

SO CLOSE, BUT SO FAR? THE DAVIES COMMISSION AND THE CONTESTED POLITICS OF UK AIRPORT EXPANSION

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After the temporary and uneasy interlude that followed the Coalition government's moratorium on airport expansion in the South East of England in 2010, the third runway at Heathrow airport is firmly back on the political agenda under the May government. In October 2016, any lingering doubts about the policy reversal within the Conservative Party were put to rest by the public declaration of support to expand the London hub airport. Indeed, despite opposition from within the Cabinet and amongst senior Conservative MPs, it is tempting to conclude that the 'wicked issue' of aviation policy is back where it started in the early 2000s, or at least back to the dying days of the Brown government, when it belatedly decided to support expansion in late 2009. At least for Heathrow airport, the construction of a third runway is deemed to be compatible with the delivery of 'carbon neutral' growth in flights and passenger numbers.¹ At the same time, 'have your cake and eat it' policy narratives extolling the virtues of 'sustainable aviation' are back stalking the corridors of

Westminster, while demands to address aviation's rising carbon emissions have been side-lined by the supposed benefits of international carbon trading mechanisms (this time in the shape of CORSIA, which is the highly contested global carbon offsetting scheme for air travel that will come into full operation in 2027).

Arguably, following the work of the Airports Commission and the Brexit referendum, and at least in some government circles, the issue of aviation policy is now seen through a post-sustainable lens; issues of sustainability and climate change are thus relativized to other equally pressing goals, such as economic growth and enhanced international connectivity. In other words, it inhabits a post-Brexit world in which aviation expansion goes hand in glove with aspirations of a global Britain that can trade in new and emerging markets. At the same time, the future of Heathrow, London's international hub, is once more bound to the fate of the capital city and the rest of the country. In short, although Theresa May was previously a vocal opponent of expansion, the resignation of Cameron, the increasing political salience of new trading roles and connections for the UK in post-Brexit scenarios, and May's own short-term political need for a 'strong' symbolic decision to cement her premiership, all came together to re-legitimise the building of the third runway at Heathrow.

Nonetheless, despite this shifting context, opposition to expansion remains. Local communities oppose noise and air pollution, whilst environmentalists continue to draw attention to rising carbon emissions, climate change, and the limits of global emissions trading. Local authorities in and around London are preparing to come together to oppose expansion. The same is true for local residents and communities, more of whom risk being affected by increasing levels of noise, deteriorating air

quality, and greater congestion, not to mention concerns about the destruction of property and adequate compensation.² Of course, the government has sought to resolve the problem of noise and rebuild trust in the wake of accusations that successive governments have broken their promises about Heathrow expansion. In particular, it has put forward plans for an Independent Commission on Civil Aviation Noise (ICCAN), as well as a revamped consultative committee at Heathrow – Heathrow Community Engagement Board (HCEB). The latter is expected to be given greater powers and has already been endowed with a more high-profile leader in the person of Rachel Cerfontyne, former deputy chair of the Independent Police Complaints Commission.³

Yet the stark fact remains that a growing list of British governments has been unable to engineer a partial or temporary policy settlement in aviation. Indeed, there has been no new runway in the South East for over 70 years. So the question still remains: will the government get their expansion proposals to stick this time? This introduction offers an initial characterisation of the shifting political and policy contexts of UK aviation. We also set out the thematic concerns and conceptual architecture that are employed in the three papers collected together in this special collection on the Airports Commission and airport expansion and management. We begin with a brief conceptualization of aviation as a ‘wicked policy issue’.

AVIATION AS A WICKED POLICY ISSUE

It has become commonplace to characterize contemporary policy controversies as ‘wicked policy issues’, which are ‘immune’ to traditional ‘cures’ or the ‘messy

solutions' of often contradictory policy instruments. Of course, it is often suggested that all policy issues are in some ways 'intractable' or 'stubborn', all too readily shoved in the 'too difficult box'.⁴ After all, the work of politics is mostly devoted to the generation of pragmatic, second-best solutions that might improve the plight of some of the people some of the time.⁵ Putting such realities to one side for a moment, we begin by conceptualizing aviation as a wicked policy issue, thus foregrounding the fundamental challenges facing any British government in reaching a temporary settlement in the domain of airport expansion.

