

London just doesn't need a third Heathrow runway



Noise nuisance: A British Airways 747 takes off over nearby residential areas at Heathrow, already the world's busiest international airport without plans to build an extra runway

One campaigner says the principle behind expansion is misguided and ministers are just pandering to the whims of the aviation industry



ZAC GOLDSMITH

AS ONE of the estimated two million people who live beneath the Heathrow flightpath, I'm sure it's true that you adjust to the noise, as one would eventually get used to dog mess in the park. But it is nevertheless a permanent annoyance, and much more so, I suspect, if you are elderly. As candidate for the Conservative Party in Richmond and North Kingston, Heathrow is the single issue I'm written to about most often.

If the Government has its way, the problem can only grow. By its own admission, its proposals for a third runway will lead to 800,000 flights using Heathrow a year, an increase of two-thirds on today. When I was invited last week to do an unedited three-minute television clip on Richmond Green, we simply couldn't find a peaceful three-minute window. Planes already roar overhead at a rate of one every 90 seconds. Heathrow expansion

would make the situation much worse.

Where will it all end? For years, communities in west London have heard broken promises — that this terminal building or that new flight was going to be the last. And for years the Government has made farcical attempts to deny the noise and pollution associated with a third runway. It has even downplayed the conclusions of its own scientific advisers showing that the lives of two million Londoners would be significantly affected by aircraft noise if Heathrow expansion goes ahead. It's self-evident that they're right.

We also know pollution levels will breach legal limits if a third runway goes ahead. The Government's answer is to make wild statements about cleaner aircraft and burying the M4.

So why is the Government pushing ahead with a policy that is deeply unpopular with a large section of the capital and which conflicts with its own climate-change commitments? The answer must be that it has simply failed to do the calculations; that, or it has been bullied by vested interests.

In many instances, for example, the Government has double-counted the economic benefits of expansion. For instance, the job creation claimed for aviation extends far into the wider service sector. Similarly, the costs of aviation are underestimated. The £9 billion tax subsidy that accrues to the sector through tax-free fuel and zero-rated VAT doesn't feature.

Neither do environmental and social costs that some estimate to be about £14 billion a year, although in truth the calculations are virtually impossible. If the expansion plans go ahead, aviation will account for at least a quarter of UK carbon emissions by 2050. Equally, the £15 billion tourism deficit — the difference between what is spent by tourists here and British residents holidaying abroad — is ignored by ministers.

The Government's ostensible fear is that if we don't expand Heathrow, we will jeopardise the competitiveness of our aviation industry. But Heathrow is already the world's busiest interna-

tional airport, serving 17 per cent more passengers than its closest rival, Paris Charles de Gaulle, and 45 per cent more than Amsterdam's Schiphol. And let us not forget that there are another four "London" airports, which between them handle one third more passengers than Paris and nearly two-thirds more than Amsterdam. Our competitors have a lot of catching up to do.

Indeed, there are strong signals that the trend elsewhere in Europe is in the opposite direction. French President Nicolas Sarkozy stunned airlines late last month by announcing a freeze on new airport capacity. The aviation industry, used to years of deferential treatment by national governments, expected more of the same. As it was, Sarkozy's commitment threatens plans for a major new airport in western France, and casts doubt on future expansion of the country's hub, Charles de Gaulle.

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There is strong opposition to the proposed expansion of Schiphol airport, and countries around Europe are all debating the wisdom of rapid aviation growth. If other governments follow Sarkozy's lead, more will inevitably do the same.

Another pro-aviation argument is that business will relocate overseas if Heathrow is not expanded. But the presence of an airport is a relatively minor consideration for most businesses. Only one per cent of the Institute of Directors think airport expansion is a priority, and a London

Chamber of Commerce survey suggests four out of five London firms are against expanding Heathrow.

The truth is Heathrow does not need to expand. It would do far better to focus on improving its existing capacity. For instance, does it need to encourage so many transfer flights? One in three people using Heathrow never even leave the airport and therefore add very little value to the UK economy.

What's more, a huge number of runway slots that could be usefully allocated to longer-haul business flights — the category deemed most beneficial to the UK economy — are currently clogged up by short-haul flights.

How can it make sense to operate 60 flights a day to and from Paris? Or the 34 flights a day from Heathrow to Manchester? Nearly a fifth of flights using Heathrow are on routes where a reasonable train alternative already exists. These are journeys that could easily be shifted to rail.

President Sarkozy understands this. Along with his surprise announcements on airports, he also pledged to build a further 1,200 miles of high-speed rail lines by 2020 to provide people with an alternative to air travel.

Yet our Government doesn't understand this logic. The UK has only two-thirds the length of high-speed track of Belgium. We have just five per cent the distance of France's TGV network.

The principle underlying airport expansion — that we should predict growth and then simply provide enough capacity to meet it — has been discredited for road building, and ultimately it will not survive for aviation. It is the politics of the magic porridge pot; a policy with no clear end, a non-solution.

As the campaign for a third runway at Heathrow heats up, let's hope, just for once, that the Government prioritises the quality of life of Londoners above the short-term interests of the aviation industry.

■ Zac Goldsmith is Conservative parliamentary candidate for Richmond and North Kingston.