

London Assembly (Mayor's Question Time) – 26 January 2011

Transcript: Mayor's Oral Update

Dee Doocey (Chair): The Mayor is going to give an oral update of up to five minutes in length.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Thank you very much, Dee. We have only one issue that has been raised with me by the Assembly for oral update and it relates to our proposals for a new airport for London that were published last week. I believe that they represent a substantial contribution. Anyone who has read the pamphlet will see that it is a very, very well-argued case for acknowledging that the cancellation of the third runway cannot be the end of the story. If we cancel a third runway at Heathrow, which I think is completely the right thing to do, there must be consequences for aviation capacity in London and the southeast and it is economically essential, in my view, that we face up to the reality of that shortfall in capacity and the increase in demand. I think it is completely unrealistic to expect us to expose our economy ever more to the great growth areas of China and India when, if you look at rival European economies, they are putting in aviation capacity that will enable them to trade and exchange much more freely than we are currently allowed to do, at least by air.

Separately, there have been, of course, a series of announcement and successes. I would single out the huge number of London ambassadors that we are recruiting; 33,722 people have registered to be London ambassadors.

We have held some very successful community conversations, notably one a couple of nights ago in Waltham Forest. We have unveiled not only the fourth plinth but a biomedical research centre has been approved, which will go ahead in Camden; the largest such facility in the whole of Europe and testimony to the confidence that people are showing in the London economy and their desire to keep investing in this part of the United Kingdom. It is absolutely vital that we continue to attract such investment if we are going to drive jobs and growth in this City and throughout the country.

On that point, I might also mention that we have just published proposals for the Crossrail infrastructure levy.

Dee Doocey (Chair): OK, thank you, Mr Mayor. Before I call the Members who have indicated they wish to speak, can I just remind Members that they must contain their remarks to the issues that the Mayor has covered. The first speaker is Darren Johnson.

Darren Johnson (AM): Thank you. On the airport capacity report you say it is a very well-argued case but is it not simply a lobbying tool for the Thames Estuary airport idea that has been roundly rejected?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): No, absolutely not and that was clear from the substance of the discussion. I do not know whether you were at seminar, Darren, but I think you would have found it extremely interesting because there is no --

Darren Johnson (AM): I do not think you invited me.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Everybody is invited.

Dee Doocey (Chair): No, we are not.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): There is no single solution that this report pinpoints. What we are saying here is that there is a problem of capacity and let me give you one statistic that I think is critical to our future successes in economy: ten years ago Heathrow was the number two or number

one airport in the whole of Europe; Heathrow is now well down in terms of destinations served. It is now down to about seventh place, well behind Paris, Charles de Gaulle, and well behind Frankfurt. I think there are 156 destinations from Heathrow, 235 from Paris and roughly the same number from Frankfurt.

A critical point I would ask you to consider: we are told, and I think it is absolutely true, that the future of the world economy lies with the emerging power of Asia, particularly China and India. I would just point out to you that every day from the whole of London airports there are five flights to mainland China, to Beijing and Shanghai. From memory, I think from Paris there are 11 flights a day to four destinations in mainland China and there are ten flights a day from Frankfurt to six destinations in mainland China.

Now, obviously those figures exclude Hong Kong but Hong Kong has been part of the British trading circuit for a long time and if you look at the growth areas of China, if you look at where the future expansion of the world economy is going to be, we are not in a position to expose UK business people to those markets in quite the way that our continental competitors are. We should reflect on that.

Darren Johnson (AM): The economic arguments in favour of expansion have been vastly overstated, as the Assembly's own investigations have shown.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Well, I think that is complete nonsense.

Darren Johnson (AM): Are you moving away from the idea now of a Thames Estuary --

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Frankly, I would much rather rely --

Darren Johnson (AM): No, no, no.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): I would much rather rely on the views of 90% of British business than on the views of your committee, Darren.

Darren Johnson (AM): Answer the question. Are you moving away from the idea of a Thames Estuary airport now then?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): No, I am exactly in the same position that I have been throughout this conversation. My job is to --

Darren Johnson (AM): OK, let me --

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): -- speak up for the London economy --

Darren Johnson (AM): You have answered that question then.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): -- and for the interests of the wider UK economy. I do not think we can honestly say that by continuing with the current capacity that we have we are going to be enabling ourselves to compete in the long run with our continental friends and partners. I think we are on the road of making a big strategic mistake and no amount of high-speed rail is going to solve that problem.

Darren Johnson (AM): Theresa Villiers:

"A new airport in the Thames Estuary is not an option at which the Conservative Party is looking."

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Darren, you are setting up the Thames Estuary as the only solution. I am not saying it is the only solution.

