

THE ROSKILL COMMISSION – USING COST–BENEFIT ANALYSIS FOR PUBLIC POLICY

The main point about London's third airport is that, like Thurber's unicorn, it does not exist. True, scattered across the face of England are no less than seventy-eight sites once considered in 1970 by a government commission of inquiry for the role. One, Cublington in Buckinghamshire, was the final choice of all but one of its members. Another, Maplin on the North Sea coast of Essex, was resolutely supported by that last member and was finally picked by the Government of the day, in 1971. Yet another, dropped by the commission after only seven months' work, had been proposed by an expert committee and then accepted by the government, in 1967, before public outcry forced a reversal.

(Hall, 1980, p. 15)

Background

The need for additional air transport capacity to serve London and the South East had been recognized since the early 1940s, when it was apparent that the then major airport at Croydon could not expand to meet demand owing to proximate suburban development. The decision was taken to develop an existing site at Heath Row used by Fairey Aviation, and in 1946 Heathrow officially opened as London Airport. By the late 1940s, however, traffic had built up at Heathrow to such an extent that the government began to contemplate a further development to relieve it of pressure during peak periods. Gatwick, one of two main candidates, the other being Stansted in Essex, was selected as the second airport, with Blackbushe in Hampshire acting as a reserve.

The growth in air traffic continued throughout the 1950s, and by the early 1960s the question of a possible third London airport began to emerge, first through a House of Commons subcommittee and then an interdepartmental committee in 1961. The interdepartmental committee set out to consider the requirements for a third airport, including timing and location. This committee, as pointed out by Hall (1980), had what might be considered a biased structure, with only one member out of fifteen representing the planning division of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government. The other 14 members represented various aviation interests from within government. The committee calculated that demand at both Heathrow and Gatwick, when considered together, would exceed capacity from about 1973. The committee, not unsurprisingly, decided that there was a need for a new airport and that by 1980 this new airport would require two runways. After considering issues such as air traffic control constraints and ground access the committee finally decided that Stansted, although not perfect, was the

preferred site. Subsequent passenger figures showed, however, that Heathrow and Gatwick did not run out of capacity, as both exceeded the forecast figures substantially in 1976, mainly as a result of the technological improvements in airplanes. Quite simply, they were bigger and carried more passengers than the committee had allowed for in their original forecasts.

In December 1965, although it was not legally required to do so, the government of the day established a public inquiry into the development of Stansted. The inquiry ended in February 1966 and a report presented to the President of the Board of Trade in May of that year. When published, a year later, the report concluded that Stansted was only suitable as a location on the grounds of air traffic control; on others such as planning, access, noise, amenity and agriculture it fell down. The inspector felt that the only real justification for siting the airport at Stansted would be for national necessity, but this had not been proven by the evidence in his view.

Resisting the idea of an independent commission, the government set in train another government review – it felt that a decision was required urgently and that all the salient ‘facts’ had been fully explored previously and so a new inquiry was unnecessary. Whilst the review reassessed capacity figures, using different forecasts and taking into account technological advances such as the new Boeing 747s, it reaffirmed that a new airport was still needed. After considering a series of sites north, east and west of London the resultant White Paper concluded that Stansted was still the preferred option. The publication of the White Paper created a public outcry, and challenges to the technical judgements and constitutional issues mounted. This, aligned with a change in ministerial responsibilities, a call for a new inquiry by the Council on Tribunals, and a highly critical debate in the House of Lords, finally led the Cabinet to reverse its earlier decisions and announce a new independent inquiry in February 1968. The final report was published in 1971.

The inquiry

On 22 February 1968 the then President of the Board of Trade announced in Parliament that he proposed to establish a commission to objectively re-examine the choice of Stansted in light of the anxieties expressed both within and outside of Parliament. The appointment of the commission, its terms of reference and Chairmen were announced on 20 May 1968. The terms of reference were

To enquire into the timing of the need for a four-runway airport to cater for the growth of traffic at existing airports serving the London area, to consider the various alternative sites, and to recommend which site should be selected.

