

# 16050 STUCK IN A HOLDING PATTERN

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EVERY airport suffers the odd delayed flight. In Britain, it is the runways that fail to arrive on time. No new full-length airstrip has been built to serve London since the Second World War.

After a commission chaired by a major public figure reported in July that a third runway should be built at Heathrow; the Conservative government promised to make a decision by the end of 2015. Of course, it hasn't: on December 10th the Department for Transport (DfT) announced that there would be no ruling until the summer.

The Department for transport says the extra time is needed for further study of the environmental impact of airport expansion. That is partly because the government's plan on how to meet air-pollution targets set by the European Union will not be ready until 2016. Many parts of west London already breach these limits, so a bigger Heathrow would face curbs on the number of flights it could handle – unlike Gatwick, which is more rural. If environmental rules were tightened up, the economic case for expanding Heathrow would be weakened.

The government may try to find another way around the problem: on December 13th leaked documents suggested that it had been lobbying the EU to relax some of its air-quality standards.

In the meantime, the "gutless" postponement of the decision is "bad for Britain", the British Chambers of Commerce says. Heathrow has been operating at more than 98% of its capacity since 2003; Gatwick, the country's next-busiest airport, is full 80% of the time.

The delay also undermines the mantra of George Osborne, the chancellor, that "We [the Conservatives] are the builders". A National Infrastructure Commission, announced in October, is intended to take awkward decisions out of the hands of ministers.

Britain could do with an infrastructure splurge. As a percentage of GDP, government investment is the eighth-lowest of 28 countries tracked by Eurostat, the EU'S statistics agency, and lower now than it was during the financial crisis. Yet Britain has few of the empty airports or roads-to-nowhere built in Spain and Portugal. And according to the World Economic Forum, British roads are better than those of the average rich country; so are its electricity supply, its ports and, funnily enough, its airports. It may be too little, and often too late, but Britain's infrastructure budget is at least well spent. Something to hearten passengers as they await the arrival of their plane – or runway.

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