

JANUARY 2009

**CHEAP
FLIGHTS**

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DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES

www.debatingmatters.com

MOTION:

**“THE EXPANSION OF
AIR TRAVEL IS
A GOOD THING”**

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KEY TERMS

[Airline Deregulation](#)

[Hub-and-spoke model](#)

[Infrastructure](#)

[Low-fare airlines](#)

[Point-to-point transit](#)

INTRODUCTION

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In December 2008 activists from Plane Stupid invaded Stansted airport runway in a protest against aviation’s contribution to climate change. The demonstration follows in a line of similar actions [Ref: [Guardian](#)], and coincided with important decisions on whether to develop further the UK’s civil aviation infrastructure. The government approved the building of a third runway (and sixth terminal) at Heathrow in January, following the opening of a fifth terminal there in summer 2008 and the go-ahead being given for expansion at Stansted in October 2008. All these developments have faced opposition both by local residents objecting to the disruption and by environmental campaigners focusing on the wider impact of carbon emissions. Protestors have seized on ‘cheap flights’ as a particular problem, citing the ‘unnecessary’ nature of short-haul budget flights and their possible substitution with other, less carbon-intensive forms of transport.

There has, however, been a backlash against critics of cheap flights, with renewed arguments for the economic and social benefits of cheap air travel. The economic necessity to the UK of expanding its aviation infrastructure has been argued for, particularly in the heated debate over the expansion of Heathrow and other airports. Others have detected snobbery in anti-flying arguments, as well as moral posturing and hypocrisy, with people bemoaning the effects of cheap travel while continuing to take full advantage of its many benefits.



What are 'cheap' flights?

Airline deregulation across the EU allowed for the importation of a new business model pioneered in the United States - that of the 'no frills' carrier. Cheaper fares offered by budget airlines like easyJet and Ryanair have led to the expansion of air travel across Europe, both in terms of new destinations opened up and the number of flights and passengers. While the better-off remain the biggest users of air travel [Ref: [Times Online](#)], there has been a real democratisation of flying, with travel abroad now affordable to many working-class families. It has also led to increasingly hyper-mobile migration and work abroad. Advocates point to the historic nature of this transformation and the freedom of movement and new experiences it has provided millions of people.

What is the debate over infrastructure?

The Government has based its arguments for a third runway at Heathrow on the economic benefits it would provide in terms of jobs and revenue, resulting from Heathrow's position as a major hub and competitor to airports such as Schiphol (Amsterdam) and Charles De Gaulle (Paris). It is argued that London's position as a global city is at stake. However there is a debate amongst those generally favourable to expansion about whether Heathrow would be the best place for a new runway, with some proposing a new airport in the Thames estuary [Ref: [Evening Standard](#)] and others questioning the future of the hub-and-spoke model. The Conservative party, amongst others, has argued that the UK should instead invest in high-speed rail links as an economically and environmentally more sound alternative [Ref: [2M Group](#)]. While a third runway might run afoul of EU

pollution regulation, investment in rail would be a step towards overcoming the underdevelopment of that sector relative to European neighbours. Critics meanwhile have remarked on the overwhelming lack of ambition in the UK's transport policy as a whole [Ref: [Times Online](#)], arguing that environmental 'sweeteners' tacked-on to development only serve to slow down transport.

What is the environmental impact of air travel?

Local residents' opposition to airport expansion has been joined up with concern over flying's planetary impact. Environmentalists argue flying is the fastest growing cause of climate change [Ref: [European Commission](#)] and point to the government's contradictory policy of developing air transport infrastructure while committing to reduce carbon emissions by 80% by 2050. In addition to the question of airport expansion, many argue for a punitive tax on each seat sold to discourage travel. Aviation, they claim, is under-taxed compared to other modes of transport, with no VAT imposed on jet fuel, and the Government recently backtracked on a proposed change [Ref: [GreenAir Online](#)]. Industry retorts that budget airlines are more efficient than other carriers, and that when all levies and tolls are factored in, the average plane ticket is already highly taxed. Furthermore, aviation only accounts for three percent of greenhouse gas emissions, with planes also becoming more environmentally-friendly, so penalising flying would involve much sacrifice for little impact.

DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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Should we fly less?

