

Roskill and howard davies airport commissions and the third london airport

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Introduction

London's airports are operating close to capacity and there are challenges associated with the location particularly of Heathrow airport, such as noise pollution and safety of London's populace (DOT, 2003; Helsey and Codd, 2012). Capacity expansion pursuits have been long drawn over half a century involving two airport commissions and political intrigues (FT, 2014). The Third London Airport commission popularly known as the 'Roskill Commission' anticipated growth in air transport and speculated that by the end of the century London might have to accommodate 100 million passengers (Abelson and Flowerdew, 1972). It was an appropriate estimate as the actual number was 115 million (CAPA, 2013). This ceiling has been surpassed and London airports are operating under strenuous volumes. The pursuit of an alternative airport, additional runways to expand capacity, among other options continue to feature in public discourse almost half a century later with myriad arguments and counterarguments (FT, 2014; The Independent, 2014). This report explores the works of the airports commissions (Roskill and Howard Davies commissions), as well as the consideration of the controversial Boris Island alternative. It focuses on the demand and supply of airports among other considerations significant for such ventures as the development of new airports or aviation facilities.

History of commissions and development of arguments

A 1964 interdepartmental committee on the Third London Airport forecast that the capacity of Heathrow and Gatwick airports combined, even with the

addition of a second runway at Gatwick, would be insufficient for London's air traffic by 1972 (Mishan, 1970). After the consideration of options, the commission on the Third London Airport (Roskill Commission) was set up in 1968. With their evaluation of the timing of need, expansion capacity requirement, and after a careful study of a total of 80 proposed project sites, the commission finally chose four sites, among them a new airport at Cublington (Abelson and Flowerdew, 1972).

It was the first time that a full range of environmental and economic arguments were brought to bear on a major investment decision, providing substantial and significant systemic evidence on which to base decisions (HC, 1971). Its excellence in approach and output was however not much good as government, with a variant perception and opinion immediately rejected its findings choosing instead a scheme to build an airport at Foulness, in the Thames Estuary (Mishan, 1970). Interestingly, this option had been considered and had been decisively rejected by the Roskill Commission on the basis of cost, distance and convenience to prospective passengers (FT, 2014).

Neither of the two propositions (Cublington and Foulness) was built and a subsequent change in government and complexion led to the devise of a different scheme – a limited expansion of an existing airport at Stansted which was accomplished a decade after proposition. This option had also been considered by the Roskill Commission and never made its shortlist of key options (Helsey and Codd, 2012). It was a predictable failure and is still challenged by the lack of success in supporting long-haul operations by airlines, only benefitting from low-cost carriers (principally Ryan air) drawn

by attractive landing charges which offset consequent inconvenience to their passengers (AOA, 2013). A proposal which has re-emerged and gained prominence is the new airport at the Thames Estuary.

The ' Boris Island' alternative

Dubbed ' Boris Island' as a consequence of its support by London Mayor Boris Johnson, the London Britannia Airport (a name adopted for the latest iteration of the idea in 2013) is a proposed airport to be built on an artificial island in the River Thames estuary to serve London. Plans for this airport go several years back but the idea was revived by the Mayor in 2008 (CAPA, 2013; Mayor of London, 2013).

Proponents of the project cite the significant advantage it portends in the avoidance of flights over densely populated areas with consideration of noise pollution and attendant safety challenges. However, its critics who include some local councils, nature conservation charity - RSPB, as well as current London airports, oppose the scheme, suggesting that it is impractical and expensive (AC, 2013b). It is still under consideration of the Howard Davies Airports Commission, which estimates the entire undertaking including feeder roads and rail to cost ? 112 billion, about five times the presently shortlisted short-term options (AC, 2013c). The overall balance of economic impacts of the project would be uncertain given the requirement for the closure of Heathrow and by extension London city for airspace reasons (CAPA, 2013).

Renewed pursuit - Howard Davies Airports Commission

In spite of the myriad arguments and criticisms of the various alternatives, not much has changed and the Howard Davies Airports Commission set up in 2012 still wades in the long running controversy (CAPA, 2013; AOA, 2013). There has evidently been little learnt in the several decades of bad policy making given the hedging, stonewalling, and political posturing that still characterizes the endeavour, a readiness to oppose policies espoused by those of different complexions or the persistent complication of issues when there is requirement for bold action. This characterizes policy today as it did half a century earlier with elaborate models being grossly misused and deliberately disregarded. Minor challenges and disadvantages are greatly amplified overshadowing potentially more substantial benefits (FT, 2014). The Airports Commission was set up to examine the need for additional UK airport capacity and to recommend to government how this can be met in the short, medium and long term. The commission is tasked with creating economic, sustainable and socially responsible growth through competitive airlines and airports. (AC, 2013a).

The findings of the Howard Davies Airports Commission contained in their interim report released in December 2013 (preceding a final report expected in 2015) are mainly focused on the continued growth of air travel, mainly in the South East of England. The Commission considers that the region needs an extra runway by 2030, and another possibly by 2050. On the shortlist for the expansion of airport capacity are three options comprising a third runway at Heathrow 3, 500m long; lengthening of the existing northern runway to at least 6, 000m enabling it to be used for both landing and take-off; as well as a new 3, 000m runway at Gatwick (CAPA, 2013; AOA, 2013).

Not included is the brand new hub airport in the Thames Estuary, which is side-lined citing uncertainties and challenges surrounding the proposal at this stage (AC, 2013d). However, the Commission promises an evaluation of its feasibility and a decision on its viability later in 2004 (The Independent, 2014). The Stansted and Birmingham options, however, failed to make the shortlist, although the decision remains open for their qualification in the long term (CAPA, 2013).