In the first place, drawing upon the seminal definition of wicked issues by Rittel and Webber, the cluster of problems posed by flying can neither be readily formulated nor easily agreed upon.⁶ In the 1960s, the question of aviation was mainly linked to issues about conservation and the quality of life of those directly affected by its rapid growth, while in the 2000s increasing concerns about its impacts on climate change, social justice and global inequalities were added to the list. One consequence of these developments is that it has become increasingly difficult to constrain aviation policy to its traditional domain of connectivity, economic growth and social progress. At the same time, the underlying assumptions of the 'predict and provide' model, whereby growing passenger numbers were taken as a sign of progress, so that the central task of any government was to provide sufficient capacity for aviation expansion, no longer holds (if it ever did). Forecasting for growth - or starting from the premise of expansion - only gets a partial grip on the slippery problem that is now aviation. In short, as the domain of aviation policy has become more complex, and as its boundaries become more blurred, so too has the capacity of policymakers to tame the

unpredictable interdependencies between air travel and other social and political practices.

The upshot of aviation as a wicked policy problem is that it has given birth to rival constructions of the problem, including airport capacity, aviation noise, air pollution, climate change, uneven economic and regional development, airspace management, social mobility, or global connectivity. By their very nature, such issues spill over into rival arenas, exposing complicated and unpredictable patterns of interdependency. For example, tackling aircraft noise will at some point impact upon efforts to reduce carbon emissions levels, while developing new hybrid or electric planes to offset carbon emissions will potentially increase noise as new structures are added to planes to reduce approach speeds. Aviation planning and expansion at Heathrow are also intertwined with the spatial management of economic infrastructure in the South-East of England and the dilemmas of uneven economic development across the UK. Equally, the practice of regulating aviation has, in the words of Rittel and Webber, ‘no stopping rule’. Practices and outcomes of noise management, environmental efficiency, air quality, or airspace navigation can always be improved, while other dimensions of the problems suddenly come to light, so there is never a completely optimal solution and unforeseen consequences abound.

FRAMING MATTERS: BRACKETING OUT ISSUES

Within this thicket of disputed problems and solutions, different policy frames or ways of seeing aviation matter. Indeed, different ways of viewing the ‘problem-solution’ dynamic in aviation are intrinsically tied to competing frames or narratives

of air travel; in recent years these are typified by policy dichotomies that pit economic growth and expanding connectivity, on the one hand, against protecting the environment and ensuring a good quality of life for those directly and indirectly affected on the other. Each frame pictures the issue differently, while bringing forward its own particular forms of expertise, models and languages. This is not simply a disagreement over the ‘facts of aviation - for example, the decibel level at which aviation noise becomes a nuisance or what levels of mitigation are appropriate to compensate airport communities – as rival frames construct or bring into being different images, values and norms. Different actors or groups thus come to ‘understand’ aviation differently, often ‘seeing’ the practices of air travel through incommensurate values or lenses. The result is that policy becomes trapped in a series of stalemates, as different actors ‘often argue past each other, disagreeing even over what comprise the “facts” of the situation’.⁷

As the articles gathered together in this collection demonstrate, narratives of aviation success have been long embedded in the British state. The rhetoric of the Airports Commission is a good example of this. The opening statement of the executive summary of its final report reiterated the claim that ‘the position of the UK within the global aviation market is critical to its economy’. Advancing arguments to support ‘the case for change’, the final report reactivated and repeated deeply sedimented claims about the importance of leisure flights and connectivity to the productivity and growth of the British economy; the need for hub capacity to ensure improved long-haul routes to emerging markets; fears over the falling competitiveness of London as a global city; the pressures on airport capacity in the South East; and the impact of capacity constraints on fares and the rise of international competitors.⁸

