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CABINET

GATWICK AIRPORT

Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Air

In October 1954 the Cabinet finally decided that a new airport should be constructed at Gatwick (C.C.(54) 63rd Conclusions, Minute 7). Both before and since that decision the Director General of Works at the Air Ministry has employed a number of his qualified staff upon this project and also in connection with the Public Inquiry.

2. Early in the war the Select Committee on National Expenditure recommended that the Air Ministry should carry out all airfield construction work for the Government. This arrangement, so far as the Ministry of Civil Aviation was concerned, was confirmed in 1945, when this new Ministry was set up. It has been reviewed on at least two occasions since the war and continues to this day. For this purpose, a Director of Works from the Air Ministry, together with appropriate staff, has been seconded to the civil aviation department to plan and execute airfield works. This Director has advised on the practicability of developing the Gatwick site and on the technical problems involved. He has given a broad estimate of the cost of the proposed works.

It is true that certain works for civil aviation since the war have been undertaken by outside firms. These have been airport terminal buildings. But all runway work for the Civil Aviation Ministry, including that at London Airport, has been controlled by the Director General of Works.

It is true as well that from time to time consultants are employed on some R.A.F. projects (though not on runways). These are appointed by the Director General of Works at the Air Ministry who carries the technical responsibility and who supervises all work on any Air Ministry airfield on which outside contractors are employed.

3. The desire of the Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation to assure himself that the works plans for Gatwick are both technically sound and financially economical is a natural one which I appreciate. I have no wish to insist upon the maintenance of existing practices (described in paragraph 2) should he wish to alter them. It would however have been better had this view been taken earlier. But I hold strongly to the opinion that, quite apart from questions of professional etiquette, undivided responsibility for a task of this kind must be placed squarely upon either the Director General of Works or upon an outside consultant. The responsibility must be for the whole scheme ab initio because any shortcomings in design or construction by an outside consultant could much too easily be ascribed to the preliminary work already carried out by my

Department. In this field, advice which does not carry with it the onus of bringing the work to a successful conclusion is valueless. The only true test is the result.

4. In these circumstances, the Director General of Works, being unable to settle satisfactorily this matter of ultimate responsibility, which was put in question when the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation showed their intention to call in outside consultants, was in my view right to discontinue work on this project pending a decision. I must point out that it has been open to the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation to bring forward this point for decision at any time since March. It was perfectly clear at that time that a major question of principle affecting the position of professional civil servants was under challenge by the proposal to put them in competition with outside consultants.

5. To sum up my position, there is no objection on my part to the use of an outside firm on the Gatwick project if that is what the Minister wishes. Indeed I should welcome it. What in my view is objectionable on administrative as well as on professional grounds - is that outsiders of the same profession should be called in to "vet" the work of Government servants or enter into competition over it. If the work is to be done by an outside firm it should be on the basis of full technical and financial responsibility. Thus everything, including the resumption of work by my Department, turns upon the decision of the Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation whether or not to employ outside consultants upon this project.

D.L.D.

Air Ministry, S.W.1.

14th June, 1955.