

Airport development necessarily involves heavy investment commitment, often well in advance of demand, and results in the appearance of a whole range of externalities. (Recently emphasis has been placed upon the problems of noise and atmospheric pollution.) More fundamentally, the commercial objectives of airport owners often conflict with those of land use planners who may seek to slow down the expansion of a highly urbanised region, or to preserve an area as a valuable agricultural resource or recreational open space. As a consequence, government has often sought to establish policy to direct the process on a national scale. Successive administrations have not been convinced of the desirability and indeed, competence of either the free market or local government authorities to deal effectively with the crucial aspects of development planning, control and organisation.

Policy has also been concerned with the airlines, the immediate customers. Latent demand for air services is only translated into 'effective' demand if airlines are willing to create a route network commensurate with potential catchment areas. In deciding whether to operate a route or not, purely commercial judgement is tempered by regulation and government intervention to secure particular aims within a market which extends beyond national boundaries. For example, air services are often valued as a symbol of national prestige. In the post-war years, each newly emerging nation took steps to form a national airline. Like possession of 'the flag' and the exchange of ambassadors, the national airline has been regarded as an external indication that

nationhood has been achieved.¹ Similarly, national airlines have been promoted on strategic grounds to ensure that the aircraft available to carry civilians in peacetime are available to convey military equipment and personnel in times of war. Whilst a country may obtain cheaper air services by leaving them to the airlines of a foreign country, no nation wants to be dependent on another for the transport of people and goods across its national boundaries, especially when this dependence represents a permanent drain on foreign exchange.²

In the U.K. participation in the international regulatory system has been dominated by such objectives. Given the perceived need for regulation in all its guises no airport can hope to thrive without reference to the operational context set from above and for Manchester Airport the external complexities of the regulatory system and State intrusion in the planning context, could have been compounded by the necessarily different mode of internal organisation arising out of municipal ownership. It might be expected that the policy-makers, that is, the elected members, would regard the pursuit of short-term political goals (such as minimisation of the rate burden to secure future election) to be of primary significance and that this in itself could work against economic considerations. However, performance indicators, on the face of it, tend to suggest that this was not the case. Since opening in 1938, Manchester Airport (Ringway) has grown from a small provincial facility catering for a limited market to an international 'gateway' serving an ever-expanding range of world-wide destinations. On all of the standard measures of airport progress, Manchester has excelled. Aircraft movements increased from a mere 2,227 in 1938 to 83,281 in 1980; the number of passengers

¹ Wheatcroft, S., *Air Transport Policy*, Michael Joseph Ltd., (London, 1964) p.48.

² Cmnd 4018, *British Air Transport in the Seventies*, Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Civil Air Transport, HMSO, (London, May 1969) p.4.

handled rose from 3,869 to 4.43 million; and freight carriage went up from just 13 metric tonnes to 27,659.³ These impressive absolute gains were accompanied by significant relative improvements as Manchester's share of the U.K. market extended in all three indicators of performance.

It is argued that in Manchester's case, despite the potential constraints on investment decisions arising from municipal ownership, sound principles of commercial judgement have been the norm. Indeed at strategic points in the development of the national civil air transport industry, Manchester Corporation displayed a consistent policy of pursuing a prominent role for the city. In effect, the symbol of national prestige and nationhood for the State (the national airline) found its comparator at the local government level. Manchester Airport was to be regarded, by its owners, as a symbol of local municipal pride and the manifestation of the city's national and ultimately global status. Of course, it may be argued that in practice then, the elected representatives of the city, did in fact, pursue political ambitions, nonetheless such ambition translated into enterprising commercial foresight in a rapidly changing industry. For example, the official record suggests a consistent willingness and determination to adapt facilities to changes in aircraft design with their attendant impact on carrier's fleets, in order to secure and maintain status, whilst at the same time achieving maximum potential revenue for the city's ratepayers.

The Corporation maintained an imaginative – and expensive – policy of terminal and runway construction, combined with the promotion of an enlarged route network embracing the continent and then the Atlantic. An extensive road-building programme, by the 1960s, extended

³ Manchester International Airport Authority, Annual Report, 1969; and Annual Report, 1982. (Manchester Airport plc Archive) henceforth MA plc Archive.

the airport's catchment area beyond the immediate north-west region (see Figure 1) All these local authority initiatives helped Manchester to respond dynamically to the challenge posed by competitor airports, in an ambitious and coherent strategy influenced by commercial judgement in pursuit of long-term political goals.