(Quoted in Fordham, 1970)

The President of the Board of Trade at the time of instigation was Anthony Crosland, and it is not unreasonable to consider that his concerns with

environmental quality and systematic economic evaluation using cost–benefit analysis may have had some influence on the direction of the new inquiry (Hall, 1980). Indeed, in the Foreword to the *Papers and Proceedings Volume VII* its author, the Hon. Mr Justice Roskill, stated that

Stage III of the Commission’s work consists of investigation and research into matters relevant to the choice to be made between the short list sites. When the Government appointed the Commission in 1968 it drew attention to those matters which were thought particularly relevant. Included among these was the need for a cost/benefit analysis.

(HMSO, 1970, p. 3)

The Commission understood that there were problems associated with such an approach, especially with regard to valuing factors where a market does not readily exist, for example the effect of noise. To overcome this the research team used substitute measures rather than accept that some features are unquantifiable, as the team believed that doing so would weaken the analysis. Whilst the commission noted the difficulty of placing monetary values on all the relevant factors under consideration, it felt that

... It [cost–benefit analysis] seeks so far as it can to assist in bringing all problems into their proper perspective. It provides a logical framework within which to assess all the effects flowing from a particular investment or planning decision. It tries to ensure that decisions are taken on the basis of people’s individual values and choices as revealed by their behaviour rather than on the basis of the decision maker’s own preferences or standards or of those of vociferous and politically powerful groups.

(HMSO, 1971, p. 12)

An initial list of 78 sites, generated without specifying criteria for selection, was reduced to an intermediate list of 29 by considering costs of surface access, defence and noise issues. This list was then further refined by considering the cost of additional factors such as air traffic control, site preparation and land take. The four sites shortlisted for consideration were Cublington (Buckinghamshire), Foulness (Essex), Nuthampstead (Hertfordshire) and Thurleigh (Bedfordshire). This final list, however, was not solely the result of the cost analysis, as on this method alone it would have included Silverstone (Northamptonshire) and Hockliffe (Bedfordshire), and Foulness would have been omitted. To arrive at the final list the commission took into account regional planning issues – an introduction of subjective criteria at an early stage. Once the list had been decided upon the Commission’s research team then applied its cost–benefit method to enable the Commission to explore the *comparative merits* of the sites. What it did not do was an exhaustive cost–benefit analysis of each site; it was not interested in whether benefits outweighed costs at any particular site. Rather, the Commission was interested in a means of distinguishing between the chosen sites by concentrating on ‘significant inter-site differences and not on defining the totals of all the factors considered’ (HMSO, 1971, p. 118).

An example of how much detail the research team went into can be gleaned from Volume VII Part 2 of the Commission's *Papers and Proceedings*. For example, Chapter 11 details the analysis of surface transport and air movement cost parameters, i.e. the costs, benefits and disbenefits associated with travel. To arrive at their figures the team considered the following factors.

For surface transport:

- value of working time – a value placed on the loss of work due to travel to and from an airport;
- value of leisure time – a value placed on the loss of leisure time due to travel to and from an airport;
- value of time for air passengers – the average incomes for business and leisure travellers;
- value of business travellers' time – the average income plus costs borne by the employer;
- value of leisure passengers' time – based on 25% of gross salary expressed as an hourly rate;
- value of accompanying persons' time – using the Ministry of Transport's national figures for adults and children;
- value of paid drivers' time – derived from the wage rate for Civil Service car drivers plus employer overhead costs;
- increase in the value of time over time – calculated at 3% for leisure users and 3.25% for business travellers;
- vehicle operating costs – calculated for cars, light goods and other goods vehicles;
- public transport operating costs – a calculation of the marginal cost per mile of using the railway;
- vehicle occupancy and accompanying persons – a standard figure including air passengers, paid drivers and other accompanying passengers;
- accompanying persons on public transport – assumed to be 10% of air passengers using public transport;
- coach occupancy – a figure for the number of persons per coach;
- occupancy of servicing vehicles – using Ministry of Transport standard data for business cars, light goods vehicles and other goods vehicles;
- composite evaluation costs – the cost per mile and per minute calculated for business and leisure passengers when using rail and/or road;
- composite behavioural costs – similar to evaluation costs but allowing for the assumed perception of costs associated with travel.

