IF WE CHOOSE GROWTH AT GATWICK OVER INERTIA AT HEATHROW, 2016 CAN BE YEAR BRITAIN FINALLY SOLVES ITS AIRPORT CHALLENGE

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For the first time, and after decades of delays and dead ends, there is now a deliverable alternative to the UK's air capacity question.

If we choose growth at Gatwick over inertia at Heathrow, 2016 can be the year Britain finally solves one of its longest running policy challenges.

The Government delayed its decision on expansion in December last year, showing once again that Heathrow is still dogged by the environmental problems that have stalled its plans time and again over the past four decades.

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Grounded? Heathrow is still dogged by the environmental problems that have stalled its plans time and again

Last week Andrew Tyrie MP, chairman of the Treasury Select Committee, made a significant intervention in a letter to the Chancellor questioning the robustness of the Airports Commission's conclusions on economic benefits. It is clear there is now a consensus that the commission's conclusions are seriously flawed and not a sound basis for decision-making.

It is no surprise that the Government has chosen to test the commission's work in the key areas of air quality, carbon, noise and local impacts, as these crucial environmental issues have prevented expansion at Heathrow in the past.

This is not merely 'politics', as some would have it, they are real issues that affect the health and welfare of hundreds of thousands of people. In fact, polls show that air quality is one of people's top environmental concerns, so it is only to be expected that the Government should ensure that any infrastructure project meets legal limits during both its construction and its eventual operation.

The UK is facing the prospect of having insufficient capacity for its aviation needs, and we need action from the Government to address this. When you look at the analysis, it is clear Gatwick delivers an identical number of passengers, a similar number of long-haul routes, and the economic boost the UK needs.

Most importantly, it faces none of the problems associated with the alternative – it comes at a dramatically lower environmental impact, at less than half the cost of Heathrow, and with no public subsidy. Heathrow affects more people with noise than the airports at Frankfurt, Paris, Madrid and Amsterdam put together.

The area round the airport breaches air quality limits today. A new runway can only make that situation worse.

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Over the past five years, growth at Gatwick has been such that more than 40m passengers now pass through our airport in a year. That's an increase of 10m passengers over the period – equivalent to a decent-sized new airport.

Our growing popularity is due to the billion pounds of investment we've made and to the improved services offered by our airlines. We maintain a competitive, cost-efficient culture while operating the busiest and most efficient runway in the world, flying passengers to destinations from China to Peru and more than 200 airports in between.

To keep up with demand we'll have to expand, and we're ready. The good news is that we can expand without breaching air quality limits – we never have and we never will – and our noise impact is a small fraction of that facing Heathrow.

We have created Europe's most innovative noise mitigation scheme and an action plan to reduce our noise impact on residents around Gatwick. We can get going as soon as the Government gives us the go ahead. We can deliver the growth the economy needs within a decade.

As a simple, lower cost, more efficient proposition, expansion at Gatwick would enhance competition and support the current trends in aviation – the rise of lower cost travel, and the growth of direct point-to-point flights – all at an environmental impact that is a fraction of the alternative.

The simple facts show that Gatwick's plan is not just the best but the only deliverable solution to the question of where the UK's next runway should be built.

Even Heathrow's most ardent supporters must accept if it were capable of expansion it would have gone ahead by now. That's not going to happen and it is time for a new solution. It's time to get on with Gatwick.

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