

Dear Airports Commission,

I read most of your 'emerging thinking' and, first of all, if I am to understand it correctly, the terms of reference given to this commission by the government were to propose recommendations to maintain the status of the UK as an aviation hub. As far as I can see, I cannot see anywhere that the terms of reference were to keep the UK as an hypercentralised aviation hub around one and a half airports at the Southern tip of the UK. Yet reading your 'emerging thinking' what we get is a repetition of the same old London centric prejudices and biases. Of course, we should expect nothing else, since the Chairman of the Commission *"was Director of the London School of Economics and Political Science from 2003 until May 2011 [and] Prior to that he was Chairman of the UK Financial Services Authority from 1997 to 2003."* This background alone can only lead to any 'emerging thinking' being utterly London-centric by force of the law of gravity in the form of your Chairman's background.

If anyone needs proof of this bias, they need no more than read the following extract of this 'emerging thinking':

*"Finally, the fourth argument is that such a conclusion ignores the scope for regional airports to take more of the strain, if only the government were prepared to intervene to make this happen. Many passengers from elsewhere in the UK use south eastern airports. They might be expected to prefer to use an airport nearer to home."*

*"Some regional airports have indeed grown quickly in recent years, and have established profitable niches in the national market. There is nothing to prevent that happening, and airlines have an incentive to run flights from regional airports, which offer cheaper landing charges and, often, faster boarding times, with cheaper parking for passengers. These are welcome developments."*

*"But it remains the case that the largest market and the highest propensity to fly are in the south east of England. On average, a resident of Greater London takes 2.5 flights a year, compared to just over 1.5 for the country as a whole. This will always make it an attractive market for airlines, even before you take into account the significant projected population growth in the region. The population of Greater London has grown much more rapidly than forecast in the last decade."*

Let's forensically dissect this 'reasoning' part by part:

First we have the misleading, sanitised half-truth: *"Many passengers from elsewhere in the UK use south eastern airports."* This should be restated as "Many passengers from elsewhere in the UK are forced by the oligopolistic market failure into using LHR, particularly when it comes to long-haul destinations".

Then the pat on the back, the patronising treatment from the London-centric establishment: Village airports outside London have the right to establish 'profitable' niches serving the needs of their respective village catchment areas, which are mainly interested in flying to Ibiza and Sharm-El-Sheik. Obviously this is why you are spoilt for choice if you wish to travel from almost any UK regional airport to any short haul sun-and-sea destination and by extension to many, many short haul destinations. **Absolutely spoilt for choice**. But when it comes to long haul scheduled destinations, London holds firmly and stubbornly to its virtual monopoly.

And then the key argument to support centralising even more of the nation's long haul traffic in one airport in the South East: Guess what, ***"a resident of Greater London takes 2.5 flights a year, compared to just over 1.5 for the country as a whole."* !!!**

But of course, how could we be so stupid. This must be why as reported by the FT *"There are about 25 flights a day from Heathrow to New York, for example."* ( <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/54769d48-3026-11e3-9eec-00144feab7de.html?siteedition=uk#axzz2irPINfpe> ) yet only one from Birmingham

airport, a stone's throw from where I live. Actually surely there must be a typographical error in the transcription of the 'emerging thinking', surely Sir Howard Davies meant to say that "**a resident of GL takes 25 flights a year compared to just over 1.5 for the country as a whole.**", as this would explain that frequency to NY reported by the FT. If only we had known earlier that the reason for this situation is that a resident of Greater London takes 2.5 - or is it 25? - flights a year compared to just over 1.5 for the country as a whole. Thank you Airports Commission for enlightening us. By the same token there are 13 flights a day from LHR to Madrid (where I happen to travel relatively often, at least twice a year), but none from Birmingham, and I am reliably informed that many of these flights fly only half full, could it be because IAG is just holding to their precious slots at LHR?

And could it be that the reason why "a resident of Greater London takes ~~2.5~~ 25 flights a year compared to just over 1.5 for the country as a whole" is in turn related to two things:

- A resident of Greater London is wealthier on average, and a great part of this is because decades or rather centuries of London centralism have concentrated wealth at the centre, sucking life out of the regions, for example, in our times, monopolising long haul business travel, a shameful failure of the aviation market
- A resident of Greater London has far greater flight connectivity than a resident of the Midlands or the North, hence it is much easier for them to have that extra flight a year compared to the rest of the UK that the Chairman of the London-centric Airports Commission now holds as THE key argument to maintain London's virtual monopoly of long haul flight in the UK.

Is this not the very definition of a circular and/or self-serving argument? A resident of GL takes one more flight a year than the country average because a) it is wealthier on average and b) it has the flight connections in the first place, all arguments that reinforce each other.