For air movement:

- passengers' time – including taxiing, waiting to take off, flying, and waiting to land;
- crew costs – flight deck and cabin crew costs calculated for different aircraft types;

- fuel costs – based on net cost and calculated for different aircraft types;
- engineering costs – including flight, landing, regular maintenance and overheads;
- aircraft standing costs – including interest payments, insurance and depreciation calculated for different aircraft types flying three route categories;
- fare differences between airports – to allow for traveller preference should this be marked between airports.

In total, the final cost–benefit analysis comprised 20 different factors for consideration (see Table 16 below). Whether the Commission chose the most suitable method and parameters is open to some debate, as graphically evidenced in the final report by a note of dissent by Professor Colin Buchanan, and this was recognized by the Commission:

Informed judgement is required at every stage. For example, the choice between the rival views on the value of time – each view argued by experts on the basis of evidence or deduction and each view strongly held by its exponents – in the end has to be a matter of judgement.

(HMSO, 1971, p. 11)

However, the Commission was prepared to defend the use of the parameters chosen. For example, with reference to the valuation of time the Commission stated:

The values to be attached to travel time must remain uncertain but there are no conclusive grounds for thinking that the values assumed by the Research Team were either too high or too low. They are likely to be of the right order of magnitude. We finally adopted ‘high’ and ‘low’ values for time to reflect our general uncertainty about the reliability of our best estimate. The range of values adopted in the revised cost/benefit study is likely to include the correct value.

(HMSO, 1971, p. 229)

The final recommendation was not based solely on the outcome of the cost–benefit analysis. In its final report the Commission also made site comparisons based on planning, noise, aviation issues, airport design and construction, surface access, and defence issues. The question for some, including Professor Buchanan, was whether undue weight was given to cost–benefit analysis. The Commission rejected this notion, stating in the Final Report that ‘No single factor can dictate an answer’ (HMSO, 1971, p. 130). A more detailed rebuttal of Professor Buchanan’s objections were provided for in Sections 13.62–13.67 of the same report.

Now read the extract below, taken from Peter Hall’s book *Great Planning Disasters*. Whilst the Commission set out to consider the question of a third London airport in an unbiased and dispassionate manner, how they arrived at their decision may not have been so clinical.

London's Third Airport

Peter Hall

Great Planning Disasters, Penguin, 1980, Chapter 2, pp. 29–38

The inquiry by the Commission on the Third London Airport, under the chairmanship of the Hon. Mr Justice Roskill, was surely the most exhaustive of its kind ever held, and perhaps ever likely to be held. (Indeed, for sheer scale only the Greater London Development Plan, shortly afterwards, would begin to compete.) It took over two and a half years, from May 1968 to December 1970, and cost over £1,000,000 in direct costs plus an unknown amount spent by those who appeared at it. However, what distinguished it was not merely its scale, but, even more, its method. Even its most severe critics (such as Professor Peter Self) had to admit that it was a model of its kind.¹⁷ It represents a high-water mark of a certain kind of rational comprehensive planning based on the attempt to qualify. So it is particularly interesting to look at the methodology, to help understand both why the commission reached the conclusion it did, and why then the government rejected a large part of it.

The commission started by drawing up a short list of sites for comparison. In this it was determined to keep a completely open mind – unfettered, as it said in its final report, by the past. It started with a long list of seventy-eight sites, and within seven months it had narrowed the choice down to four, upon which the whole of the rest of the work was concentrated. These were Thurleigh near Bedford, Cublington in Buckinghamshire, Nuthampstead in northern Hertfordshire, and Foulness, or, as it later became known, Maplin. Conspicuously, Stansted was missing, and in its final report the commission explained why. It was inferior to Nuthampstead, a site about ten miles to the north-west, in terms of air traffic control, of noise impact on urban areas, and of surface access. Therefore, logically, it had to go. On Foulness, however, the commission finally admitted a failure of logic: it ranked best on noise, defence and air traffic control, but it was expensive to prepare and it involved very high surface-access costs. So it finally went in, though overall it ranked thirteenth out of fifteen: four places, ironically, behind Stansted. The reason was that it seemed to offer a particularly novel solution, and the commission thought it should be tested.