Darren Johnson (AM): Rodney Chambers, Leader of Medway Council:

"I am pleased that all councils in Medway are united in their decision to stop the Mayor of London's plans to build an airport in the Thames Estuary to stop this necessary and ill-thought-out airport plan."

Can you not listen this time? Your Conservative colleagues at local level in Kent and Essex and at national level in Government have actually got it right on this one. Can you not listen to them?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Well, actually there is quite a lot of support and a surprising measure of support for all sorts of proposals, not least for a solution somewhere in the Thames Estuary. I think that that option should not be excluded. The point of the report and the point of this conversation is to make the case for the UK economy and just to argue that we cannot go on deluding ourselves that we can continue with zero increase in capacity anywhere. That is the current position and frankly I do not think that is economically realistic. I do not know what your report said but I would be amazed if it was intellectually sustainable.

Dee Doocey (Chair): Thank you. Before I call the next speaker, can we welcome students from Greenwich Community College who are here with us today. You are very welcome.

The next speaker is Andrew Boff.

Andrew Boff (AM): Mr Mayor, you touched on what my question is about. Do you not think that the development of high-speed rail to Birmingham, for example, and the surplus capacity there is at airports in that area reduces the need to provide a new airport in London?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Well, I think the trouble with high-speed rail is that no matter how speedy your high-speed rail is, you cannot take a high-speed train to China and you cannot take a high-speed train - unless the Green Party has got a better idea and indeed I am not sure about the environmental friendliness of such a suggestion. We need to look at our overall aviation capacity. If you look at the graph of people who want to fly and the increase in flying over the last 50 years, it is basically been going up at a 45 degree angle and I think it will continue to go up in that direction.

Of course, there are going to be concerns about the CO₂ impact and people will have legitimate environmental issues about expanding airport capacity. The key point that was made in our consultation paper is that by cancelling the third runway, the Government has effectively left an 85 million passengers per-annum hole in the calculations. In other words, there is room for an expansion to the tune of another 85 million passenger movements per year without infringing the Government's 50-year target to cut CO₂ by 2050. Just to give you an idea of what 85 million passengers per year is like: the whole of Heathrow every year moves 60 million passengers per year.

So there is scope in environmental terms for increasing capacity and the issue is: where do you find the space? Darren says that you cannot do it in the Thames Estuary. OK, fine. All right, Darren has a point of view. We will bear that in mind. There may be other solutions.

Andrew Boff (AM): I take your point about the calculation. In your deliberations will you do an analysis of airport traffic or rather passenger traffic which indicates how many people flying over London actually want to come to London to contribute to the economy or how many people are coming to London to avail themselves of the BAA concessions in waiting areas; the connecting flights?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): It is a good question. Are you arguing we should not be in the market for connecting flights?

Andrew Boff (AM): I am just saying that if you ignore the fact that a very substantial part of the passenger traffic that flies over London are connecting flights and are nothing to do with boosting the economy of the southeast of England.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Can I humbly make a point about that. I understand that argument. Heathrow is a hub airport and that is why it has a lot of connecting flights. The difficulty is if you say, we do not want connecting flights; we just want people who are flying to London and to London alone, then you greatly restrict the range and scope of your destinations. That is basically what is happening, because Paris and Frankfurt are able to expand their runway capacity, and that is why Heathrow is now serving so many fewer destinations by comparison with those cities. If you have the hub capacity then you serve far more destinations.

Not only that, of course. The second point I would make is that if you have the hub capacity, Andrew, you thereby have a substantial airport proposition, as there is at Heathrow, and you generate tens of thousands of jobs. At the moment we are exporting to other European countries tens of thousands of jobs that could be in the aviation sector in this country.

Andrew Boff (AM): Just one more question on this and then I do have a question about something else that the Mayor asked about, not on aviation.

You are aware, of course, that the attitude of some Londoners is their life is being blighted by the number of flights that are going over their houses and the impact of those flights. Have you had time to reflect on your decision to accede to the decision of Newham Council to allow a doubling of the flights to City Airport? Have you had time to look back on that decision and decide whether or not that was the right one for Londoners?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Yes. As you know, I have looked back at that decision and I am not sure that I do want to see a massive expansion of flights from City Airport. That is not what we are going to see and the comparison between City Airport and what is proposed at Heathrow, or what was proposed at Heathrow, is very stark. There are going to be huge numbers, or there would have been huge numbers, of extra flights coming over London from all directions had the Labour Government got its way and imposed a third runway. It would have been experienced all over East London, over West London and North London and it would have been, I am afraid, completely intolerable. No mayor could conceivably have accepted such an increase in air traffic movements over London.

