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London Report: Airports, Concorde in trouble

There are now unmistakable signs that not one but two of the British government's most costly and environmentally questionable schemes are collapsing, with the roof falling in and the bottom falling out. Since the end of January, the world's airlines have been lining up behind Pan American to drop their options to purchase the Anglo-French Concorde supersonic airliner. The situation will doubtless have been well-reported in the US, since most of the key developments took place there. What may not have been so well-reported is the sudden sinking sensation encountered by the British government over its nearly final plans for a third major airport for London.

London's two major airports are Heathrow, now surrounded by the suburbs of west London, and Gatwick, to the south, gradually being encircled by a built-up area. By the mid-1960s the number of air traffic movements seemed certain to increase beyond the capacity of these airports; and the noise nuisance was growing severe. The government of the day thereupon decided to enlarge a small airport near the village of Stansted, in Essex, north of London, to make it a third major airport. The villagers of Stansted and their Essex neighbors fought the plan ferociously through every stage - and to their delighted astonishment they won. In 1968, the government appointed a seven-man commission under Justice Roskill to decide which of four sites would be preferable - not including Stansted. The four sites proposed were Foulness, on the southeast Essex coast; Cublington in Buckinghamshire, northwest of London; and two other inland sites north of London. After hearings and studies costing well over 1 million pounds, the Roskill Commission produced a report recommending that the site be Cublington. The ensuing uproar was deafening, if predictable. Cublington is in the heart of the commuter belt, a Tory stronghold, and an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (to use the official designation); the idea of siting an airport there offended every possible sensibility, and Parliament, ignoring the Roskill recommendations, voted to site the airport at Foulness. This decision was widely hailed, and government spokesmen called the planned Foulness development the "world's first environmental airport."

The inhabitants of southeast Essex from the outset considered such a claim hypocritical nonsense. Unlike the other anti-airport protest groups they did not simply, in effect, say "Put it somewhere else". They instead challenged the unstated assumption upon which the whole Roskill study had been founded. The Roskill Commission had been instructed to decide where to put "the third London airport" - not if there were a need for a third London airport. But the defenders of Essex were few in number, with little financial backing. For two years they carried on their lonely battle; only a few journalists and environmentalists supported their cause. By the end of 1972, the government had succeeded in persuading the media to refer to "Maplin Airport," presumably feeling that there might be something distasteful about calling the airport "Foulness". The "foul" were of course birds; the wetlands of Foulness are the only wild coastline within 50 miles of London and one of the densest seabird-colonies in Europe - the home of one-fifth the world's population of Brent geese. But even questions of birdstrike had been brushed aside, and the government's Maplin Development Bill was coming up for its second reading. Then, with a suddenness that must have astonished even the defenders of Essex, all the cumulative doubts - and there were many - finally broke through. The defenders found allies. Friends of the Earth published a Maplin Manifesto, calling for a fundamental reappraisal of national airport planning. The *Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Evening Standard*, and virtually every other national newspaper reverberated for days with editorials and letters. A small group of dissident Conservatives proposed to vote against the government, Labor and the Liberals in Parliament did likewise; and the government, still reeling through the Concorde chaos, agreed to refer the Foulness-Maplin plan to a committee for rethinking. On this basis the government got its second reading, but only a reckless gambler would now put any money on Maplin.

The government, of course, is conceding nothing; but it is clear that both the Concorde and the Foulness-Maplin airport are succumbing to the combined weight of environmental and economic arguments. That is perhaps the most striking parallel between the two situations: the alliance between environmentalists and economists, once established, can bring down even billion-pound boondoggles.