Logically, as with all previous (and subsequent) inquiries, the Roskill Commission had to look at the timing of the need. Here, some argued that they were constrained by their terms of reference, which asked them to 'inquire into the timing of the need for a four-runway airport to cater for the growth of traffic at existing airports serving the London area'. In other words, these critics argued, they were precluded from looking at the national airports policy and the possibility of large-scale diversion to provincial airports. But, in view of the fact that the commission's subsequent traffic model ranged as far as Manchester, this is perhaps hardly fair. Impressed from the start by the

weaknesses of earlier forecasting efforts, the commission asked its research staff to make their own, as well as using those of the British Airports Authority, the Civil Aviation Authority and others. It had a problem with Gatwick, where it had to make alternative assumptions – one with a second runway, one without it. It concluded that there was no reason to open a third airport before traffic growth made it necessary, and it assumed that there would be no artificial control over the growth of traffic at Heathrow or Gatwick (apart from the runway decision at the latter). It concluded also that Heathrow, Gatwick with one runway, Stansted and Luton could together accommodate about 475,000 air movements by the end of the 1970s, and on balance it thought that this figure would be exceeded by demand in 1980 or 1981. Significantly, in view of later events, it emphasized that expedients at existing airports would not greatly modify this: even a second Gatwick runway would postpone the need for the new airport by about two years.¹⁸

Roskill's forecasts of demand and capacity are set out in Tables 14 and 15, where they can be compared with earlier and later estimates. In so far as direct comparison is possible, they show a distinct increase on earlier forecasts in both passenger numbers and air traffic movements. But on the other hand they also posit a bigger ultimate capacity both at Heathrow, and, especially, at Gatwick (which was the more remarkable as this assumed only one runway against two earlier). So the total effect is to put back the date of opening of the third airport from the early to mid-1970s, as commonly assumed in earlier studies, to the start of the 1980s.

These basic studies done, the commission could concentrate on its main task of comparison and evaluation of the four sites. This was done on a far more elaborate scale than ever previously considered. The aim from the start was to quantify advantages and disadvantages by the use of cost–benefit analysis, then a relatively new tool in planning, which had been used with some success for new roads and new public transport facilities such as London's Underground Victoria Line. The commission decided to use the method because it saw no other way of avoiding arbitrary and subjective judgements.

This analysis was without doubt the largest and most complex of its kind ever attempted anywhere. For it involved not merely computing some of the principal direct impacts of the airport (on capital costs or travellers' time, for instance), but also estimating indirect impacts, such as urban development and its effects on agricultural land. For this last aspect, indeed, special subconsultants had to be employed to produce what were in effect subregional plans of the area around each of the four short-listed sites. These, together with the overall cost–benefit analysis by the commission's research team, were first published early in 1970 and were subject to extraordinarily detailed critical examination in the fifth and final stage of the commission's work, the public hearings in the spring and summer of 1970. Modified, but only in detail, they provided the essential basis of the commission's final evaluation. They are expressed in terms of differences in

costs as compared with the cheapest site, for, as the commission argued in its final report, in an inter-site comparison the absolute money values are irrelevant. Overall, Cublington emerged as the best site from the analysis, so the other three sites were compared with it. Thurleigh, the next best, was £68,000,000 to £88,000,000 more expensive to the community, in terms of 1982 values. Nuthampstead, the next best, was £128,000,000–£137,000,000 dearer than Cublington. And the most expensive of all was Foulness, which was between £156,000,000 and £197,000,000 more costly than Cublington in real resource terms to the community (Table 16).

