

HACAN

Heathrow Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise

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PROOF OF EVIDENCE

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THE VITAL IMPORTANCE OF RUNWAY ALTERNATION AT HEATHROW

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Personal Details

I have lived in Kew since 1977. I am a Justice of the Peace, and hold a Master's Degree from the University of Cambridge.

In the past I have worked as a researcher in a Medical Research Council unit, and in the BBC.

I joined HACAN because the nuisance of aircraft noise was much greater than I had expected, having been misled by official assurances that a new generation of quiet aircraft was to replace old technology, and that a limit of 275,000 movements was to be implemented.

Neither of these proved to be the truth, and I continue, therefore, to be a member of HACAN.

I have a particular interest in alternation because I benefit from it, living as I do about half a mile north of the flight path. For me, and many of my neighbours, alternation is an absolutely essential relief measure.

Summary

Runway Alternation is the most effective, and most valued, operational noise relief measure. The environmental consequences, if it were to be ended, would be totally unacceptable.

It is not secure, even at present, for legal reasons, and because it is being eroded as a result of inadequate runway capacity.

In the future, if T5 were built, commercial pressures would certainly lead to its abandonment.

1. Runway Alternation

- 1.1 Alternation would be better described as Half Day Noise Relief. It provides a means of giving predictable periods of respite, and of sharing the burden of aircraft noise among the population affected.
- 1.2 At present it primarily benefits those living under the approach paths, during westerly operations. Its purpose is explained in the Department of Transport booklet "Action Against Aircraft Noise": "The main object of the system is to achieve a fair sharing of periods of relative quiet among the communities of West London affected by noise from landing aircraft. However, those communities close to the western end of the airport which are overflowed by departing aircraft also benefit, as take-offs are normally made from whichever of the runways is not being used for landings. This alternation system is generally regarded by people living in the vicinity of Heathrow as being one of the most effective of the current noise abatement measures at the airport."

2. Current Practice

- 2.1 The runways 27L and 27R are used in segregated, not mixed, mode, i.e. one runway for arrivals, the other for departures. Runway alternation requires aircraft to land on one runway between 07.00 - 15.00, and on the other between 15.00 - 23.00. The morning/afternoon rota changes weekly, on Mondays. This practice has been followed since 1972 and is firmly established.
- 2.2 It is not, however, a measure specified by the Secretary of State under section 78 of the 1982 Civil Aviation Act, and is therefore not fully and legally secure.

3. The Importance of Runway Alternation

- 3.1 Runway Alternation is the most effective operational noise relief measure currently in use.
- 3.2 Its value is recognized in the White Paper 1985: Airport Policy: "The Government will continue to support the necessary measures (to alleviate noise), particularly the continued use of surer take-off and landing procedures and runway alternation." (para 5.18)
- 3.3 The Inspector at the Airport Inquiries 1981-83 was in no doubt of its value:-
"I am strongly of the opinion that for environmental reasons the system should remain unchanged. In this regard, I share the view expressed in the 1978 White Paper. It is important to note that in taking the decision that Heathrow should not develop beyond four terminals, Government believed that doubt would be cast on the continued practicability of the policy of runway alternation." (Chap. 42, 8.11)

“I gained the firm impression that, of all the measures in force at Heathrow, the loss of this mode of operation and the prospect of increased night flying were the most feared. The benefits were not disputed.” (Chap. 7, 7.18)

- 3.4 Regular publication of the flight path timetable in local newspapers is an indication of the value residents attach to runway alternation. Similarly, the issue of press releases by HAL whenever the measure is suspended for any length of time is a tacit admission of its importance.
- 3.5 The benefits of runway alternation might apply at night as well as the day, if alternation were to be extended from 11pm to 7am.
- 3.6 Preliminary results from a night alternation trial held between October 1996 and March 1997 show a significant reduction in night noise nuisance. 35% of residents surveyed felt that it made the aircraft noise “better”.
- 3.7 However, it is worth noting that the pressure of numbers of aircraft is already so great that alternation during the shoulder period 06.00 to 17.00 was subject to suspension due to “inbound traffic delays”. T5 could only exacerbate this situation.

4. Consequences of ending runway alternation

- 4.1 If alternation were to end, the runways would be operated in mixed mode. Both runways would be used simultaneously for departure, with arrivals interleaved between these. The environmental impact of continuous flying without respite would be totally unacceptable to local residents. It would be a reversion to the situation that obtained in 1972, before the introduction of alternation, but very much worse, since the number of movements has hugely increased.

Sixteen hours of continuous disturbance, with little if any pause between aircraft: natural justice rules out inflicting this on the residential mass of West London.