The question remains, what then of the impact of regulation and State intervention on this process of growth? It is argued that, during what was a crucial and pivotal period for the laying-down of airport infrastructure, central government policy was equivocal and prevaricatory. As regards route development, Manchester Corporation seized upon the opportunities provided by loopholes in the regulatory system geared towards the protection of the 'national interest' to invoke a policy designed to promote the 'local interest' and that of the consumers of air services. Thus the major contention is that the growth of Ringway was unplanned and quite anomalous from the perspective of national agency. Rather than being the outcome of direction from an interventionist State, the growth of Manchester Airport was reflective of a local drive for recognition within a dynamic and modern industry, stemming from municipal ownership and enterprising local authority initiative which was fuelled by the conviction that 'latent' demand for air services existed within the city and its surrounding environs. In reality, the only significant State support to be afforded airport development was the limited provision of grant-aid to the local authority owners at a time when central government policy rejected the principle of subsidised airport operation. It is surely significant that the initiative for such an arrangement came from the local authority owners themselves – again reflecting the ambition of the Manchester Corporation – rather than any agent of central government operating within the industry.

1 - The inter-war years: Central government reluctance and local authority enthusiasm.

The evolutionary pattern of State policy regarding the planning and ownership of airport capacity in the U.K. may be traced back to decisions taken at the end of the First World War.⁴ State ownership was deemed unnecessary because licensing powers were thought sufficient to satisfy Government's concern for regulation and protection from injury.⁵ However, the principle that any local authority with the consent of the Air Council, could set aside land to establish and maintain aerodromes was embodied in Section 8 of the Air Navigation Act, 1920.⁶ Seemingly this legislation was met with a degree of belated enthusiasm on the part of local authorities, a national conference on 'The Necessity of Municipal Airports' attracting 350 representatives of Local Government nine years later. However, evidence suggests that the desire of the Manchester Corporation to be in the vanguard of the development of airport facilities pre-dated such initiatives. Manchester's first aerodrome which opened in May, 1918 and was known locally as 'Alexandra Park' – taking the name of the local railway station - was associated with the city's involvement in aircraft production immediately preceding and during the First World War.⁷ On the cessation of hostilities Manchester Corporation had been keen to purchase the airfield, but the landowner, Lord Egerton of Tatton,

⁴ Cmnd. 9218, *Report of the Civil Aerial Transport Committee*, HMSO (London, 1918.)

⁵ Myerscough, J., *Airport Provision in the Inter-War Years*, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 20, 1 (1985), pp. 41-70.

⁶ Consent of the Ministry of Health was also required if such land was not already owned by the local authority.

⁷For a brief discussion of the early history of airports around the city of Manchester see Caruana, V. and Simmons, C. 'Municipal Enterprise in the Pursuit of Profit: Manchester Airport, 1945-78', *Manchester Region History Review*, X (1996), pp.62-70.

refused to sell off the area for flying purposes. Given the uncomfortably close proximity to the city centre, just two miles to the north (see Figure 2) it was probably fortuitous that Lord Egerton had been less than co-operative and with the expiry of the government lease, the airfield was shut down in 1924.

Having failed to acquire Alexandra Park, and confronted with the manifest futility of attempts to establish scheduled air services elsewhere in the country during the 1920s, Manchester Corporation remained undeterred, continuing to incline to the view that a potential market for air services existed in the area. The returns of the provincial bank clearing houses provided sufficient evidence of the relative prosperity of the north west of England to support a new venture.⁸ Nonetheless, it was appreciated that in order for any airport to succeed the airlines had to be courted. An approach was thus made to Imperial Airways, whose initial response was that the immediate development of internal routes was ‘out of the question’ and continental air services were similarly, ‘improbable’ given the ‘uneconomic’ flying distances of less than 200-250 miles involved. However, the company also suggested that in the longer term there existed the possibility of the city fulfilling a need for an intermediate station between Edinburgh and Glasgow in the north and Croydon, to the south.⁹

Clearly the impression gained from Imperial was that the immediate market was limited and the future was anything but certain. Nonetheless, armed with conviction and spurred on by the latent interest of other municipalities in airport development, the Corporation had