Table 14 London airports: Traffic forecasts 1963–79

		1965	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990
(1) Air traffic movements (000s)							
Inter-dept. Committee 1963		210	279	?	?	?	?
White Paper 1967	Lower		277	327	327	?	?
	Middle	221	283	353	430	?	?
	Upper		302	402	525	?	?
Roskill Commission 1971		225	347	392	470	545	?
Maplin Review 1973 (No Tunnel)	Low						340
	Assessment	225	347				450
	High						565
Consultation documents 1975	Low						?
	High						580
White Paper 1978							?
(2) Passengers (Mill.)							
Inter-dept. Committee 1963		11.4	17.4	?	?	?	?
White Paper 1967	Lower		18.4	25.6	33.0	?	?
	Middle	11.9	19.3	29.6	43.6	?	?
	Upper		21.7	37.8	63.7	?	?
Roskill Commission 1971		12.7	22.0	36.1	56.6*	82.7	
Maplin Review 1974 (No Tunnel)	Low					58.1*	78.3
	Assessment	12.7	22.0			62.0*	85.0
	High					75.8*	114.5

Table 14 (continued)

		1965	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990
(2) Passengers (Mill.)							
Consultation documents 1975	Low	12.7	22.0		33.9*	47.7*	67.0
	High				46.2*	72.8*	106.6
White Paper 1978	Low	12.7	22.0	28.8	36.7	51.1	65.9
	High				41.9	63.5	89.4

Sources: Documents listed * Interpolated

Table 16 makes it clear that the differences are dominated by a few items. By far the most important of these is passenger user costs, which, for instance, represent £167,000,000 to £207,000,000 of the difference between Cublington and Foulness, or more than the overall difference (meaning that on other aspects, Foulness was on balance better than Cublington). Because of this, the commission's research team had performed elaborate exercises to see what would happen if certain critical assumptions, particularly on the value of time, were changed. It was argued, for instance, that leisure travellers put a very low (or nil) valuation on their time, and that this should be reflected in the analysis. The research team's sensitivity analysis showed that no amount of variation could alter the substantial differences between the sites, which reflected real differences in money costs and time valuation. Foulness emerged as the worst site overall fundamentally because it was the farthest from London (and from most of the rest of the population of England); conversely, Cublington emerged as best because it was well sited on the London–Birmingham axis. These access costs far outweighed differences in construction costs – where the most expensive site, Foulness on the drained Essex marshes, emerged as only £32,000,000 more expensive than Thurleigh, the cheapest on this criterion.

The cost–benefit analysis attracted an enormous volume of critical comment. One main line of argument was that it omitted some important items, either in whole or in part. The most important were planning considerations. Noise and agricultural land loss could be measured in money terms; the loss of landscape and rural amenity could also be measured, through house prices, but that would not allow for the losses to non-residents. Local employment benefits were similarly ignored. A second argument was that the valuations themselves were wrong, especially those concerning the value of time. The commission finally sought to deal with this by giving a range of values, from £1.46 to £2.58 an hour for business travel and from 11.5 p to 34.5 p an hour for leisure travel. There was also much argument about the valuation of

Table 15 London Airports: estimated capacity 1963–78

	Heathrow			Gatwick			London airport system without third airport		
	Air traffic movements 000	Passengers mill.	Saturation Date	Air traffic movements 000	Passengers mill.	Saturation Date	Air traffic movements 000	Passengers mill.	Saturation Date
Inter dept. Committee 1963		15 +	1971	?67	?3	1980	?315*	?20*	1973*
White Paper 1967	Lower	16.3	1970				354	30	1978
	Middle	15.7	1969		?6.6	1972–74	353	30	1975
	Upper	15.2	1968				359	30	1973
Roskill Commission 1971	314			110			478	61	1981
Maplin Review 1975	338	38–53		168	16–25		620	61–104	After 1990
Consultation documents 1975/6		38–53	1983–1990	168	16–25	1983–1990	590	50–104	1988–1990
White Paper 1978	275	38		160	25		555	72	1990 or after

Sources: Documents listed * Heathrow + Gatwick only

noise, which was made through house prices and compensation costs. Finally, there was criticism that the use of money in the analysis was itself distorting, because a sum of money meant different things to different people: £1 meant more to a poor person than to a rich one, so some form of weighting should be used. On this point the commission refused to produce a formula, declaring instead that this was yet another matter to be included in the final judgement.