- 4.2 Alternation ensures that movements are equitably distributed between the different flight paths, as well as providing predictable periods of relief, during which movements are made on the runway most distant from the “relieved” area. Under mixed mode there is no assurance that movements would be equitably distributed and there is the certainty of no relief.
- 4.3 The increase in subjective annoyance if mixed mode were to be adopted would not be reflected in any change in Leq contours, which casts severe doubt on the validity of these contours as a measure of community disturbance.
- 4.4 The concentrated use of two parallel runways, near close parallel main roads in a climate of foggy winters, can only increase risks to aircraft, and to people living under the flight paths. There has already been an incident in which a pilot making a visual landing mistook the A4 road for the nearby runway, only narrowly avoiding a catastrophe. It cannot be possible for the proponents of mixed mode to

prove that there would be no safety implications, either for close parallel streams of arriving aircraft, or from aircraft dispersing in different directions from close departure runways.

5 Security of Alternation: mixed signals

5.1 Runway Alternation is not secure. There have been numerous signs of its vulnerability. Its insecurity is partly the consequence of the legal situation mentioned above, and partly the use of the procedure known as “Tactically Enhanced Arrivals Measures” (TEAM), a grandiose name used to justify expedience.

5.2 Under the TEAM procedure alternation is suspended “in order to reduce delays to incoming aircraft”. When inbound congestion occurs, aircraft are permitted to land on the “wrong” runway. Alternation frequently breaks down under “TEAM” in the early morning periods, when arrivals outnumber departures. As many as 3% of all aircraft land out of alternation. HAL has been pressed to give reasons on a regular basis for incidents of de-alternation, but will not do so, whether through reluctance to reveal the scheduling of too many aircraft at any one time, or for resource reasons, is not clear. Either way, TEAM can provide an excuse to suspend alternation whenever runways are congested, a situation which T5 would compound, to the extent that alternation would exist in name only.

5.3 Future insecurity

5.3.1 “Government has not reviewed the policy on alternation since the 1985 White Paper although it must be borne in mind that the further work which was requested by the Secretary of State in February 1995 will involve an assessment of proposals outlined in the Runway Capacity Enhancement Study” (Alison Munro, Dept. of Transport, evidence to the inquiry, para 3.15).

5.3.2 This study advocated mixed mode operations as “offering scope for moving forward in the future” by providing additional take-off and arrival slots.

5.3.3 An environmental case for mixed mode should be made, the study continues, following further evaluation by NATS. This would have to address the end of alternation, the Cranford agreement and Noise Preferential Routes. Work is currently proceeding.

5.3.4 HACAN is deeply concerned that lack of planning for airport capacity will lead to abandoning alternation in the pursuit of a few more slots for a few more years, without regard to the people affected.

5.4 CAA spokesman Stanley Abrahams gave evidence to the Inquiry to the effect that movements in excess of more than 475,000 aircraft per annum would require the ending of runway alternation. T5 would lead to over 500,000 atms per annum, in order to carry 80 million passengers per year at 158 passengers per aircraft, the passenger loading predicted by Mr. Abrahams for 2010. This would require 91

movements per hour on the runways - almost exactly the throughput permitted by mixed mode in the Runway Enhancement Study. HACAN's own estimate of flight numbers associated with T5 is 550,000 – 600,000 patms per annum (Day 117, p.182). In HACAN's view, therefore, T5 would be very likely to lead to irresistible pressure to end runway alternation, either formally, or informally via TEAM.

- 5.5 British Midland have been pressing for an end to alternation since 1993.
- 5.6 In 1995 US Senator Larry Pressler sought the end of alternation in order to allow a few more slots for American carriers.
- 5.7 “We believe that there would be advantages in the introduction of mixed mode operation at Heathrow, perhaps for limited periods of the day only.”
(House of Commons Transport Select Committee Report, May 1996, para 18)

5.8 Unconvincing Assurances

- 5.8.1 Doubtless aware of the public furore that would follow dropping alternation, BAA sought to reassure:-
 - 5.8.2 “Introducing mixed mode - BAA would not support the introduction of mixed mode operations.”
 - 5.8.3 “BAA believes that these are views that Government ministers are likely to share”.
(submission by BAA plc to House of Commons Transport Committee Inquiry on Airport Capacity 6th Dec 1995)
 - 5.8.4 HACAN has little faith in these assurances, especially in the light of BAA's membership of the study group (see 5.3 above) which advocated the advantages of mixed mode.
- 5.9 **The only way to secure the continuance of this vital relief measure is to make its continuance a legally binding requirement.**