

2nd august 2010

Dear Mr Cameron,

After retiring from the airline industry several years ago I utilised the extra time available to visit difficult to reach places. One example is St Helena Island presently accessible only by sea. I have now been to this island several times and have taken a keen interest in their proposed airport, the construction of which has just been approved by Dfid. I have serious reservations about this project which in my opinion is seriously flawed.

My first reservation concerns the annual running costs. Dfid's consultants W S Atkins initially predicted that the airport would be profitable from year one, and would need no subsidy. Later this hopelessly optimistic prediction was revised to profitability in the short term. The reality of the situation can be ascertained by looking at the accounts of Highlands and Island Airports Ltd ([hial.co.uk](http://hial.co.uk)). This company operates 11 airports in Scotland and is wholly owned by the Scottish Government. The operation is consistently unprofitable and the annual losses are made up by subsidy, last year the required subsidy was £26 million, or approximately £2.5 million per airport per year. Some of these airports have been operational since the 1930's and all of them since the 1950's, and they always need a subsidy after many decades of operation. The proposed airport at St Helena would have to operate to exactly the same standards as laid down by the CAA and ICAO, and a permanent annual loss is certain, just as in Scotland. Just by coincidence, the required subsidy would be just the same as that granted annually to the RMS St Helena. However this is not an obstacle to building the airport, it just means that there must be a permanent commitment to underwrite the inevitable annual loss. This is unfortunate as the main intention of building the airport is to make the Island financially self sufficient.

However my main concerns are of an operational nature, and I think it most unlikely that any airline would operate to this airport because of the constraints imposed by topography and politics. Concerning the topography, the Island is a very challenging place to build an airport, and the intended site is the least worst one available. However it would be 1000 feet above sea level, with a near vertical drop to the sea shore from the beginning of the runway. As the airport site is on the windward side of the island there would be very undesirable wind effects just before touchdown, making the approach tricky. This would be compounded by frequent poor weather, I have seen this site covered in low cloud several times, even in mid summer, so a tricky approach would become even trickier. And just to make matters even worse for the captain, the instrument approach will not be lined up with the runway as if it were there would be insufficient terrain clearance from an area of high ground. So this would be a very tricky airfield indeed in poor

weather, which is all too common in the area.

If there were no other problems, the approach would be just acceptable, but politics play a part, and in my opinion renders this proposed airport unusable. The reason for this is that the previous Government negotiated a totally inept agreement with the US Government regarding the use of Ascension Island as both a scheduled destination and as a diversion airfield. Ascension Island is of course Sovereign British territory but the Americans control the airfield and have always excluded commercial aircraft unless under charter by the MOD. The inept agreement reached allows 2 charter flights to operate to Ascension, but specifically excludes scheduled flights and also prohibits the use of the airfield as a diversion for St Helena.

Civilian aircraft invariably carry sufficient fuel to fly to the intended destination, plus sufficient fuel to fly to a diversion airfield, and still have at least 30 minutes fuel available on reaching the latter. As the nearest diversion airfield is on the coast of Africa, about 1200 miles away, (compared to only 700 miles to Ascension) this means that the likely aircraft to be used (Boeing 737 or similar) cannot carry enough fuel. The consultants have suggested that a little known flight planning technique known as "Island holding" should be used. Annex B, paragraph 26 of the airport prospectus refers to this. Island holding is so rarely used that most professional pilots have never heard of it, I have heard it mentioned just 3 times since my flying career began in 1966. What Island holding means is that the captain will not have sufficient fuel to fly to a diversion airfield, but will instead have at least 2 hours of flying time available on arrival at destination. So if any captain were foolish enough to employ this technique, he would be committed to landing at St Helena, even if the weather became unexpectedly poor. And this would be at an airfield with the operational problems already described. It is a situation that no airline captain would entertain, and I do not believe that any airline would be prepared to operate to the proposed airfield unless Ascension becomes available for a diversion.

Another aspect of this political problem is that even if an airline did elect to operate flights to St Helena, it would not be possible to continue the flight to Ascension. So for the large number of Saints who work on Ascension or the Falkland Islands, the only way to get there would be by flying first to somewhere in Africa, then onwards to London, then by road to Brize Norton, and finally on the next Falklands flight. This is not the best way of travelling 700 miles.

I am strongly of the opinion that no money whatsoever should be spent on this project until a sensible agreement is struck with the US Government regarding the use of Ascension Island by civilian aircraft. I hope Dfid will have another look at this, as the airport could become a very expensive and embarrassing white elephant without American co operation,

Yours Sincerely,

Brian Heywood.