⁸ ‘Notes prepared for an interview with Sir Samuel Hoare, Secretary of State for Air, London, 22 April, 1929’, (MA plc, Archive)

⁹ ‘Notes of interviews between Mr. Hill, Town Clerk’s Department, Deputy Treasurer and representatives of the Croydon County Borough, officials of the aerodrome at Croydon, Imperial Airways Limited and Major Jones of the Air Ministry’ (MA plc Archive)

appointed an Airport Special Committee in 1928 to consider the appropriate siting of airport facilities. The Barton aerodrome - constructed on land already owned by the Cleansing Committee - opened in January, 1930 in an attempt to ensure, at an early date, the introduction of scheduled air services to link the commercial and industrial community of Manchester to other large cities in the British Isles and on the continent.¹⁰ However, as the number of local authority airports nationwide increased in the 1930s the airlines became evermore concerned that development had been ad hoc. For example, a report of the Superintendent of the Board of Railway Air Services published in October 1934 highlighted the haphazard selection of sites – which certainly fell far short of a national policy:

The Air Ministry up to the present has assisted municipalities only in advising them when requested, on details to which their attention has been directed. A lack of guidance on matters of general policy has resulted in some cases in aerodromes being constructed in key positions which are not capable of development, and in other cases first class aerodromes have been laid down in districts which are commercially unsuitable for inclusion in any main airline route. It is submitted that the Government, or some responsible body, should make surveys of the United Kingdom and main industrial areas in conjunction with Railway Air Services and the railway organisation, with a view to indicating where with advantage, main line routes could be operated.¹¹

¹⁰ Myerscough, J., (1985) op. cit.

¹¹ Stroud, J., *Railway Air Services* Ian Allen Ltd., (Weybridge, 1987) p.44

Seemingly there were those in Government circles who were equally concerned about the proliferation of local authority airports, because in July 1935 a committee under the chairmanship of Sir Henry Maybury was formed to advise on the development of civil aviation. The report of this committee¹² published eighteen months later, came closest in its reasoning to a national master plan, proposing a ‘system of airports’ based on a centrally located ‘junction airport’ in Manchester. However, the airport envisaged was not to be the recently established Barton aerodrome, because in its eagerness to establish facilities the Manchester Corporation had fallen foul of the lack of expert advice at hand, when drawing up its plans. In January 1933, Corporation representatives had sought to negotiate with KLM the possibility of a direct service between Manchester and Amsterdam or Rotterdam via Hull. The chief pilot of KLM, Captain Smirnoff, who had recently landed at Barton, inspected the aerodrome and squarely condemned it:

Even with the maximum extensions this ground will never fulfil the conditions necessary for commercial flying... Taken from the meteorological standpoint this is the worst flying ground of any known to me in Europe...The surrounding obstructions such as high tension pylons, high factory chimneys and high radio masts make the approaches to the ground very dangerous... Our advice to the local authorities is not to spend

¹² Cmnd. 5351, *Report of the Committee to consider the Development of Civil Aviation in the U.K.*, HMSO, (London, 1937)

more on this ground, but to try to find a more open ground in their neighbourhood of Manchester.¹³

The Corporation had, undoubtedly, constructed an airport in a key position which was not capable of development. Thus a decision was taken in 1934 to establish Manchester's second airport at Ringway. After four years of planning and development the airport opened on 25th July 1938 and a service to Amsterdam was finally undertaken by KLM.¹⁴ Unfortunately, the Maybury scheme with Ringway providing a junction was never to be tried and tested as a result of the uncertainty created by the mounting tension in Europe.

2) The Second World War: from local authority initiative to State requisition.

With the outbreak of war, strategic control by the State became an imperative and requisitioning plans for aerodromes were activated. Section 7 of the Air Navigation Act, 1920, had provided that in the event of war or of great national emergency, the Secretary of State could, by Order, take possession of and use for the purpose of the naval, military or air forces any aerodrome. Most of the major pre-war provincial airports,

¹³ Correspondence between the representative of KLM and Alderman E.P.M.Sutton, Re. File 16270/vdk1/nw/187, 10 April, 1934 (MA plc Archive)

¹⁴ From July 1938 to August 1939, the Airport handled 7,087 aircraft movements, carrying 7,625 passengers and 163,168 pounds of freight. In addition to Amsterdam airline routes established included services to Croydon, the Isle of Man, Glasgow and Bristol. Operating companies included Railway Air Services using DH86bs and Rapides; Isle of Man Air Services, Southampton Air Services in addition to the Royal Dutch Airline, KLM using DC2s and Electras. (Ringway Airport – Traffic 1938-1939, MA plc Archive)

including Manchester (Barton), were managed and operated by either the RAF Branch of the Air Ministry or the Department of Civil Aviation.

