

RUNWAY D

Have you ever met a Londoner in favour of the third runway at Heathrow? Here are the numbers: 78% passengers are in transit, bypassing the British economy altogether. So who does stand to benefit from this

A reminder of the limits of the powers of the London Mayor is this: while none of the four main candidates support the building of a third runway at Heathrow it looks increasingly certain that it will go ahead. Gordon Brown has long been seduced by the mantra that air travel – and Heathrow in particular – is the key to Britain's business success.

As a man who made his name by keeping the economy steady, Brown has perhaps been a little too credulous of this argument, peddled by one of the most efficient lobbying operations in the world. And while other government departments have spent much effort on going green, the Department of Transport has skipped hand in hand with what environmentalists call Big Carbon.

There has been a retreat over emission, noise and traffic targets and a rash of broken promises. In 1980, Terminal 4 was given the green light on the condition that government policy would not permit a fifth terminal or any other major expansion at Heathrow. In 2001, Terminal 5 was given the go-ahead by this government. Two years later, the Aviation White Paper came out in support of a third runway at the world's busiest airport.

Why? Heathrow is already operating far beyond capacity, claims the air travel industry. The national economy is being stifled; jets circle overhead, boosting their noise and carbon footprint, because they have no slot to land immediately. Besides which, most European airports have more runways – Amsterdam has five (although this is disingenuous as Amsterdam has a third of the passengers) – so why can't we?

A new £9 billion runway could be finished by 2017. It would allow an extra 500 flights per day, on top of the existing 500,000 flights a year. This would necessitate the demolition of 700 homes and the creation of a new flightpath over London. Even more galling is that 35 per cent of the passengers would be using Heathrow as a hub on their way to somewhere else.

Government figures suggest that a new runway would dump a further 2.6 million tonnes of carbon emissions (absurdly, these figures excluded all international flight arrivals). Friends of the Earth say that if the UK's aviation industry continues at the same rate, it will be responsible for our entire carbon target 'allowance' by the year 2050. Flights from Heathrow already produce 18 million tonnes of carbon annually – 3.1 per cent of the UK total.

Furthermore, only one third of all passengers using Heathrow are making business trips. Of the rest, most are UK holiday-makers, taking their money out of the country – an estimated annual deficit of some £15 billion. And then there is the question of whether there should still be an airport at Heathrow. Now hemmed in by residential West London, its location is wrong on many counts: noise, congestion and safety. Many European cities have moved their airports further from the centre in the last 20 years. Boris Johnson supports a new hub on the Thames Estuary.

So who are pushing for expansion of the existing site?

You may not have heard the story about the Spaniard, the Irishman, the former car dealer and the Transport Secretary. Or the special advisers who have swapped jobs in government for similar roles in the aviation industry. Some, like the Downing Street special adviser and former BAA spin doctor Jo Irvin, have gone the other way.

It's not a joke. Some would call it a stitch-up. Green it ain't.



Top: Willie Walsh, chief executive of British Airways. Above: Plane Stupid demonstrators rename Parliament 'BAA HQ' in February