



Preparing for take-off

In a surprise move in September, Boris Johnson shifted Daniel Moylan from the London Legacy Development Corporation after just three months in office to head up the Mayor’s review of airport capacity and to plan his vision of an airport in the Thames Estuary. Peter Murray caught up with him

The idea of having an airport in Maplin Sands in the Thames Estuary was abandoned in 1974. What have you learnt from that?

The Heath government legislated for an Estuary airport, however Labour campaigned against it and then when they won the February 1974 election they cancelled it. I suppose one learns a number of things from that. The first being you do have to have some sort of political census. Secondly, you have got to have confidence in the circumstances that support the predictions of growth and demand, which the airport is meant to meet. If you remember, the Labour party’s excuse for scrapping it was that the oil price had risen as a result of the '71/'73 wars and therefore nobody would be able to afford to fly in the future.

You need to rise above that sort of temporary fluctuation and circumstance. You have to have a longer-term confidence in your figures and not be driven off course every time there is some fluctuation in oil. Petrol was 3 shillings a gallon when I started to drive, which was in 1971.

Weren't birds a big factor then?

Birds are always a factor for aircraft and of course the Estuary does attract a lot of birds. I think it’s very interesting that Crossrail is creating the largest bird sanctuary in the UK on artificial land using the soil from its tunnelling on Wallasea Island. The point I want to make there is that birds can be trained and diverted to new locations. After all, what is the point of building a beautiful new bird sanctuary

if no birds go to it? They don’t go at the moment because it’s just sea, but they will go to it because it will have all the luxurious trappings that a bird needs – a five-star sanctuary.

The RSPB will agree with you that you can encourage birds to take different paths and you can create reserves for them. We clearly have to be doing things like that and it will be very important. There are a whole series of practicalities to overcome in creating a new airport but none of them is a showstopper. What you need to do is untangle them and deal with them patiently one by one using the best technology that we have. They will then all come into place.

People talk about the SS Richard Montgomery (the US Liberty ship which sank in 1944 with around 1,400



Take-off for Thames Hub? The Foster and Partners proposal includes a high-speed rail link



The Foster-designed Thames Hub proposal is sited on the Isle of Grain on the Hoo Peninsula

tonnes of explosives on board); it sits closer to Sheerness than it would ever be to an airport. We are going to have to deal with it anyway so it's not an airport issue.

What are your main objections against a third runway at Heathrow?

The first thing is that people do object to the noise and the numbers are huge. It really is a matter of scale. The CAA published a statistic back in January that out of all the people in Europe who suffer from aviation noise above a certain level in their homes, 28 per cent of them live near Heathrow. What it means is that other countries have got this right and have their airports in the right places and ours isn't. We are talking about between half a million and 750,000 people and we are talking about adding to that with the third runway because it has a different alignment. It isn't just noise, there is air pollution associated with it as well. So there are all those environmental issues.

The other reason for opposing it is that it's manifestly a suboptimal thing to do; that you are investing money in something that can go no further. The question is not where does the third runway go; the question is



The Hub also includes an international rail station, directly linked to the airport

where are you going to put the fourth runway? Because you need four and maybe more runways, Schiphol is building its sixth.

Do your plans for an Estuary airport require the closure of Heathrow?

The Mayor thinks there is still a role for Heathrow on a smaller basis serving a west London premium leisure market. It's already a premium leisure airport; if you want a cheaper flight you go to Stansted or Luton. I also think many of the flights that have been sent to Gatwick will come

back to Heathrow because they are more convenient.

So why not Stansted? Steve Norris is supporting that route.

What Steve Norris is proposing I think is very wrong-headed. It is just to build an extra runway at Stansted and increase its capacity where already it's under-utilised. However, Stansted as the site of a four or five runway hub airport is more credible than simply sticking on an extra runway that the airlines don't want to use. A major four runway airport

sitting on top of a high-speed rail station connected into London but also connected across the Estuary to the Continent and potentially linking round to a High Speed 2, that would connect into the rest of the country such as Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester and the North to Scotland, I think is a possible fall back if the Estuary was unworkable.

