

Critical proposals on Heathrow will affect future jobs

Heathrow sliding down airport rankings in Europe

By Clive Soley

WITHIN a few days, the Government is expected to publish critical proposals for the future of the biggest employer in the West London area.

Heathrow airport employs 72,000 people directly and supports tens of thousands of other jobs in ancillary industries. It is the foundation stone on which so many people's **incomes and** lifestyles depend in this borough and neighbouring areas.

The Government will launch a public consultation on how we can safeguard Heathrow's many economic benefits for the future, while protecting the environment, which is so important for our quality of life.

We have taken Heathrow for granted for far too long. It has given us high prosperity and high employment for 60 years, but that will not continue unless we address the problems of its decline relative to other competitor airports.

It is time to choose. We either allow Heathrow to continue its decline into early retirement with all that that implies for jobs, or we invest in its future. That means modernisation and expansion.

Heathrow cannot continue as it is now.

It used to be seen as Europe's No 1 airport. **But this summer it was pushed into fifth place by Munich, which now provides flights to a bigger network of destinations.**

Global connectivity is what a successful hub airport is all about - and in terms of destinations served, Heathrow had already been overtaken by Amsterdam, Frankfurt and Paris.

Madrid is catching up fast, and Heathrow will continue to slide down the rankings unless action is taken.

In a globalised economy, no UK Government can afford to be without a high-quality hub airport. So either Heathrow expands or a new hub airport is built elsewhere, as some argue.

That would be a disaster for us. West London and the Thames Valley without Heathrow would be an economic desert.

It is not just the people who work full-time at the airport. Think of the hotel trade, engineering, the catering industry, taxi firms and all the other services that supply a modern hub airport. Ask how many people you know work at the airport or whose job depends on it. In Hounslow alone one in ten of the work force work on the airport.

I do not believe all these people are careless about their economic future. That is why the trade unions are backing expansion and modernisation. I do not believe businesses are careless about their future growth and success. That is why they are backing expansion and modernisation.

We all saw the 'Heathrow hassle' headlines over the summer, with the Mayor proclaiming that the airport 'shames London', and politicians, business leaders and travel groups complaining about delays and endless queuing.

There is a solution to the Heathrow hassle. It is to give the airport more runway capacity.

This would dramatically reduce delays and allow Heathrow to compete properly with its Continental rivals. Heathrow has only two runways, while its main competitors already have four or five.

Naturally there are concerns about expansion, and there is no denying the hard fact that some people would suffer.

A short third runway would come at a high price for communities like Sipson.

Though many householders would accept the change and take advantage of the compensation offered by BAA, others would be reluctant to move having lived there for many years. There is no easy answer to that. When we built the motorway network and the Channel Tunnel rail links, many people lost their homes.

It is a cost of essential economic development, and it is why we have to have generous compensation schemes.

As the consultation will make clear, any expansion will have to meet tough new conditions on noise and pollution. As a long-term west London resident myself, I am determined that will be so.

There have been deliberately exaggerated claims made about the noise impact of a third runway. The fundamental fact is that the runway will not be allowed to go ahead unless Heathrow's overall noise impact is kept at the level of 2002 or lower.

Aircraft are becoming quieter. British Airways, Virgin and a host of other Heathrow airlines are investing in Airbus A380s and Boeing 787s, which generate only 25 per cent of the noise volume of the jumbo jets we have today.

Local air quality will have to improve because it will have to comply with specific legal standards for the first time. So Heathrow expansion is not a polluter's charter.

For the wider environment, climate change is undoubtedly a serious threat. But aviation's contribution to greenhouse gases is much smaller than that of many other industries. Global warming must be tackled with planned responses by all sections of society, not by knee-jerk attacks on one economically crucial industry, let alone one airport.

If, as I hope, Heathrow receives the green light for expansion, then I also hope everyone locally will enter a new phase where we stop seeing Heathrow as a problem and start seeing it for what it is - the main driver of our economic well-being in this area.

The forthcoming consultation on Heathrow is a massive opportunity to secure these local economic advantages for future generations as well as regenerate some of the most deprived areas of west London. We should seize it with both hands.

(Clive Soley is a Labour peer and Campaign Director of Future Heathrow.)