Set against these economic benefits, the failure of government to act to address capacity constraint would, in the eyes of the Commission, be ‘short-sighted and perilous’.⁹ The Commission thus repeated the rhetoric of economic risk and overloaded airport capacity, which is inscribed in countless white papers, ministerial statements and policy briefings. Indeed, it invoked the fear of economic decline and reduced mobility, which has hung like the Sword of Damocles over the heads of the British public throughout the post-war regime of aviation expansion. The latter had been predicated on a utilitarian logic of ‘predict and provide’, paying little attention to the overall pattern of expansion or wider environmental concerns.¹⁰

Empirical evidence suggests that once actors invest in a particular frame, it tends to ‘stick’, thus serving to constantly re-construct their interactions and dialogues with others. Over time, the function of each policy frame is to bracket out different dimensions of the wicked issue of aviation expansion. Indeed, frames are inherently political, as they exclude particular discourses and arguments, while foregrounding others. In fact, the very existence of a rival frame is one of the conditions for a frame’s existence: what organizes and sustains one group of actors’ investments in a way of seeing is the opposition of a rival frame.

FRAGMENTED GOVERNANCE AND THE ABSENCE OF GATEKEEPERS

It is not surprising that the ongoing antagonisms and disputes in the field of aviation policy are reflected in their governance, which is increasingly pluralized, heterogeneous and entangled. Such fragmentation has been exacerbated by the logics

of liberalization and privatization that have shaped the aviation industry in the last thirty or so years, leading to the emergence of airport companies and a proliferation of new and different types of airlines. Such logics have been amplified by the integration of aviation into the European Union (and perhaps even its decoupling) in a field which has been highly internationalized. This has been the case ever since the signing of the Chicago Convention in 1944, which established the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), where the latter is the specialized organization of the United Nations that was given the task of coordinating the global regulation of international air travel.

Yet, even domestically, it is difficult to navigate the interlocking pattern of policy remits and confused lines of responsibility that characterize aviation policymaking. Even an issue like the management of aviation noise cannot escape the ‘thorny’ issue of boundary and jurisdictional disputes between different (and at times contending) parts and levels of government, not least the Civil Aviation Authority, the Department for Transport and, indeed, the individual airports themselves. Such confused responsibilities often serve to fuel ‘blame game’ strategies, in which politicians, ministries, public agencies and indeed companies seek to re-assign appropriate responsibilities, jurisdictions, functions and competences on to rival actors.

This governance patchwork has repeatedly begged questions about the overall political leadership and direction of aviation policy. In the early 2000s, these criticisms were in many ways answered by New Labour in its attempts to create a national dialogue on aviation. It engaged multiple stakeholders in a consultation

designed to generate a policy settlement that would set out plans for aviation expansion for thirty years. This effort to bring about a form of collaborative policymaking targeted the piecemeal and fragmented decision-making over individual airports, which had allegedly hampered aviation expansion in the 1980s and 1990s. In practice, it merely amplified the conflicts and antagonisms over airport expansion, paving the way for the Coalition's moratorium on aviation expansion in the South-East. Yet Cameron's commitment to oppose expansion was only a precarious interlude, as supporters of expansion, who vociferously advocated the need for the UK to maintain a global hub airport, which would connect the UK to emergent markets, pursued an intense media-driven campaign to put expansion back on the agenda. Political leadership was once again seen to be caught between competing coalitions and rival demands. The upshot was that in the summer of 2012 the solution that emerged was to try and remove aviation from the political domain by transferring responsibility to the depoliticised arena of expert governance in the form of the Airports Commission. Demands for political direction had paradoxically led the government to absolve itself of responsibility.

