

"I believe that major inland airports are no longer feasible and the only adequate location for an airport for the metropolis is on the Thames estuary."



THE VIEW FROM CHAPMAN

Recently the Government, as was expected, decided to scrap the £650 million project for the third London Airport at Maplin. The increase in air traffic in the South East is to be handled by Heathrow, Gatwick, Stansted and Luton and a more important role for provincial airports is foreseen. While plans for the deep-water seaport off Maplin will continue for the time being, there is a general expectancy that the Port of London Authority's plan for that £50 million development will also eventually be axed.

The decision follows the report of a committee set up by the new Government last March which recognised a number of new and significant trends—not the least of which were that there has been a dramatic reduction in the forecast of growth in the number of air passengers and aircraft movements, and that there will be a big reduction in disturbance from aircraft noise.

The committee's task was not to make recommendations to the Secretary of State for Trade but to set out the latest facts and figures. However, Peter Shore was not hesitant in reaching his decision. One of his crucial conclusions was that the cost of Maplin would be nearly twice as much as the next most expensive alternative—development of the other airports to take the anticipated traffic.

There is little doubt that the Government's decision will be widely welcomed, except by those who live near Heathrow and Gatwick and more particularly those who dwell around Luton and Stansted airports, both of which could have been closed down. But I consider Mr Shore's decision a very bad one, both on national environmental and regional planning grounds, though I concede that, in the train of the energy crisis and escalating oil prices, there is a case for delaying the Maplin project.

The case for postponement is twofold: first, it might have been imprudent to have committed the Government to large-scale public expenditure at a time of deepening economic crisis. Second, while I do not challenge the downward revision in the forecast growth of air passengers, it seems that it would have been sensible to see if the price of oil remained high relative to other costs—particularly at a time of rampant inflation. Also the development of larger aircraft, and thus fewer air transport movements than otherwise, could mean that the price of

oil might not be such a crucial factor in air costs in the future.

That said, I believe that there is still an overriding case for a new airport at Maplin (and in conjunction with a sea port) for a number of reasons.

First, air travel will grow—even if not at the pace originally anticipated—and it is common knowledge that the other four major airports in the South East will have to handle the additional traffic with the consequent increase in nuisance and crash risk to the millions who live near them. Incidentally, I do not accept that the provincial airports will provide for anything but a minute proportion of the increase in such traffic.

Second, I do not conclude that the development of quieter engines will make life less intolerable or more bearable for those who live in the vicinity of inland airports, for any benefit in the reduction of noise levels will be offset by the increase in the frequency of services. In any case the noise reduction will still be insufficient and many of the existing (and louder) aircraft have a future service of up to 20 years. Mr Shore's committee con-

firms also that vertical and short take-off and landing aircraft are unlikely to be developed in the next 20 years. Another justification for proceeding with Maplin is the regional planning aspect. It is interesting that the committee acknowledges that Foulness is still the best location for a new airport, for it is adjacent to the one substantial area in the South East with an inadequate employment base and with a very large journey-to-work problem. The building of a new international airport involves major urban development and it is estimated that this would have meant employment for about 28 000 people by 1990.

Maplin would not entail building in an area of high amenity value and, unlike the Heathrow, Gatwick and Luton sites, it would not mean further growth being added to existing congested areas with severe pressures.

But my final plea returns to the environmental considerations. I believe that we are now living in an era when major inland airports are now no longer feasible and the only adequate location for an airport for the metropolis is on the Thames estuary. Of course selecting a site is a question of balancing all the environmental and commercial factors, and doubtless the Defenders of Essex and ornithologists will be keen to point out that an airport at Maplin would endanger the Brent goose and ruin one of the few wet land areas of its type in Britain.

Others who are anti-Maplin will also be quick to counter by saying that, had the "third" London airport gone ahead, expansion of Heathrow and Gatwick would still be necessary to cater for increased air travel up to 1985, when Maplin would have come into service. But surely short term expediency should not cloud long-term objectives and perhaps we should remind ourselves that there would have been no need to expand Heathrow and Gatwick if successive governments had not equivocated for more than 10 years.

I believe that the Maplin decision is a disastrous blow to those who thought we had moved into a more civilised era when environmental factors were taken into account with commercial judgements. I am convinced that there will be a need for a new London Airport and that it will have to be built ultimately at Maplin. When it is, it will cost astronomically more in real terms than it would if development had proceeded in the 1970s.