Victoria Borwick (AM): I support your desire to keep London at the forefront of business and I, therefore, do support the need for airport expansion. So I put my cards on the table.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Well, that is very brave of you, Victoria, and, may I say, more intellectually coherent than a lot of the proposals, a lot of the --

Dee Doocey (Chair): No, because you are going to be nice today. That is why you are not allowed to say that; so a rare change.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): I am always nice.

Victoria Borwick (AM): Of course, that point has been reiterated by business leaders in the last few days. However, I do want to take us back briefly to the fiasco at Heathrow before Christmas because, frankly, it is that fiasco that actually makes me much more concerned that we do need expansion elsewhere and I think it is very disappointing. I just want you to give us a quick update on how you

have been using your influence to ensure, for the sake of Britain and London, how we are not going to let BAA let us down on that again. I have a supplementary question on some other expansion ideas which I will come back to.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): All right. Thank you, Victoria. You are perfectly right. I think that what happened at Heathrow before Christmas was pretty shambolic and we made our views known at the time and I do not think that is a controversial opinion. There was a discussion to be had about the exact kind of de-icer that they had bought and I know that there is going to be a review undertaken of the whole episode by David Begg and I urge them to get on with it and come to the necessary conclusions. Frankly, again, you have got an airport running at 99% capacity. Frankfurt, Paris and other airports around Europe are running at 75%. They have the scope to cope with serious events of this kind.

Let me give you another statistic. Flights landing at Heathrow, because of the strain on capacity, 40% of them are late. We are losing our reputation as an attractive and great place to land and to arrive at and depart from. That cannot be in the long-term interests of this City. Again, if you look at the figure of other European airports, they have considerably better performance figures.

Now, obviously I want to see BAA sharpen up their act and let us hope that David Begg's report enables them to do that. Certainly there were plenty of conversations I had with BAA before Christmas, during the whole period, which were in that general direction but you have got to look at the big problem and the big problem, I am afraid, is one of capacity.

Victoria Borwick (AM): Representations have been made to us about somewhere like - and I do not speak from any particular experience - RAF Manston because, again, that would link to London, using Eurostar and Crossrail, in perhaps an hour. So I think there have been suggestions, rather than necessarily where there is been a dispute about the bird strike and potential problems, that other venues should be looked at. As I say, I do not speak with any particular experience other than I believe representations have been made to us with regard to that as a possibility.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): At the moment, Victoria, what I want to do is get across the message that I do not think we can continue to try to force a quart into a pint pot in Heathrow and treat the problem as solved and believe that we can just go on as we are. I hope that actually, in spite of what Darren said, there is at least some support in this hemicycle for what I am saying because I do not think it is economically defensible. We need another solution.

Now, Manston may be part of the mix; another airport in the Thames Estuary may be part of the mix; you could look at Stansted; you could look at Luton; you could look at Gatwick. These things are very difficult. There will be big, big NIMBY¹ issues wherever you go and that is why, of course, the Thames Estuary has its instant attraction. It may be it turns out to be only a superficial attraction because there are fewer people around the area to be disturbed by flights. Our prime duty at the moment is to get across the message about under-capacity.

Len Duvall (AM): Look, Mr Mayor, this is a complex issue requiring a serious discussion. Why then do you mislead Londoners over the number of destinations that you can reach from London in terms of some of the figures you have already quoted this morning in your arguments?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Well, I do not believe I am misleading Londoners, Len.

Len Duvall (AM): Well, Andrew Gilligan's - who is a well-known cheerleader for you and possibly a friend - research infers that you are misleading Londoners but also he goes one better. He says you are fiddling the figures.

¹ 'Not in my back yard'.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Well, in fact, as far as I am aware, we went to great trouble with Andrew [Gilligan]. Of course, I am a huge respecter of what Andrew has to say but, as far as I can remember, we looked at what he had said and we think that, alas, in this one instance, it seemed to us that he was mistaken and the fact is that Frankfurt and Paris are flying considerably more both flights to mainland China and to more destinations in mainland China. That is not how it used to be. That is a function, I think, of the gross attempt to rely solely on Heathrow and I think it needs to be sorted out.

Len Duvall (AM): So which instance is he wrong about?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): I do not know. He just seems to have got it wrong. The figures I have given you are right - if you exclude Hong Kong - and I double-checked this because it was drawn to my attention that there was a rare occasion when someone had chosen to dispute my figures. I double-checked it and --

Len Duvall (AM): Because you never get the figures wrong, do you, Mr Mayor?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): No, I do not. Well, I double-checked it and it is a fact that the whole of London flies fewer daily flights to mainland China than either Paris or Frankfurt and that seemed to be of material importance to the argument.