DEPOLITICISATION: YOU CAN'T GET RID OF POLITICS

Vigorous debate about the concept of depoliticization – that is, endeavours to remove the sting of politics from a particular issue or practice through various means – has emerged in recent discussions of statecraft, governance and policy-making.¹¹ As we note above, the notion has also been used by actors engaged in the current endeavours to reach an acceptable settlement about UK aviation. Indeed, the government's turn to

the Airports commission – an expert committee that would have the time and space to reach a considered conclusion – can be seen as an explicit attempt to remove the issue from the hurly-burly of partisan politics, so that a more technocratic and reason-based solution could be reached. Yet, in dealing with wicked policy issues, it is often difficult, if not impossible, to circumvent the problem and thus reach a rational and acceptable answer. Depoliticization (by definition) presupposes prior and concurrent processes of politicization, and strategies of depoliticization can often re-politicize the issues that are addressed. Logics of depoliticization are thus at best often only temporary solutions to a dilemma or at worst displacements of problems.

Seen in this light, the Airports Commission promised to take the politics out of aviation policy. As it was widely noted in September 2012, when the Commission was established, the Cameron government had decided to delegate to its ‘independent’ commissioners, led by Sir Howard Davies, the task of delivering a workable and binding evidence-driven settlement, which could guide airports policy for the next 20 or 30 years. Of particular concern in this regard was the desire to tackle the problem of noise. The Commission thus reiterated its support, first voiced in its 2013 interim report, for an independent aviation noise authority to ‘act as an impartial source of expertise and advice’. And it supplemented this appeal to use impartial and independent expertise, which could function above and beyond the realm of politics, with a proposal to create a Community Engagement Board. Based on existing arrangements at Frankfurt and Schiphol airports, which had earlier been advocated by the Civil Aviation Authority¹², this board would act as a ‘trusted repository of information’. It is plausible to argue that this proposal was part of a broader strategy to reframe community opposition to aviation noise, not in terms of concrete demands

against the impact of noise on quality of life, but as a problem about the lack of trust in public decision-making. Indeed, in seeking to move such issues out of the political domain, the Commission voiced its continued concerns that the existing arrangements for airspace changes left final decisions with the Secretary of State; it thus exposed them to the risk of ‘being politicised’, which could in turn ‘risk delay or, at the extreme, failure’.¹³

However, as the papers in this volume suggest, the much sought after depoliticisation of the issue has not been accomplished. At the same time, the government’s and the Commission’s technocratic strategy of allowing impartial experts to intervene and settle the problem has been found wanting. The Conservative government welcomed the publication of the final report of the Airports Commission in July 2015. Expansion at Heathrow was to be accompanied by a package of mitigation measures including a ban on night flights; a legally-binding noise envelope; and the creation of an independent aviation noise authority and community engagement board. Importantly, expansion at the London hub was made dependent on being able to meet European Union (EU) air quality limits, whilst a fourth runway was ruled out once and for all. Yet, almost six months after the publication of the Airport Commission’s final report, the Cameron government, whilst reaffirming its support for a new runway in the South-East, announced that it had yet to decide its preferred scheme for additional capacity. Paradoxically, after two years of investigations by the Commission, it called for further evidence and analysis of the environmental impacts of expansion on air quality. Now arguing that the decision had to be ‘right’, the Secretary of State for Transport pushed back any decision until the summer of 2016; arguably the time of the Airports Commission had been and gone.

CONCLUSIONS: WILL HEATHROW EXPANSION GET OFF THE GROUND THIS TIME?

It is axiomatic that the task of tackling the ‘wicked issue’ of airport expansion was never going to be straightforward for UK governments. Howard Davies himself recounts how he and his fellow commissioners had received ‘more commiserations than congratulations’ when appointed to the Airports Commission, noting that commentators were keen to describe the Commission as the ‘latest in a long series of so far largely fruitless attempts to grapple with the problem of airport capacity in a densely populated island.’¹⁴ So, after over two years of investigation by the Commission, and after nearly three further years of deliberating and weighing-up of its findings by government, how much further along the runway are we in addressing this ‘wicked issue’ of aviation expansion?