Apart from the endemic London-centric bias that permeates the whole of the establishment and their appointed committees and commissions, there is a fundamental misunderstanding around what is a hub and what is not a hub. A hub airport is one that serves many destinations that would not be possible to serve from a non-hub airport. The clearest example of this is one far away destination to a country of just over 50,000 population served directly from LHR. No I haven't been smoking anything, this destination, served from LHR is Cayman Islands, one of the key money laundering and tax haven centres in the world. There are not enough tax evaders in any UK region (outside of Greater London) to fill even a weekly flight to Cayman Islands so aggregating the many tax evaders that no doubt can be found in the City of London with those in other regions, bingo!, we have a hub destination served proudly from LHR. By the same token when LHR flights 25 times a day to NY it is not acting as a hub but as an hypercentralised oligopoly sucking the life out of the regions, whose passengers are then are forced to commute by road to LHR to go to such a mundane place as NY. I am not saying that there should be flights to NY from every airport in the UK, but there should be at least a reasonable amount in key regional hubs to serve the demand from their respective catchments, something currently not the case due to market failure or rather an oligopolistic situation.

Very often you hear the argument that LHR has two runways while Frankfurt and Amsterdam have four or five each. What a flawed argument that is. First of all if you add all the runways in and around London (LHR, LGW, Stansted, Luton, City) I count no less than six runways. That's more than any competitive aviation hub in Europe. Even if Frankfurt has more runways than LHR it is not the only hub in Germany, as Munich acts as a second hub, not least for Lufthansa that operates many long haul routes from both, and Berlin would be the third hub if the new Brandenburg airport had opened on time. Likewise Italy has two mini-hubs in Rome and Milan, Spain another two mid-sized hubs with Madrid and Barcelona. The only comparable sized European country that operates a single hub model is France, a country which is almost as centralised as the UK.

Finally, there are also other factors that are not taken into consideration in the delusions of grandeur of 'maintaining the status of the UK as a global aviation hub' (needless to say with a single hub model around LHR or its pipedream replacement on the Thames Estuary, the establishment has already decided that):

- The first one is that the centre of gravity of the global economy is shifting eastwards. The US and the UK used to be the twin centres of gravity of the global economy and hence it was and still very much is absolutely right that the UK should have by far the greatest number of connections to the US compared to any other airport in Europe. Geography, just as much as cultural and economic connections (the US is by far the largest FDI investor in the UK and the UK is by far the largest destination of US FDI), dictate that the UK is ideally located to serve as THE hub between Europe and North America. But then as the centre of gravity for the global economy shifts eastwards and southwards, the idea that London should still serve as a hub from Europe to emerging economies in the far East and the South (Brazil, LatAm and Africa) is just laughable. First with these emerging markets the UK no longer has the monopoly of historical, cultural and economic connections: France and even Belgium, for example, have far more historical connections with North, West and Central Africa and greater diasporas of these origins, while Spain, Italy and Portugal have more cultural, economic and historical connections to Brazil, Latin America and Northern Africa, with the Netherlands having more historical connections with Indonesia and in almost every single case, if not in every case, not only each of these countries mentioned have more flights than LHR to their respective areas of cultural, historical and/or economic influence - be it France with West and North Africa and Vietnam, Spain with Latin America and the Spanish speaking Caribbean, Portugal with Brazil, Angola and Mozambique, Germany with China, Italy with the horn of Africa and parts of Latin America, Netherlands with Indonesia, etc. but they are also far better geographically located to serve these connections than the UK

- The second one is that the UK is the only EU member country that has rejected to join the EU no-internal-borders space, aka Schengen, in turn forcing Ireland to follow suit. This alone means that many emerging market citizens which require both a UK and EU visa (aka Schengen visa), understandably choose to apply, pay and go through the hassle of obtaining JUST one of these two visas, and this is logically the one that allows them access to 26 countries on a single visa, leaving the UK status as 'natural gateway' to Europe as something in serious danger of obsolescence. This situation alone could go some way to explain why Paris, Amsterdam, Frankfurt and Milan combined have far more connections and frequencies to China and Russia than LHR.

In summary we have a situation where LHR is full, yet it finds the space to send direct flights to Cayman Islands, Gibraltar plus a wide network of tax havens, it has the room to fly 13 times a day to Madrid, a key 'emerging market' destination if ever there was one, with aircraft usually only half full, it has also the room to fly 200 (BA) flights to Paris and 143 to Brussels (don't tell me many of these are connecting passengers as it is far easier for anyone flying from Brussels to connect via Paris or Frankfurt, depending on the direction of their destination, and needless to say there are more than enough hub connections from Paris to fill a lifetime of long haul travel, so if LHR was so short of space a good number of these 340+ flights a week could be easily transferred to Eurostar or other London airports), we have a situation where LHR has a virtual monopoly of long haul destinations in the UK, forcing passengers like me to commute to or connect via LHR (or even worse Brighton Gatwick aka LGW, if your destination happens to be Jamaica) for destinations for which there is enough local demand from Birmingham or Manchester, for example, if the flight availability was there, yet with all this situation we get an Airport Commission that has an emerging thinking: **WE PROPOSE MORE OF THE SAME BASED ON OUR LONDON-CENTRIC 'THINKING'.**

Yours sincerely