Throughout the war, Ringway was the centre of a number of activities that, in total, made a significant contribution to the war effort. Indeed, the origins of Ringway's wartime role lay in preceding years. For example, the provision of facilities for the assembly and testing of aircraft manufactured in the locality had already been well established by 1939. The need for facilities had arisen because of the difficulty in meeting the requirements of the Air Force Expansion Programme. Initially, Fairey Aviation Co. were accommodated in two hangars but, with the re-armament programme, increased production at the Fairey Heaton Chapel factory was required, involving more assembly and test facilities in separate locations.¹⁵

Although Ringway was strategic during wartime, it was never requisitioned – unlike Barton. The municipality continued to be responsible for the general administration and operation of the facility throughout the entire duration of hostilities. Rather than requisition, lease agreements were drawn up with appropriate government departments. In accounting for the institution of different arrangements at two airports in close proximity owned by the same local authority, it appears that uncertainty surrounded the whole question of requisitioning. A communication between the Airport Manager and the City Treasurer dated 5 October 1939 stated that the relationship between the Air Ministry and the Corporation regarding the use of Ringway during the war was 'somewhat obscure'.¹⁶ The Corporation certainly was not

¹⁵ Memorandum, Aerodrome Owners' Association to the Association of Municipal Corporations, 12 March, 1940 (MA plc Archive) and Robinson, B.R., *Aviation in Manchester, A Short History*, Manchester Branch of the Royal Aeronautical Society, (Manchester, 1977) pp.78-86.

¹⁶ Correspondence between R. H. Adcock and Councillor Biggs, 14 September 1939. (MA plc Archive)

convinced of the merits of requisitioning. On 6 November, the Airport Manager urged the Air Ministry to reconsider the position of Barton and allow the Corporation to co-operate in the administration and maintenance of the airport.¹⁷

Despite the local rejection of the policy of requisitioning it seems likely that, given the national emergency, had central government felt requisitioning to be vital, it would have been difficult for Manchester Corporation to resist. It is quite plausible that when requisitioning plans were being laid in the mid-1930s, Barton, having been established as the ‘Manchester Airport’ for some years, was earmarked because little was then known of the potentially superior facilities at Ringway, the plans for which had only begun to be formulated in July 1934.

In any event, Manchester Corporation was in the enviable position of being able to determine its own priorities, the uppermost being to ensure that the demands of war should not impinge upon the primary civil role of the airport after the cessation of hostilities. Unlike experience elsewhere, Corporation officials continued to influence decisions on the siting of buildings; certainly, their professional services and skills were marshalled in both design and construction. In contrast, at some requisitioned aerodromes there were claims of misuse by the Ministry of those parts of aerodromes that they had requisitioned – sometimes erecting buildings upon sites that were inconvenient or indeed dangerous.¹⁸ In maintaining control of Ringway, the Corporation ensured that at every juncture of development full consideration was given to the fact that at some point in time, hostilities would cease and the Airport

¹⁷ As late as December, 1939 the Town Clerk wrote to the Director of Home Civil Aviation: ‘In view of the fact that this station has already been let by the Corporation to the Air Ministry I do not understand why it should be necessary to requisition it from the Corporation.’ (Correspondence, S. Hill to the Town Clerk, Manchester (Ringway) Airport, 6 November, 1939; and Town Clerk, Manchester Corporation to the Under-Secretary of State, Air Ministry, 16 December, 1939, (MA plc Archive)

should then be in a condition to resume its pre-war role of providing facilities for civil air transport.

