

Britain - A third runway at Heathrow — an act of environmental vandalism

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Alan Thornett assess the significance of Rachel Reeves support for a third runway at Heathrow

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I recently penned an article, [assessing COP29](#), in which I describe the Labour government elected on July 4th as “hitting the ground running”— at least as far as its ecological agenda is concerned. The decision of Rachel Reeves to support a third runway at Heathrow, however, calls into question such a description. It was true then, but it is not true now.

In fact, her position crosses an important Rubicon, and is a very big step in the wrong direction.

The Heathrow figures are staggering. The number of flights, currently capped at 480,000 a year could rise to 720,000 as a result of her decision. Heathrow managers told the BBC that it would eventually be able to serve up to 140 million passengers a year once the third runway is in operation.

Labour has long been divided on climate policy, of course, between Rachel Reeves, who craves fiscal orthodoxy and fiscal rules, and Ed Miliband, the Minister for net-zero. He is committed to a radical transition to renewable energy and the solar revolution, as reflected in the policy of decarbonising an upgraded Nation Grid by 2030 — which they both insist is still on the cards. Starmer floats opportunistically between the two as the right turn up the pressure.

For the first five months, Miliband was in the ascendancy with his rapid acceptance of schemes blocked by the Tories from solar and onshore wind to solar farms from the East Midlands to Oxfordshire.

Unfortunately, two major unions, UNITE and the GMB are in favour of airport expansion including Heathrow. This gives the Labour leadership room for manoeuvre.

Growth

This situation is a product not only of Reeves’s ‘fiscal rules’, but of Labour’s obsession with economic growth — irrespective of the basis and environmental impact of such growth. Fortunately, this

rationale is being strongly opposed by an important coalition of forces inside and outside of the Labour Party. You can't have economic growth on a dead planet. Nor should you have economic 'growth' which further degrades the planet.

Aviation is an ultra-high carbon emitting industry, and the idea that there has been a breakthrough to ecologically sustainable aviation fuel is fantasy-land. The reductions in carbon emissions are marginal at best. Rachel Reeves's insistence that there has been such a breakthrough show she is ecologically illiterate or totally cynical. Claims of climate friendly fuels and aircraft designs are greenwash, and are incompatible with both the decarbonisation of the grid by 2030 and 'net-zero' by 2050.

Reeves also promotes Carbon Capture and Storage in her speech. This also is completely unresolved and would put serious pressure on renewable electricity resources.

Reeves's proposition is an anti-ecological U-turn with serious consequences in terms of carbon emissions in general and the government's ambition to decarbonise the national grid by 2030 in particular. It reduces to hot air the idea of making Britain a green energy super power.

It is worth noting that Keir Starmer voted in Parliament against Heathrow expansion in 2020 and is now giving his full backing to Reeves.

Wide opposition

There is wide opposition to what Reeves has done.

[Sadiq Khan](#), the London mayor, says in a statement on his website that support for a third runway will do little for economic growth, that it will cause disruption and air pollution, and fly in the face of the UK's climate commitments. He says he will, if necessary, take the issue into the courts.

[Clive Lewis](#) Labour MP for Norwich South told the Guardian that the government's 'growth' mission reeks of panic.

He goes on: "Regardless of motivation, Labour has crossed the Rubicon. Approving Heathrow expansion is an irreversible break with our pre-election pledges. In 2021, Reeves stood in front of the Labour party conference and declared that she would be the "[first-ever green chancellor](#)". Now, Labour is [accused of obstructing](#) the [climate and nature bill](#) and abandoning its ambitious decarbonisation plans.

"The choices Labour is making" he tells us " will define not just its electoral prospects but the political landscape of the UK for years to come. This is not just about Heathrow, banking regulations or benefit fraud crackdowns. It is about whether my party can offer a vision of growth that actually works for the people who need it most — or whether it will leave that space open for its populist opponents to fill."

Most startling of all, however, for those who have campaigned in the Labour Party on the environment, is an [open letter](#) issued by Ken Penton and Lisa Trickett the co-chairs of SERA, the official body of the Labour Party which campaigns (or not) on the environment, to Keir Starmer himself.

It is the first time in living memory that this ultra-loyalist body has criticised the Labour leadership in this way — and this on growth which is close to a religion in Labour leadership circles.

"It is our view" the letter says, "that the drive for growth cannot be decoupled from—and indeed

needs to be reconciled with — the need to address climate change and the entrenched inequality that scars too many of the communities we serve.

“A large part of the case for Heathrow expansion”, the letter tells us, “appears to be based on the development of ‘sustainable aviation fuel’. This description is a misnomer as there is currently no aviation fuel in use which does not lead to increased carbon emissions. Since technological development — such as the development of solar and wind power and battery storage — will be central to how we meet our climate change targets, we do support investment in research and development in this area, as well as that of electric engines.