Having said that, the Estuary is better. The Mayor isn't tying himself to a specific single location, but his general thrust is to go to the east of London because the area has so much development opportunity. It has greater deprivation, greater poverty, lower life expectancy, a younger population; the airport would be a stunning transformational act for London.

What about just linking existing airports with high speed rail, as Terry Farrell has suggested. What's wrong with that one?

I like and admire Terry but he's so silly about this. Look at the practical issues. You treat the London airports as a single airport by linking them up very fast. I land at Heathrow and I'm going to take off from Stansted and there is a superfast link which will take me, say, 45 minutes; first I have to ask: is it air-side link or land-side link? If it's a land link that anyone can use, I have to get off the plane, go through immigration, pay my Visa fee, pick up my bags, get onto a train and get off in Stansted and do the whole process in reverse. And Terry thinks it's going to feel like you're in one airport! If it's an air-side link which can only be used by passengers, unless it's all totally underground (this is presumably a sealed train) I won't have cleared immigration, but I could be a terrorist. What happens if the train stalls? Am I locked in as the train burns? How do you deal with security issues? You can imagine what the press is going to make of all of that and all those security issues, and bags.

One of the most complex bits of

an airport is automated baggage handling. We are talking here about tens of thousands of pieces of luggage walking themselves from one airport, onto a train, off the train at the other end and onto a plane. You have to have huge confidence in software systems to imagine that you can possibly make that happen.

I just cannot see it. Munich airport is now getting its transfer times down to 30 minutes. You can get off the plane and 30 minutes later you are on the next one, knowing that your bag is with you. That is the standard that we have to face from international competition. What's being described here is laughable, I'm afraid.

What about the different proposals for an Estuary airport?

Foster's I suppose has the most attraction as they have spent a lot of money working out quite detailed ideas. Boris is not tied to the Foster's proposal and he is not wholly aligned with some of the elements, so we are not endorsing that as our sole favoured solution. What we are saying is there are a number of options on the table and the Foster's one looks quite sensible, it needs a bit of refining and changing in some ways to make it totally acceptable to the Mayor, but we are 90 per cent there. We don't want to direct them, it's right that people come forward with different ideas.

What about funding?

Well there are several sources. There will be public money I'm sure required for roads and rail and things like that but first you have to bear in mind that every airport in Britain is run as a business to make profit. If they don't make profits they would close, so airports are profitable. If you look at shareholders at Heathrow/BAA you will see that there is a tight group of half a dozen major investors including sovereign wealth funds.



Island nation: Gensler's proposed London Britannia Airport in the Thames Estuary

The other thing that's happened in other countries is that they have maintained landing charges at the old airport and indeed increased them during the transition period, even though they have stopped investing in anything other than in maintenance and safety issues. So they are collecting money that they are not spending any more, and over a 10-15 year period they have used that money to create a fund which helps to defray the cost of construction of the new airport. So there are a number of ways in which money can be provided for this without dipping directly into the government's purse, but I'm not saying it's going to be free to the taxpayer.

This country is arranged so that no airport is built in this country unless the government makes the project its own. So my job is largely to try to move the case on so that the government realises that there is a real need to make progress on this and not keep it all in the long grass, which is where they seem to

be headed at the moment with this independent commission.

So you could provide them with the get-out?

We have been working the last two years to provide them with a credible plan. We have had a budget over the last two years of £100,000 per year and some very good, dedicated technical resources at TfL who have worked extremely hard on this. We have had no comms budget; the comms has been Boris and me going around making speeches. Even within those constraints we have produced some very well-regarded technical reports, and I think we have moved the debate on very considerably. If we now have to spend a lot more money, we will do that. This issue is sufficiently pressing that we should be reaching a policy decision on it fairly soon. Then we will take over and get on with it. We will produce the Hybrid Bill. Getting the policy decision is the crucial thing. ■