This stance is mirrored in the negotiations, which culminated in the construction of concrete runways in 1942. The RAF had been quick to recognise that aircraft dispersal necessitated the construction of hard standings. However, the experience of the winter of 1940/1 suggested that, in addition, it could be necessary to join up the standings with some sort of perimeter road if constant and excessive damage to the landing area was to be avoided. Similarly, it was suggested that, if Ringway were to remain serviceable, steps would need to be taken to secure hard runways. At a meeting of the Airport Committee on 21 February, 1941 one of the councillors argued that there appeared to be ‘a very grave danger of the Corporation being left with an unserviceable aerodrome on the termination of hostilities.’ To delay construction of concrete runways until after the war ‘would be to let slip a golden opportunity of being first in the field to meet the new and rapidly growing civil aviation which would be influenced in its choice airport by the facilities provided.’ The Airport Manager supported this view, maintaining that whilst there was no immediate necessity to construct hard runways, if the war was to last another winter the airport would become unserviceable without concrete runways.¹⁹

Financially, the development of facilities to cater for wartime needs constituted a hidden subsidy. This was because many of the buildings and improvements had been strategically placed to be useful following the cessation of hostilities. In addition to controlling wartime development, continued municipal ownership allowed the Corporation to ensure that

¹⁸ As in the case of Birmingham where buildings were even placed over a sewer.

¹⁹ Memorandum, S. Hill, 3 March, 1941; see also Memorandum of the Town Clerk from C.A.Marsh, H/CAM/A 12 March 1941. (MA plc Archive)

agreements entered into fully covered expenditure incurred. Achieving this objective involved extensive and often protracted negotiations. In the words of Corporation representatives:

‘The Corporation do not wish to profit out of the war time use of Ringway by the Air Ministry, but they do not see why their income should not equal their expenditure when the airport is used to its maximum capacity.’²⁰

The record thus supports the notion that the Corporation would gain advantage from the experience acquired during the period of continued municipal control in wartime. Officials and elected representatives of the City Council played an active, and often leading, part in the determination of the future of the airport. Any development project envisaged by central government during the war had been subjected to the scrutiny of the city and had often been executed by Corporation departments. The unusual nature of arrangements at Ringway was implied in a communication from the Air Ministry:

‘The circumstances at Ringway are unique and there is no other case of a RAF station being built by a City Corporation.’²¹

3) The early post-war years: the ‘nationalisation versus municipal ownership’ debate.

²⁰ Memorandum of an interview, Ringway Airport, dated 13 July, 1938; also Memorandum of and interview between Mr. Marsh, Deputy Town Clerk, and Mr. Hill, Airports Manager, Manchester Corporation, 8 August, 1940. (MA plc Archive)

²¹ Correspondence, C.A.Marsh, 18 March, 1940. (MA plc Archive)

The scale of the British effort in civil aviation from August 1946, when wartime restrictions on the flight of civil aircraft were revoked was considerable.²² The rapid resumption of activity and the large demand for air services that the experience of the war years had engendered were, in part, reflected at Manchester. In the fourteen months from October 1946 to November 1947 Ringway handled 33,022 passengers representing a more than fourfold increase on numbers recorded in the equivalent period to August 1939. The summer timetable offered in 1948 similarly suggests a significant improvement upon the pre-war years, new continental routes to Paris, Brussels and Lourdes operated again by foreign airlines now accompanied KLM's Amsterdam route.

As the State had assumed a more prominent role in airport development during the war, it is perhaps not surprising that the newly elected Labour Government announced, in 1945, its plans for the State ownership and operation of all aerodromes to be used for scheduled air services. Nationalisation implied the need to devise a programme of existing aerodromes, which would support air services, and, in 1947, 40 aerodromes were earmarked for acquisition.²³ Concerning Manchester's place in the scheme, the fact that it had not been requisitioned was of significance because whilst other airports could pass from a State of requisition to nationalisation with ease, for Ringway there was an intervening period when the aerodrome operated as a licensed entity

²² It may be gauged by the fact that within seven months, not only were civil air services resumed between the U.K. and the nine European capitals (Paris, Oslo, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam, Rome, Athens and Helsinki), and New York, but also the first regular British service to South America was inaugurated. In 1947 U.K. airlines carried 586,500 passengers and 5,051 tons of freight on scheduled services compared with 222,200 passengers and 2,527 tons of freight in 1938. The number of people using air services to cross national boundaries had increased more than threefold. (Ministry of Civil Aviation, *Civil Aviation Report(s) 1946 and 1947*, HMSO, (London, 1948.)