“As well as our concerns about the impact on our climate, the likely increase in carbon emissions and the negative impact on public health that Heathrow’s expansion will cause, we believe this will prove to be a distraction from the urgent need to secure growth to support public services, improve people’s everyday life experience, and tackle the regional inequalities the UK faces that should be a priority for our Labour government, which we were proud to play our part in getting elected.

“We believe investing in a repurposed national grid; rail, bus and walking and cycling infrastructure; and energy efficiency are more urgent and will deliver much greater sustainable economic, social, health, and climate returns in the short, medium, and long term”.

Ali Milani in [Labour List](#) says that: “The inescapable reality is that getting behind a third runway project will shred our government’s green credibility within our first year in power.”

They go on: “It will act as a signal to all those watching around the world that we are not serious in meeting our climate obligations and critically, for those of us in the surrounding areas and in London, it means further deterioration of our health and environment. Heathrow is already the single biggest source of carbon emissions in the entire United Kingdom.”

[The New Economics Foundation](#) says: “*Rachel Reeves’ commitment to Heathrow expansion relies on flawed economics. By the government’s own metrics, airport expansion won’t deliver serious economic growth. Business air travel peaked two decades ago and a new runway won’t change that*”.

[Friends of the Earth Manchester](#) have said: “Chancellor Rachel Reeves has given the green light to airport expansion while we’re in a climate emergency.

Expanding airports like Heathrow won’t do much, if anything, for the communities that need growth the most. Instead, benefits will be enjoyed by shareholders and the wealthiest few who fly frequently. Airport expansions mean more subsidies for a heavily polluting industry — when we desperately need to be doing all we can to reduce emissions.”

They all make strong points.

The saga of Heathrow

A third runway at Heathrow will take at least 10 years (probably more like 16) to build, if indeed it is ever built, but the ambition involves a transfer of resources on a scale capable of derailing any and all of the positive steps the government has taken in the wake of the fall in the cost of wind and solar, its recognition of the solar revolution, and the task it has undertaken in terms of the preparation of the energy infrastructure for the transition to renewables.

The Guardian points out that the “saga of Heathrow’s third runway has been continuing for decades, with ministerial resignations, U-turns from politicians against the backdrop of climate disaster,

including 0.2°C of global heating since the expansion was first proposed. Now the chancellor, Rachel Reeves, is hoping to kickstart the expansion again in a push for economic growth”.

As far back as February 2020 the court of appeal found that the government’s approval of the runway as illegal because ministers had failed to take into account the UK’s commitments under the 2015 Paris climate accord, which means keeping the global temperature rise as close to 1.5°C as possible.

New push

The new push for a third runway is widely condemned by local groups, London politicians and even by the sector - because of the airport’s previous denials that it was seeking expansion.

The organisation representing residents under the Heathrow flightpath, [HACAN](#), tells us that “out of the top ten destinations only one, New York, is long haul. The rest are European or British destinations”. There is also the No Third Runway Action Group that John McDonnell has long been involved with. Both are reactivating following Reeves’s speech.

Not necessary

And a third runway is not even necessary to reduce pressure on Heathrow. There are numerous measures that can be taken which can reduce the pressure on British airports in general, and they should have been taken a long time ago. There is still no tax on aviation fuel, for example, after years of demands by environmentalists for a tax to be introduced.

There are no plans to curb domestic short-haul flights. Greenpeace rightly point out that In Europe, many short-haul flights are to be replaced by rail. The continent boasts a robust high-speed rail network that effectively connects major cities, making train travel a viable alternative for many short-distance journeys.

A third of the busiest short-haul flight routes in Europe *have rail alternatives that are under six hours* by train. Last year, France introduced a ban on domestic short-haul flights, and Spain is proposing a short-haul flight ban where a train journey is possible in under two and a half hours.

Meanwhile we have to keep up the pressure. We have to demand that this misguided support is recognised for what it is: a mistake of epic proportions that will put at risk not just the decarbonisation of the national grid, but of net zero by 2050 itself.

Alan Thornett

Comment

Fred

06.02.2025 at 3:58 pm

I agree with Alan when he writes that Labour’s plan for airport expansion is a disaster for the climate. Since then, Starmer has unveiled a plan for a large expansion nuclear power, and then there is the distinct possibility that he will approve the expansion of the Rosebank oil field in the North Sea. We need urgent, united and mass mobilisations to stop this rush to climate apocalypse from Labour.

P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. :

<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/a-third-runway-at-heathrow-an-act-of-environmental-vandalism/>

- *Alan is the author of Facing the Apocalypse - Arguments for Ecosocialism which can be purchased from Resistance Books.*