

The Heathrow decision

Parliament yesterday voted to approve the third runway at Heathrow. This is the third of the three Hs of large scale infrastructure investment that this government has decided on. It is the most commercial of the three. Hinckley may lumber us with 50 years of very expensive power, unless the alternatives suddenly shoot up in cost. HS2 will be a huge loss maker for years to come on any sensible forecast. It is a disproportionately expensive investment for the railway as a whole, and will hit the revenues on competitor lines. Heathrow will be a successful hub airport with many people and airlines wishing to use it.

The issues surrounding Heathrow were not easy. Some felt expansion at Gatwick would be better. Some wanted a distributed system of growth with several airports in the south east expanding to take more flights, on the argument that hubs and interlining are not as important as some claim. Some wanted the lengthened two runway solution at Heathrow, to cut costs. Many of us want some better news on noise. Because the UK has developed an airport so close to a large conurbation it has created more strains between the settle population and their noisy neighbour. Having the airport to the west of London means planes cannot be stacked over the sea, which would reduce noise and risk.

There was general agreement that the UK does need more airport capacity in London and the south east. There is universal agreement that more direct flights to other UK cities would be helpful, reducing the strains on Heathrow with people flying down to London to catch an onward flight to somewhere else. This is mainly a question of getting to critical mass in these other cities to sustain a decent direct service.

I urged the Transport Secretary to intensify efforts to reduce current levels of aircraft noise, reminding him of the agenda of measures I have been working on with the Aviation Minister.