

6 August 2014

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POST POLITICS

UNITED KINGDOM

Ruling Out an Offshore Airport Would Be a Mistake

Posted: 05/08/2014 17:23

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I'm extremely worried by news that Sir Howard Davies, chair of the Airport Commission, may be about to rule out the option of an offshore airport in the South East. Are these rumours true? If so, in my view, that would be a catastrophic error; a premature, short-sighted decision that lacks the vision necessary to ensure Britain is a powerhouse of world trade once again.

British people want to see our country become a great trading nation once again and many of my constituents support the view that a Thames Estuary airport is exactly what the country needs.

We want to see the UK close its goods trade deficit from a worrying £9billion; we want to see British businesses shipping UK products all around the world, from Cambodia to Canada; and we want to see these exporting companies creating jobs and wealth. If we want to realise this ambition, we will need at least three, possibly five, extra runways over the next few decades.

There is space for expansion offshore in the South East where we could build a four or five-runway airport. This airport could also operate 24 hours a day without disturbing anyone because it is away from major conurbations. There's also space for excellent rail links and in this location it could possibly host a space-port development.

So, I was very concerned when I read the new studies of the offshore option published recently, highlighting the environmental, financial and social difficulties facing a Thames Estuary airport. I'm worried because these detailed studies - totting in at over 600 pages - mean the offshore option has now been subject to a greater degree of scrutiny than the alternatives. It would be entirely wrong to exclude an offshore option from the final report simply because it has been subject to greater scrutiny.

We know a lot less about some of the options at Heathrow: what about the technical, environmental and financial challenges of building a third runway at Heathrow? There is neither enough space, nor sufficient transport links for this kind of expansion there. And what about the impact on local people? A third runway would create an unacceptable amount of night noise for my constituents, bulldoze nearly 1,000 local homes, pave over important flood protections and destroy irreplaceable areas of outstanding natural beauty. And then we'd still need another two or three runways within a few decades! Heathrow expansion is a short-term sticking-plaster solution that is not in the local, regional or national interest.

However, I am a realist. An offshore airport is a huge undertaking. But on balance, given the enormous benefits it would bring to the UK, these challenges must be overcome. If we are to be an ambitious, forward-looking, world-beating nation, we must be bold.

The Mayor of London, Sir Norman Foster and others have indicated that the initial £100billion investment required would readily come from national and international investors, especially sovereign wealth funds, attracted by the clarity and certainty of the UK government's commitment.

I strongly urge Sir Howard to include an offshore option in the shortlist for his final report; it will take courage and innovative thinking but I believe it would be in the long-term interests of our country and I believe it would be a complete solution to our future aviation needs. If Hong Kong can build a brand new offshore airport in seven years and France can twice move its national airport in a matter of decades, it should not be beyond the UK - a great engineering nation - to achieve a similar feat. It is in the interests of the public, the nation and our long-term future.

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