Historically, increased mobility was a mark of social progress and travel was seen to 'broaden the mind'. Now many people see flying as 'unnecessary' and even damaging: be it people flying to second homes or drunken stag and hen nights abroad. But who is to decide what is 'unnecessary'? The moralisation of flying – some even comparing to it child abuse [Ref: Monbiot.com] – has led critics to argue that demands to restrict flight are based on prejudice against the freedom that cheap flights have afforded people, and that air travel should be celebrated [Ref: spiked]. But others argue that flying is now a moral issue that we can ill afford to ignore.

ESSENTIAL READING

Why we shut Stansted airport
Plane Stupid 9 December 2008

Flying lessons
Charlemagne *The Economist* 17 July 2008

For

Runway 3 will be a shrine to Labour's congenital frailty
Martin Kettle *Guardian* 16 January 2009

Lily savaged
Lily Kember *Guardian Comment is free* 10 December 2008

Air traffic out of control
George Monbiot *Guardian* 9 May 2007

We're all heading for the fiery furnace if we keep on taking these cheap flights
Magnus Linklater *The Times* 26 July 2006

Against

Class hatred at Stansted airport
Brendan O'Neill *spiked* 9 December 2008

The menace of cheap travel
Mark Khazar *Battles in Print* 1 October 2006

Hot air? I want the cold facts
Anatole Kaletsky, Stelios Haji-Ioannou and Micheal O'Leary *The Times* 10 June 2006

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Stop this war on tourism
Keith Jowett and Roger Wiltshire *Guardian* 3 March 2006

In Depth

A transport policy running on empty
The Times 14 December 2008

The right side of the argument
The Economist 6 November 2008

Disagreement on environmental impacts of air transport is seriously undermining UK government policy
Hugh Raven *GreenAir Online* 28 August 2008

Save the planet, don't see the world?
David Soskin *Battles in Print* 2 October 2006

Fly the frugal skies
Matt Welch *Reason* 1 January 2005

BACKGROUNDEERS

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Timeline: Environmental protests against aviation industry

Haroon Siddique *Guardian* 8 December 2008

Open skies, open minds?

ESRC Society Today

High Speed North – Joining up Britain

2MGROUP

GreenAir Online

Aviation and Climate Change

European Commission

Aviation

Sustainable Development Commission

Air transport

Office of National Statistics

ORGANISATIONS

2M Group

Airport Watch

Future Heathrow

Manifesto Club – Celebrate the Freedom of Flight

Royal Aeronautical Society

Stop Stansted Expansion

Sustainable Aviation



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IN THE NEWS

Go-ahead for new Heathrow runway

BBC News 15 January 2009

London's airports hit by passenger fall

Evening Standard 14 January 2009

Heathrow train plan to allay environmental fears

The Sunday Times 4 January 2009

Gordon Brown to overrule minister on Heathrow runway

The Times 15 December 2008

Benn warns against breaching EU air pollution limits

Guardian 15 December 2008

Stansted protest cancels flights

BBC News 8 December 2008

Decision on third runway delayed

BBC News 4 December 2008

BAA agrees to Heathrow watchdog

BBC Radio 4, Today programme 26 November 2008

Boris Johnson hires experts to look at Thames estuary airport

Evening Standard 10 November 2008

Stansted expansion goes ahead

Guardian 9 October 2008

Air passenger transport up by 5% in 2006

Eurostat 14 December 2007

Cheap flights across the pond?

BusinessWeek 13 April 2007

Blair says no politician would ban cheap flights

Independent 9 January 2007

Air tax hike 'would hit poorest'

BBC News 7 August 2006

It's a sin to fly, says church

The Sunday Times 23 July 2006

Euro MPs push for air fuel taxes

BBC News 4 July 2006

BAA plans 'greener and cheaper' second Stansted runway

Independent 9 December 2005

Rich snap up cheap flights

The Times 4 November 2004

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- I am a sixth form student and would like further details about events in my area
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- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
- Other (please specify)

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Professional role
(if applicable)

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School/work phone

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**“TEENAGE CITIZENS
THINKING DEEPLY
ABOUT...SOCIAL
ISSUES”**

IAN GRANT, CEO, BRITANNICA