Len Duvall (AM): No doubt we could check those figures because I think they would be of interest to others to see if you have got them wrong or right. You will be prepared to come before us to apologise then, if you have got your figures wrong? Because the figures, he says, are quite clear and, for someone who has checked into it because you want to get your figures right. I think you say Paris do 79 flights a week, Frankfurt do 70 a week, to locations in China. Andrew Gilligan says in London - you say "as a whole", we will use "as a whole" then - 92 flights to China average 13 a day.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Len, with deep respect, you were not listening to what I said. You have got to exclude Hong Kong. I said mainland China and, as you will appreciate, an event took place in 1996 which created --

Len Duvall (AM): Is Hong Kong not part of China?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Hong Kong is part of China.

Len Duvall (AM): I am just getting a geography lesson. We do business with China.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Yes. I said --

Len Duvall (AM): So are you fiddling the figures? Are you fiddling the figures?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Was anybody listening when I said earlier "excluding Hong Kong"? Did anybody hear me say that? Do you not thinking he is being ever so slightly unfair?

Len Duvall (AM): I am trying to get to the bottom of --

Dee Doocey (Chair): No, Mr Mayor, it is for you to answer the questions, not to ask for comment --

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): I have answered. With deep respect, I have answered it.

Dee Doocey (Chair): -- not to ask the Assembly to comment on your opinion. So can you continue, Mr Duvall, please?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): I do not think he can because I think I have answered his question.

Dee Doocey (Chair): Well, that is entirely for --

Len Duvall (AM): Well, can I say to you can you stop misleading Londoners? Can you double-check your figures?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Come on. Now, Len --

Len Duvall (AM): Stop misleading Londoners, double-check your figures and then we can have a serious debate, which is what you want to promote.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): I really think that anybody listening to what I said earlier on, which specifically excluded flights to Hong Kong, will appreciate that the growth in China is in mainland China. We are failing to expose British business people to those markets in the way that we need to and I think that, frankly, to go on quibbling about one particular statistic, which in fact I am right and you are - I do not know actually what your position is - I think basically agreeing with me.

Len Duvall (AM): Andrew Gilligan is wrong, is that what you are --

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): He --

Len Duvall (AM): He is wrong, is he?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Well, he is wrong, yes.

Len Duvall (AM): He is wrong?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): I think when you --

Len Duvall (AM): That is what you say; he is wrong?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): -- look at the reduction, the decline at Heathrow in international standing and the fact that so many flights are now delayed coming into Heathrow and the deterioration in passenger experience at Heathrow and the fact that most of our economic competitors have absolutely no compunction about building more runway capacity, I think you are in danger, Len, of trivialising the argument. I certainly will be happy to supply you a detailed breakdown of those statistics but I am assured that the figures I have given you today are correct.

Dee Doocey (Chair): OK, Andrew Boff?

Andrew Boff (AM): This is on a different subject.

Dee Doocey (Chair): Sorry. You wanted to come back on a different topic.

Andrew Boff (AM): On a different topic; yes, thank you.

The biomedical facility which you recently approved was on land designated for housing in the Camden plan. To what importance do you give land that is designated for housing in inner London?

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Well, as you know, Andrew, we have had a great deal of success over the last few years in building more affordable housing. I thought that the proposal for a

medical research centre was of strategic importance for London and I am very pleased that it has gone ahead.

Andrew Boff (AM): I agree with you it is of strategic importance to London. I just wondered why it had to be in inner London and in that place, bearing in mind that the result is going to be to increase the number of inward passenger movements in an area that is already congested.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): Sorry, are you talking about aviation again or are you talking about --

Andrew Boff (AM): No, the passenger movements on the public transport network.

Boris Johnson (Mayor of London): On any kind of transport, right. The argument for building up the capacity in that area, in the whole Euston area, is that there is now a cluster of academic, health, science centres in London and particular around the Euston Road. If you look at what is happening at University College Hospital and that whole nexus, it is, I think, one of the most powerful medical research areas in the whole of the planet and that is why I think it made sense to go for that location.

Murad Qureshi (AM): I just have a point of information. I do remember us handing Hong Kong back to China in the early 1990s.

Dee Doocey (Chair): Do you have a question?

Murad Qureshi (AM): It is a point of information.

Dee Doocey (Chair): No, I do not want a point of information. Do you have a question?

Murad Qureshi (AM): It is a geography lesson that the Mayor needs to understand

Dee Doocey (Chair): Do you wish to ask a question?

Murad Qureshi (AM): No, it was just a point of information.

Dee Doocey (Chair): Right. Let us move on, please.

Murad Qureshi (AM): We handed it back to the Chinese. It is part of the mainland. Yes, the lease ran out. It is part of mainland China. I am giving him a geography lesson.