CABINET

GATWICK AIRPORT

Memorandum by the Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation

I should be grateful for the guidance of the Cabinet on a point which has arisen in connection with the construction of Gatwick Airport.

2. Acquisition of land for the construction of this airport is proceeding smoothly and the point has now been reached at which the procedure to be followed in connection with construction of the airport requires to be settled.

3. As the civil aviation side of my Department has no works department, I have so far relied on the Air Ministry Works Department for the preliminary engineering work.

4. As the time for the putting out of the contracts to tender has approached, I have discussed with the Treasury the most appropriate way in which the detail for contract tender, estimates for cost, and supervision of the contract should be carried out. This can either be done by the Air Ministry Works Department or by a consulting engineer. In view of the fact that consideration was being given to this matter, the Air Ministry Works Department stopped their preliminary work seven weeks ago. As the Secretary of State for Air has felt unable to instruct them to resume work pending a decision on this issue, it is urgent that a decision should be taken in order that further time may not be lost with an inevitable delay in the completion of the airport.

5. There are three possible ways in which the matter can be handled:

(a) That I should rely for the work referred to in paragraph 4 on the Air Ministry Works Department only,

(b) That I should rely for this purpose on outside consultants only,

(c) For this work to be done both by the Air Ministry Works Department and by one or more consultants, and a decision taken as to which should be used for this and subsequent work in the light of the relative cost and suitability of the detailed proposals submitted by the Air Ministry Works Department and by the consultants.

6. My own preference is for course (c). It is no reflection on the Air Ministry Works Department to say that it would be useful to be able to compare cost and standards proposed by them with those proposed by competent outside civil engineering firms.
7. I am particularly anxious to follow this course in this case since, as my colleagues will recall, the decision to construct Gatwick Airport was a somewhat controversial one and it is therefore particularly necessary not only that every step should be taken to avoid extravagance, either in standards or in cost, but also that it should be clear to Parliament and the public that every such step has been taken. From this point of view, separate proposals by a Government Department and by well-known private firms would constitute a check by each upon the other.

8. The Air Ministry Works Department has very great experience in the construction of airfields. But it has no monopoly of such knowledge, even in the rather specialised field of construction of runways. International airports are at present being constructed at Hongkong and in Kenya under the supervision of civil engineering consultants appointed by the Colonial Governments. And there is also the consideration that design of civil airports, particularly, though not solely, with respect to the buildings at such airports, is tending to diverge somewhat from the design of military airfields where the principal experience of Air Ministry Works Department of course lies.

9. The course which I am suggesting was in fact followed in 1952 in connection with the construction of a new terminal building at Blackbushe Airport. In the event, the services of a consultant were employed, mainly because his estimate (£25,000) was substantially below that of the Air Ministry Works Department (£35,000). In this case the cost worked out as estimated.

10. Admittedly this work is on a very much smaller scale than that involved in the construction of Gatwick Airport. But it involves the same principle and seems to me to be an illustration of the value of the course which I suggest. It is also an indication that this course does not constitute a revolutionary departure from all previous practice.

11. The Financial Secretary to the Treasury, with whom the Secretary of State for Air and I have had some discussion on this matter, is, I understand, inclined to think that my proposal might raise large issues affecting the role of Government works departments. Many interesting issues indeed arise in this connection. But I hope that it may not be thought necessary to settle these in advance of a decision on Gatwick which, particularly for the reasons given in paragraph 4 above, is now very urgent. I understand from the Secretary of State for Air that the Air Ministry Works Department is very fully engaged with other work. And the very special political and presentational problems which arise in connection with Gatwick should, in my view, enable this matter to be settled without going into more general problems. Apart altogether from this, I should have thought it would be of value both to tap the ideas and enterprise of specialist consulting engineers in this field and to introduce an element of competition in this particular case.

12. I hope therefore that the Cabinet will see fit to authorise me to proceed as suggested in sub-paragraph (c) of paragraph 5. I should not, in any event, feel able to accept the responsibility of proceeding with the aid of only one source of professional advice at this stage, without the express instruction of the Cabinet.

J.A.B. -C.

Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation, W. 1.
11th June, 1955.