²³ Cmnd. 6712, *British Air Services*, HMSO, (London, 1945) See also Sealy, K.R., *Airport Strategy and Planning, Theory and Practice in Geography*, OUP, (London, 1976)

outside Ministry control.²⁴ This period was to witness a lively debate regarding the relative merits of municipal versus State ownership which resounded not only through the corridors of Whitehall but of Manchester Town Hall too as the prospect of nationalisation found the Finance Committee of the Corporation at loggerheads with its Airport Committee.

Initially, the Finance Committee had proved willing to support the city's investment in airport facilities in the absence of assistance from central government. For example, when considering the proposal to establish Barton aerodrome in 1929, the benefits that could arise had been manifestly appreciated:

The proposals now under consideration show a financial burden which under ordinary conditions the Finance Committee would wish to avoid, but having regard to all the circumstances, including a prospective benefit to Manchester trade generally, the Finance Committee approve the proposals of the Airport Special Committee as to the application for borrowing powers for £30,000.²⁵

When the Finance Committee considered the Ringway scheme in 1934, the same attitude was displayed. Despite the creation of a financial burden on the city the Committee were 'of the opinion that looking to the future economic development of the City satisfactory airport facilities are

²⁴ Correspondence, George Lamb to Councillor Fitzsimmons, 14 January, 1946. (MA plc Archive)

²⁵ City of Manchester, 'Report(s) of the Airport Special Committee and the Finance Committee on the Proposed Application for Borrowing Powers for the construction of an aerodrome at Chat Moss, 31 February, 1929.' (MA plc Archive.)

essential, they approve the proposals of the Airport Special Committee as to an application for borrowing powers for £179,295.²⁶

However, by March 1953, Ringway had cost the Corporation £493,250 on capital account; and the total rate-borne expenditure between 1935 and 1953 amounted to £202,000.²⁷ In the face of mounting expenditures the Airport Committee remained convinced that if the city retained control of the airport and developed it, in the long run surpluses would accrue. They maintained that Manchester's status in the world of civil aviation was unquestionably the result of the insistence of the City Council that the city should not fall behind in times of rapid change. At every stage, it was asserted, the Airport Committee had pressed the claims of the Greater Manchester area for the best that civil aviation could provide enlisting the support of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce. Detailed knowledge of the requirements of the area, local drive, enterprise and initiative would ensure the success of Ringway, not State take-over whereby Ringway would have to take its place with others in a programme laid down from London by an authority lacking the special knowledge that the city of Manchester had regarding the trade and other requirements of the area.²⁸

For the Finance Committee the indirect benefits of the development of airport facilities for the industry and commerce of

²⁶ City of Manchester, 'Report(s) of the Airport Special Committee and the Finance Committee on a proposal to provide additional air transport facilities, 19 July, 1934' (MA plc Archive). It is interesting to note that despite the Finance Committee's acquiescence however, certain elected members had still voiced misgivings within the council chamber. Indeed, the Ringway scheme originally considered in full council on 25 July, 1934 had only been approved by the narrowest margin of 55 votes to 54. Some elected members had voiced concerns about the scope for developing civil aviation in a country the size of Britain and questioned the prudence of devoting large expenditures to an industry which was undergoing rapid change, others simply opposed the principle that such an enterprise should be supported by the rates; even considerations of equity were given an airing when it was suggested that 'only the rich could afford to fly.'

²⁷ Council Circular Item No. VII (o) No. 1915, City of Manchester, 'The Future of Ringway Airport', in the 'Report of the Airport Special Committee, 18 March, 1954.', p.8 (MA plc Archive)

²⁸ Ibid. p.10

Manchester and the surrounding region remained unquestionable. In principle its position remained that of 1929. However, the Airport Committee's claim that municipal ownership would bring an added impetus to development was firmly rejected whilst the possibility of future profits and the prestige of local ownership were regarded as inconsequential in the face of the added rate burden. Ultimately, the Finance Committee urged the City Council to disapprove the recommendations of the Airport Committee and to instruct it to make arrangements for the transfer of the airport to the Ministry of Civil Aviation.²⁹

At a meeting on 31 March 1953, the City Council considered the options. The decision was not one to be taken lightly, and the council adjourned on that date with no vote being registered. The question was again considered on 29 April, 1953, and it is clear that a lively and sometimes emotive debate ensued – a debate conducted not so much on party lines as much as on the issues of local vs. central funding and of the “business” of local government in terms of services and obligations to ratepayers. The contribution of Alderman Dawson (Conservative) was recorded in the local press:

If you hand over control you are admitting to the world at large that Manchester feels it is not capable of doing the job it took on in 1934...The success of Ringway may be so glorious that in a few years you will get a profit...³⁰

²⁹ Council Circular Item No. VII (o) No. 1915, ‘Observations of the Finance Committee’ dated 24 March, 1953, p.16 (MA plc Archive)

³⁰ *Manchester Evening News*, 30 April, 1953.

