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Complications make third runway plan risky

Sir, Jonathan Ford is absolutely right to highlight the perverse regulatory incentives that explain why Heathrow's board rejected the opportunity to implement our substantially cheaper expansion alternative: the extension of the existing northern runway, which produces the same capacity for around £5bn less ("The gold-plated reason for Heathrow's bloated runway costs", Inside Business, March 26).

The Heathrow board reviewed our independent concept at the request of transport secretary Chris Grayling in September 2016 and, as he told the transport select committee last month, declined to issue the government a letter of comfort. He said: "The biggest issue for us was that the promoters of that scheme could not secure from Heathrow a written guarantee that if we picked it they would do it." This has pitched the interests of Heathrow's

largely foreign shareholders against the interests of UK consumers and does not make for an attractive political proposition.

Not only will passengers and airlines probably pay higher fees (and hence fares) should Heathrow Airport's third runway plan go ahead, there are two additional complications that make it very risky.

First, Heathrow Airport has failed to conduct a proper safety review. If this were completed it would demonstrate that many of the operational claims made by Heathrow are incompatible with safe operations. The third runway's capacity is likely to be much lower than the 740,000 air traffic movements (ATMs) claimed.

Second, because the construction of the third runway requires the demolition of three villages and critical infrastructure such as the energy-from-

waste plant, and no credible plan for crossing the M25 so close to the M4 junction has been produced, it will require billions of pounds of expenditure up front. This means it cannot be meaningfully phased. The government and regulators will have to agree to releasing all the new capacity, even if environmental limits in air quality and noise are not met.

By contrast, our first phase, creating at least 70,000 ATMs, can be produced for £3.8bn, by far the cheapest option for expansion. Even at this stage it is not too late for Mr Grayling to see sense and tell Heathrow to adopt our proposal before parliament votes in the summer.

Jock Lowe

*Director,
Heathrow Hub Ltd extended runway
concept,
London WC2, UK*