In that judgement, therefore, the commission accepted that the cost–benefit analysis could never include all the factors relevant to the decision. But it could provide a framework within which all the evidence could be brought together and weighed. In fact, the final verdict of the majority of the commissioners could be fairly described as cost–benefit analysis modified by judgement. It involved weighing advantages and disadvantages, through a carefully balanced judgement process. The needs of the air traveller had to be balanced against the hardship and disadvantage to those living under the flight paths. Thus the commission deliberately refused to set planning considerations as some kind of absolute constraint.

This balanced judgement led the commission to dismiss Nuthampstead straight away: though it had good access and was cheap to construct, it was worst for noise and general planning considerations and it would mean substantial agricultural land losses. Foulness (the site the commission admitted was by far the most popular among witnesses) was good for airport services, air traffic control and (surprisingly, in view of the earlier arguments about the Shoeburyness ranges) defence. It was outstandingly good on the noise criterion but this would be cancelled out by extra traffic at Luton. On balance it was also good on planning grounds. But the commission also stressed that there were disadvantages here too: the destruction of wild life and coastline, as well as the danger of overcrowding in the southern peninsula, which the associated urban development would bring. Further, it would involve very heavy and disruptive provision of extra surface access to London. And not only would it lead to increased traffic at Luton, but because of its inaccessibility compared with the other sites it would lead to more traffic also at Manchester and Birmingham airports, with resulting environmental damage. The commission concluded that though Foulness had an advantage on planning grounds, it was by no means as big as many supposed. And this had to be weighed against its clear disadvantages: its high cost of construction, and above all its inaccessibility. Because it would attract less traffic than the other sites, there was a danger that it would never produce an adequate return on capital, and would thus be a liability to the taxpayer. However the reckoning was done, users of the airport would overall pay a heavy financial penalty.

Table 16 London Third Airport sites: summary cost/benefit analysis. Differences from lowest-cost site (£ million discounted to 1982)

	Cublington		Foulness		Nuthampstead		Thurleigh	
	High time values	Low time values	High time values	Low time values	High time values	Low time values	High time values	Low time values
1 Airport construction		18		32		14		0
2 Extension of Luton		0		18		0		0
3 Airport services	23	22	0	0	17	17	7	7
4 Meteorology		5		0		2		1
5 Airspace movements	0	0	7	5	35	31	30	26
6 Passenger user costs	0	0	207	167	41	35	39	22
7 Freight user costs		0		14		5		1
8 Road capital		0		4		4		5
9 Rail capital		3		26		12		0
10 Air safety		0		2		0		0
11 Defence		29		0		5		61
12 Public scientific establishments		1		0		21		27
13 Private airfields		7		0		13		15
14 Residential conditions (noise, off-site)		13		0		62		5
15 Residential conditions (on site)		11		0		8		6
16 Luton noise costs		0		11		0		0
17 Schools, hospitals and public authority buildings (including noise)		7		0		11		9
18 Agriculture		0		4		9		3
19 Commerce and industry (including noise)		0		2		1		2
20 Recreation (including noise)		13		0		7		7
Aggregate of inter-site differences (costed items only) high and low time values	0	0	197	156	137	128	88	68

Source: GB Commission on the Third London Airport, *Report*, p. 119

The commission majority therefore repeated its earlier argument:

A third London airport must be able to succeed as an airport. To this end, it must meet the needs of those whom it is designed to serve. But it could succeed as an airport and yet fail in some wider social purpose. This in essence is the case made against an airport at Cublington or Thurleigh. Unfortunately the converse is not equally true. An airport cannot serve any social purpose unless it first succeeds as an airport.¹⁹

Because there was too great a danger that Foulness would fail as an airport, the commission rejected it. It was therefore left with Cublington and Thurleigh, two inland sites with finely balanced advantages and disadvantages. They found that Cublington was better for access and for defence. It was rather worse for planning and environment, though both imposed a burden on those living in their local areas. Cublington made a smaller claim on the nation's resources; it also offered a better prospect of reducing the noise burden around Heathrow. Therefore, despite the undoubted environmental disadvantages, the commissioners plumped for Cublington.