Following a revised draft of the National Airports Aviation Strategy in October 2017, and then a report of the transport select committee in March 2018, the key focus of the current phase of UK aviation policy is the publication of the final NPS. In certain respects, therefore, we are back where we started in 2003. However, the focus of discussion has been narrowed (more or less) to the case for Heathrow expansion, and the conditions that should be satisfied if a third runway is given the green light, even if Gatwick is still theoretically on the map.

Of course, politics is always in flux and fraught with unpredictable events. Yet there are some general lessons that we can learn from the experience of the Airports Commission and the cycle of policymaking that has unfolded since the 2010

moratorium. The three articles in this collection examine how we got here and what are the likely outcomes of the current ‘resolution’ to the wicked issue of aviation policy. This collection of papers also casts further light on this episode of ‘stalled’ policymaking and the failure of successive governments to engineer a partial or temporary settlement in aviation policy. In this introduction, we have provided an initial contextualisation and characterisation of the final report of the Davies Commission, clarifying its logic and its attempt to bring about a settlement. This analysis is then extended in the first paper of the collection by Griggs and Howarth. The other two papers deepen the contextualization of the Heathrow case in two directions. Tim Marshall provides a vital context for understanding and evaluating the Heathrow case by exploring the changing character and form of the planning process in the UK. Rob Freestone and Doug Baker extend this contextualization and analysis by situating the dilemmas of the Heathrow case, especially the problem of noise for those residents surrounding the hub airport, in relation to the differences and similarities of the debate about noise at Sydney airport in Australia. This context is particularly relevant, because the Sydney model (as well as Paris) has been discussed as a potential way of dealing with the problem of noise at Heathrow.

NOTES

¹ Heathrow Airport (2017) *Heathrow 2.0*, London: Heathrow Airport Holdings Limited, available at your.heathrow.com/sustainability/ accessed 20 April 2018.

² *The Guardian*, 09 April 2018; House of Commons Transport Select Committee (2018) *Airports National Policy Statement, H548*, available at

publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmtrans/548/54802.htm accessed 20 April 2018.

³ For details of the Heathrow Community Engagement Board, see www.hceb.org.uk/ accessed 20 April 2018.

⁴ Clarke, C. (ed.) (2014) *The Too Difficult Box. The Big Issues Politicians Can't Crack*, London: Biteback Publishing.

⁵ Bang, H.P. (2013) 'It's the Politicians' Fault': *Depoliticisation as Dehumanization of Politicians*, paper presented to the Political Studies Association annual conference, Cardiff, 24-26 March, p.17.

⁶ Rittel H.W.J and Webber, M.M. (1973) 'Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning', *Policy Sciences* 4(2): 155-69.

⁷ van Hulst, M. and Yanow. D. (2016) 'From Policy "Frames" to "Framing"', *American Review of Public Administration*, 46(1), p. 95.

⁸ Airports Commission (2015) *Airports Commission: Final Report*, July, London: Airports Commission, p.9 and pp 69-81.

⁹ Airports Commission (2015), *Final Report*, p. 17

¹⁰ Griggs, S. and Howarth, D. (2013) *The Politics of Airport Expansion in the United Kingdom*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

¹¹ For a discussion of strategies of depoliticisation, see Flinders, M. and Wood, M. (eds.) (2014) 'Depoliticisation, Governance and the State', special issue *Policy & Politics*, 42(2); Fawcett, P., Flinders, M., Hay, C. and Wood, M. (eds.) (2017) *Anti-Politics, Depoliticisation and Governance*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Buller, J., Donmez, P., Standring, A. and Wood, M. (eds.) (2018) *The Dynamics of Depoliticisation in Comparative Perspective*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹² Civil Aviation Authority (2014) *Managing Aviation Noise. CAP 1165*, London:
CAA.

¹³ See the Airports Commission, *Final Report*, p. 235, p. 303 and p. 205 respectively.

¹⁴ Airports Commission (2013) *Airports Commission: Interim Report*, London:
Airports Commission.