



UK AIRLINES SAY HEATHROW DELAY IS ALL ABOUT PRIME MINISTER'S EGO

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U.K. airlines condemned David Cameron's move to put off a decision on a third runway for London's **Heathrow** airport until next summer, with British Airways parent IAG SA saying the delay was ego-driven after the prime minister's pledge five years ago to block the hub's expansion.

The Board of Airline Representatives in the U.K., which represents more than 70 scheduled carriers, said it was "dismayed" at the government's "uncertainty and indecision," and that the motivation appeared to be "local political reasons" rather than a cited need for further environmental analysis.

"We have compromised and compromised and compromised to satisfy a political agenda that makes our industry inefficient," IAG Chief Executive Officer Willie Walsh said. British Chambers of Commerce Director General John Longworth described the government delay as "gutless."

Cameron had undertaken to reach a decision by the end of this year on whether to endorse the findings of the Airports Commission, a body he appointed to depoliticize the runway debate during the last general-election campaign, and which said in July that a third strip at Heathrow was best for the economy.

Goldsmith Factor

The move to delay reaching a conclusion will allow Cameron to avoid conflict with Zac Goldsmith,

an anti-Heathrow lawmaker who will stand for the prime minister's Conservatives in elections for London's next mayor in May, while remaining true to a promise not to expand Heathrow given five years ago before he became premier.

"The fact that the PM came out in 2010 and said 'no ifs, no buts, no third runway,' is his problem, not mine," Walsh said. "I don't think I should compromise and put at risk the viability of my business to satisfy the ego of a politician who should not have said that in the first place until he understood the implications."

Transport Secretary Patrick McLoughlin said Thursday that the government backs the commission's conclusion that southeast England needs more runway capacity by 2030, but feels further research into environmental impacts is necessary before deciding between options that still include the expansion of London Gatwick, south of the capital.

Capacity Curb

Nathan Stower, CEO of the British Air Transport Association, which represents airlines registered in the U.K., said the announcement was "extremely disappointing," adding: "The U.K. cannot continue to put off this difficult but vital decision while our international competitors forge ahead."

The Confederation for British Industry also said the delay was "deeply disappointing," while the British Airline Pilots' Association described it as "disappointing, but not unexpected."

Heathrow has been operating close to the limits of its two runways for years, boosting passenger numbers to 73.4 million in 2015 only after airlines drafted in larger jets. A third strip would cost 18 billion pounds (\$28 billion) and lift capacity above 135 million by 2050, creating 70,000 jobs and adding 40 destinations, according to Howard Davies, who led the Airport Commission.

"We hope the government uses this extra time to think about its decision from the consumer's perspective," Virgin Atlantic said Friday. "The first new runway in the southeast of England since the 1940s needs to deliver on cost, competition and for local communities."

IAG's Walsh said expanding Gatwick isn't an option, with no airline wanting to locate there with Heathrow still open, while adding that he remains opposed the proposed funding plan for Europe's biggest hub as passing on too much cost to airlines and passengers. The executive said he has no faith in Cameron reaching a decision in 2016.

"I think 50 years from now — long after I've left — we'll still be operating a two-runway Heathrow airport," he said. "I've seen nothing to date that will convince me that that's going to change."

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