considerable vested interests. Or indeed for business organisations like the CBI and the Institute of Directors arguing that a new runway at Heathrow is vital for the prosperity of the country. That is only to be expected. But the commercial pressures behind Heathrow's third runway are so powerful that the case against further development at the world's most congested major airport is in danger of being overlooked. It would be a tragedy if the Government were forced by such pressures to retreat.

No one denies that the short-term economic case in favour of Heathrow's expansion is strong. A third runway would help relieve the pressures on an

airport which has become internationally notorious for its delays.

But what it could not do is cope with the predicted trebling of aviation traffic over the next 30 years. As the previous government's consultation paper admitted, even with a third runway Heathrow would be able to satisfy only two-thirds of unconstrained demand by 2030. That suggests that the airport will be as chaotic in 20 years time as it is today.

The uncomfortable truth is that if Heathrow is to function competitively as a 21st century airport, it needs not just one but at least another four runways operating 24 hours a day. Schiphol already has six runways, Charles de Gaulle and Frankfurt four, each with room for expansion.

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No doubt trebling Heathrow's capacity with another four runways could be achieved by a determined government, but it would mean destroying large chunks of west London and exposing hundreds of thousands more Londoners to unacceptable levels of noise.

The airlines and BAA know all this, which is why they are secretly planning the next stage of Heathrow's expansion. A third runway is just another stage in Heathrow's unplanned expansion over the past 70 years. It will continue the inglorious history of solemn undertakings being given in exchange for expansion, only to be cynically abandoned as soon as it is politically convenient to do so. The inspector of the Terminal 5 planning inquiry, concluded that a third runway would have "such severe and widespread impact as to be totally unacceptable".

That conclusion is why the

Government should maintain its veto on Heathrow's expansion. You can't fix "one of the country's truly great planning disasters", as the Town and Country Planning Association has dubbed Heathrow, by digging an even deeper hole.

There are real alternatives to Heathrow, including the further development of Gatwick and Stansted. But along with the mayor of London Boris Johnson, I believe that the optimum long-term solution is to build a new airport in the Thames estuary, which would be able to operate 24 hours a day. Moving a hub airport further from the capital is a policy which has been successfully adopted by major cities across the world including Paris, Washington, Denver, Oslo, Hong Kong and Kuala Lumpur. With developments in rapid transit, an estuary airport would be 20 minutes away from central London.

The claim, assiduously promoted by the airlines and their allies, that the cost of a new Thames estuary airport is unaffordable is absurd for one of the richest countries in the developed world. Much of the cost could be privately financed. An infrastructure development such as a new airport backed by the Government would be attractive to pension funds, venture capitalists and sovereign wealth funds. The capital costs could be recouped over 50 years or more. A levy on outgoing and incoming passengers could also raise considerable sums.

The new airport should be aimed at Britain's future, and be capable of being expanded and meeting the demands that will be made on it over the next century.

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