In the Commission's view, the capacity challenge is yet to become critical although there is potential if no action is taken soon. However, capacity challenges and the jostling and vying for a slice of anticipated extra capacity by airports signals need (AC, 2013d).

Arguments on the expansion of airport capacity

The Howard Davies Commission acknowledge the 'over-optimism' in recent forecasts of growth in demand for the aviation sector, but consider the level of growing demand as prominent requiring focus on the earliest practicable relief (AC, 2013c). This is in response to contentions by opponents that the current capacity is adequate basing their primary argument on earlier inaccurate demand forecasts. These opponents posit operational changes including quieter and bigger planes could serve to accommodate more passengers negating the need for ambitious and expensive ventures. Some also argue that constraining growth in the aviation industry would be the best option for emissions reduction and that government should utilise available capacity, pushing traffic from London's crowded airports to others around the country, (AC, 2013b; c; d; AOA, 2013 DOT, 2013).

The Commission accepts the changes in aviation practice and aircraft design could deliver modest improvements in capacity but argue that none of these submissions suggested significant transformational gains (AC, 2013c). It also stresses that deliberations were alive to the issue of climate change and were focused on the delivery of the best solution for the UK, which entails the achievement of carbon targets and delivery of required connections for the economy and society (AC, 2013c; d). The Commission notes that doing nothing to address capacity constraints could have unintended economic and environmental consequences with the possibility of some flights and emissions being displaced to other countries (AC, 2013d; CAPA, 2013; Mayor of London, 2013).

Reliance on runways currently in operation would likely produce a clearly less ideal solution for passengers, global and regional connectivity, and would be sub-optimal in the endeavour to minimize the overall carbon impact of aviation (AC, 2013a; AOA, 2013). To achieve statutory mechanisms aimed at operational efficiency and emission reduction are critical.

Conservationists, such as the Friends of Earth, decry growth arguing that the building of more airports and runways will have a major impact on local communities and the environment (Mayor of London, 2013; AC, 2013b). The argument for sustainable growth is welcomed by industry players in light of calls for constraint (AOA, 2013; The Independent, 2014).

Through time, the argument has significantly centred on the timing of need for expansion of capacity with the uncertainty over growth and demand estimates. The drive for more intensive use of existing capacity is most appropriate in the short-term given that operational and aircraft design

improvements have enabled the handling of more volumes than anticipated. Though limited, there is still capacity for improvement benefitting environmental conformity and overall efficiency. Several tactical improvements are proposed by the Davies commission to enable full and efficient use of available resource and capacity (DOT, 2013; AC, 2013d). The Davies Commission proposes the encouragement of greater adherence to schedules by airlines through stricter enforcement of aircraft arrival time. This would enhance efficient sequencing of arrivals ending the practice of ‘stacking’ especially at Heathrow (Europe’s busiest airport), which is expensive in fuel costs and time and has adverse environmental impact. They also propose ‘smoothing’ of timetables and the tackling of surges in traffic and bottlenecks, such as restrictions of arrivals before 6am and the designation procedures of runways which impede efficiency (AC, 2013d). Also considered are ‘mixed-mode’ operations which entail simultaneous use of runways for take-offs and landings. Through this mode, Heathrow expects to gain 15% in airport capacity without extra building (AOA, 2013). The Airports Commission rules out proposed mixed-mode operations suggesting its use when arrival delays arise and eventually to allow envisaged gradual traffic build up and increase in operations towards the opening of additional runways rather than a flood-gate of activity. In their consideration of noise pollution and impact on residents, the Commission recommends ending of simultaneous landings at both runways with an exception of times of disruption (AC, 2013d). Presently, Heathrow designates different runways for landings and departure which are switched daily at 3 pm to allow for respite for communities near the airport (AOA, 2013; FT,

2014).

The Howard Davies Commission suggests that there might not be need for one huge hub airport as growth in recent years has come from low-cost carriers (AC, 2013a). This view makes the case for expansion of Gatwick Airport. In anticipation of confirmation of expansion priorities and solutions, airport bosses are at loggerheads with Gatwick bosses suggesting that it would not make business sense for their second runway if Heathrow is also given a green light for simultaneous expansion (AOA, 2013). This is in consideration of an extension of time to achieve return on investment from the expected 15-20 years to 30-40 years. Gatwick's case is compelling given that it is cheaper, quicker, has significantly lower environmental impact and is the most deliverable solution in the short term (CAPA, 2013).

Heathrow rejects this argument insisting there is a clear business case for a third runway regardless of development at Gatwick. With the airport operating at 98% of its capacity, they highlight potential for parallel growth delivering choice for passengers (AOA, 2013). Mayor Johnson is, however, opposed to Heathrow's expansion citing the misery inflicted on a million people or more living in west London. He notes that there has been significantly more concern for the needs of passengers superseding the concerns of those on the ground. Johnson proposes focus on the new hub airport (Boris Island) to relieve impact on residents as well as to enhance UK's competitiveness (Mayor of London, 2013). Supporters of Heathrow's expansion say it will be quicker and will help to maintain the UK as an international aviation hub increasing global connections. Paris, Amsterdam and Frankfurt are closely competing for this business (DOT, 2013).

Conclusion

The examination of need for additional airport capacity and recommendation of solutions for the short, medium and long term, has taken the UK half a century and two commissions and still there is no confirmed venture despite the raft of proposals. The earlier Roskill Commission reached conclusions on four promising sites-including a new ' Boris Island' airport, which are still under consideration in the later commission the Howard Davies Airports Commission. Considering several arguments with regard to their mandate, the latter commission has proposed additional runways one at Gatwick and possibly two at Heathrow despite potential adverse effects to London residents. They are still to deliver a verdict on the new Thames Estuary project, promising a decision later in 2014 after evaluation.

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