They did so with one exception. Almost at the very end of their work, Professor Colin Buchanan announced that he could not accept the choice of Cublington. To the surprise of his fellow commissioners, he then announced that he could not accept the rest of the report either, except for a small section on the timing of the need. He produced instead an eleven-page note of dissent. It makes an extraordinary contrast to the main report. Against their cool, logical, detached and carefully measured analysis, he contraposes a passionate, highly emotional personal testament. He explains how, almost from the start, he had developed a deep distrust of the cost-benefit approach used by the commission and its research team. He takes his stand on a principle, that good planning considerations must be absolutely paramount, an approach which had been specifically rejected by the rest of the commission.²⁰ A central planning principle, he argues, has been the preservation of open rural background around London. A new airport in that open area would involve enormous destruction of its character and threaten the whole principle. Finally, three of the four sites are there; only Foulness is not.

Behind the sanctity of planning principles, however, lies a deeper consideration, which Buchanan makes explicit. It is that preservation of the national heritage, and in particular its traditional landscapes, is a sacred trust for present and future generations.

I see many examples of the way present day life has been enriched as a result of decisions taken years ago with sure-sighted anticipation of our needs; I see other cases where the exercise of but a little foresight would have prevented losses over which we today can merely wring our hands. Human nature does not change so quickly that it is impossible or even difficult to distinguish the

things that successive generations commonly find of value. I have no doubt that the things I find of interest in the open background of London are things that will interest many generations to come. I am profoundly certain that they are *good* things.²¹

Buchanan thus took issue with his colleagues on a central issue of principle. He concluded that:

it would be nothing less than an environmental disaster if the airport were to be built at any of the inland sites, but nowhere more serious than at Cublington where it would lie athwart the critically important belt of open country between London and Birmingham.²²

He confessed he still doubted the cost-benefit analysis on the grounds of the basis of the costings – which he did not fully understand – as well as the way they were aggregated; but above all, he felt that any such analysis must be constrained by planning considerations. So he remained adamant that Foulness was the only acceptable site.

The result was perhaps predictable. Immediately on publication of the report, the split within the commission was replicated in the wider reading (and thinking) public. The critical difference was that the Buchanan view was no longer in a minority. All those who felt intuitively, as he did, that Cublington would be an ‘environmental disaster’ naturally turned to his testimony for support.

One group especially did so. The Roskill Commission had been right when it predicted that its recommendation would be received with abhorrence by the majority of those living in the Cublington area. Immediately after publication the Wing Resistance Association was formed. It modelled its campaign on the highly successful one at Stansted and it did so with resources supplied by some very affluent residents. It was estimated that the Roskill Commission spent a million pounds to produce its recommendation and the Wing Resistance Association spent three quarters of a million trying to overturn it.

Again, perhaps as expected, they succeeded. The forces of economic reason may have declared for Cublington, but the forces of environmental emotion were in favour only of Foulness, and they proved far stronger both in number and in intensity. The weight of the planning profession, of the media, of general middle-class public opinion as reflected in letters to *The Times*, and finally of MPs, shared the views of Buchanan:

Time and again since the end of Stage V, I have recalled Mr Niall MacDermot’s words in his closing address when he said that anyone standing on one of the famous vantage points of the Chilterns and looking out over the Vale of Aylesbury would say, ‘It simply is unthinkable that an airport and all it implies should be brought here.’²³

In April 1971 John Davies, President of the Board of Trade, told the House of Commons that the third London airport would be built at Maplin Sands (or Foulness) in Essex.

¹⁷ Self, P., *Econocrats and the Policy Process*.

¹⁸ GB Commission on the Third London Airport, Report, pp. 33–34.

¹⁹ GB Commission on the Third London Airport, Report, p. 137.

²⁰ GB Commission on the Third London Airport, Report, pp. 149–51.

²¹ GB Commission on the Third London Airport, Report, p. 151.

²² GB Commission on the Third London Airport, Report, p. 149.

²³ GB Commission on the Third London Airport, Report, p. 153.

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