Councillor Mendell (Labour), on the other hand, maintained that since 1945 there had been a substantial increase in income from Ringway, but an even greater increase in expenditure:

There is no indication that this trend is not going to continue. Almost every month there is a supplementary estimate for more money... Are we justified in incurring extremely high capital expenditure when all we are to get is the doubtful honour of owning an airport?³¹

On the future ownership of Ringway, the Airport Committee won the day with a majority of 86 to 32 on a free vote at the end of a 90-minute debate.³² To retain ownership, the city had been prepared to meet a loss of revenue amounting to the return of a 2nd rate, or the equivalent of £52,000.³³

Having convinced the City Council that continued municipal ownership was the best way of securing Ringway's future the Airport Committee was free to pursue its battle against the forces of the State, which seemingly could not muster a united front. A detailed examination of the negotiations between representatives of the Corporation and of the Ministry dating back to the closing months of World War Two reveals that there were in the Ministry itself grave misgivings about the State management of aerodromes. For example, at a gathering of representatives of the Ministry of Civil Aviation, Manchester Corporation and the Manchester Chamber of Commerce, convened in June 1945, the

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

³³ Council Circular Item No. VI (d), City of Manchester, Manchester Airport, 'Agreement with the Ministry of Aviation' in Report of the Airport Committee dated 13 February, 1954 (MA plc Archive)

Minister, Lord Swinton, expressed doubts regarding the government's plans. In his view, the municipalities had done 'fine pioneer work' in developing airports, 'often at considerable expense' and he supported the involvement of local authorities in the detailed administration of airports.³⁴

At a later conference between representatives of the Corporation and the newly appointed Minister of Civil Aviation, Lord Pakenham, held at the House of Lords on 13 June, 1950 a scheme for continued municipal ownership and control – the details of which were known to fewer than six people in the Corporation – was tabled. The proposals involved the Corporation retaining ownership subject to certain capital works, already completed at State expense, being transferred to the local authority without charge; the cost of future capital works being borne by the Corporation with substantial grants from central government and the Corporation bearing all recurrent expenditure (including runway and other maintenance) whilst retaining all accruing income.

In considering these proposals recent experience suggested the advantages to the Exchequer of grant-aid rather than State control. Accounts of the Ministry of Civil Aviation published as early as 1948/9 had shown a loss of £4,210,551 on aerodrome operation and after deducting losses on the national airports of London, Northolt and Prestwick the loss on other airports remained a substantial £2,561,111.³⁵ Under the Corporation's proposals the Exchequer could anticipate a saving on capital expenditure and any annual losses, which might accrue to the operation of the aerodrome, a point which had seemingly been equally appreciated by the Corporation's Finance Committee. As with the

³⁴ Minutes of a meeting between a deputation from the Manchester Airport Committee and the Minister of Civil Aviation, 12 June, 1945. (MA plc Archive)

³⁵ Correspondence, G. H. Barnwell to P. B. Dingle, 7 January, 1952. (MA plc Archive)

City Council, the Airport Committee was successful in convincing the Ministry that ‘the municipality situated beside its own aerodrome would take a very keen local interest in running [it] and might do it more satisfactorily, and certainly better from the public relations aspect, than the Government doing it more remotely.’³⁶

The agreement between the Corporation and the Ministry was finalised in 1955 and the question of the future ownership of Ringway was settled, whilst at many other provincial airports the state of limbo of requisition-cum-nationalisation continued into the next decade. On 31 March, 1955 F.N.Hillier, Secretary-General of the Air League of the British Empire, wrote to Philip Dingle, the Town Clerk referring to a statement made by the Minister of Civil Aviation, in reply to a question in the House of Commons that ‘Manchester Airport has established its position as one of the most important aerodromes of this country.’ He also made reference to the Town Clerk’s ‘hard struggle’ to obtain recognition of the aerodrome at all, and commented ‘I could not forbear a smile, but you must be very happy to see your efforts come to fruition’³⁷

4) The 1955 agreement in practice.

In agreeing to Manchester Corporation’s proposals for continued municipal ownership of Ringway it seems that the Ministry had finally been convinced that the attitude of the local authority towards developing air services would reduce the burden on public funds not only nationally, but locally, too. However, in reality financial viability would only be

³⁶ Report of the Select Committee on Estimates, Session 1955-56:XIII, par. 24.

³⁷ Correspondence, F. N. Hillier to P. B. Dingle, 31 March, 1955. (MA plc Archive)

possible if the local authority was free to develop facilities and publicise them in order to attract the commercial interest of the airlines.

In June 1945 Corporation representatives had voiced misgivings not only about the nationalisation of airport facilities but also about the emerging ownership and competition policy for the airlines. The proposal to bring the provision of air transport services under public control with the establishment of B.E.A., B.O.A.C. and British South American Airways required clarification because it was felt that the State airlines might not be prepared to operate through Ringway in the post-war period preferring to concentrate their operations on London. Lord Swinton suggested that the primary basis for assigning air services to selected operators would be 'taking the rough with the smooth'. Private independent operators could apply to run a service, which was not assigned, and foreign operators could be granted permission to operate a service into and out of the U.K. so long as the designated corporation could join the route as and when they wished on a '50/50 basis'.³⁸

The suggestion implied that the field was open for the authorities in Manchester to take the necessary action to encourage the use of their airport by both foreign and independent operators if the State corporations proved reluctant to operate services through Ringway. This was to be crucial in the early post-war development of the airport.

A Report of the Select Committee on Estimates, Session 1955-6 entitled 'Civil Aerodromes and Ground Services' stated that because of the efforts of the Corporation, the increase in traffic at Ringway had been considerably greater than at aerodromes owned by the Ministry. Certainly by the end of the 1950s, Manchester had developed an extensive network

³⁸ Town Clerk's Report to the Airport Committee and to the General and Parliamentary Committee, 1 May, 1946. See also Minutes of a meeting between a deputation from the Manchester Airport Committee and the Minister of Civil Aviation, 12 June, 1945. (MA plc Archive)

of air services operated by a number of airlines with – in many instances - foreign operators tending to take the initiative in testing the market.³⁹ However, what was to set Ringway apart from airports of comparable size, thus posing a challenge to the larger Prestwick Airport in Scotland, was the development of transatlantic services. Referring to the Select Committee on Estimates again, it was asserted that in 1952 the Ministry had considered Ringway serving only continental routes but the Manchester Corporation had thought otherwise and as a result of their initiative the airport served long-haul intercontinental routes as well.

The encouragement of transatlantic traffic was the means by which the local authority owners sought to pursue a more fundamental goal of establishing Manchester as the second airport in Britain and necessary to this goal was the completion of a programme of runway and terminal development. In deciding to extend the main runway from 5,900 to 7,000 feet in the 1950s the Airport Director had supported the project on the expectation that half the transatlantic traffic at Prestwick would be attracted to Manchester and it was hoped that a number of continental and North American airlines might transfer their operations, an added bonus was the possibility of prising northern traffic away from London.⁴⁰

Sabena, the Belgian airline introduced the first transatlantic service on 28 October 1953, operating between Brussels, Manchester and New York. Over the next three years, transatlantic services were expanded with B.O.A.C. commencing a route between London, Manchester, Prestwick and New York and Lufthansa inaugurating new services to

³⁹ B.E.A. had joined K.L.M. and Aer Lingus on the Amsterdam route; Aer Lingus joined Sabena flying to Brussels; Sabena and B.E.A. operated to Dublin in addition to Aer Lingus and K.L.M.; and B.E.A. Aer Lingus and Swissair operated to Zurich. New scheduled services had been introduced to the Continent by B.E.A. flying to Barcelona, to Milan, to Palma and also to Rome.

⁴⁰ Council Circular Item No. V (c), 'Report No. 2606, City of Manchester, Extension of Manchester Airport' contained in Report of the Airport Committee, 13 December, 1956. See also City of

Montreal and Chicago. In addition to these new scheduled services, North American charter traffic was swollen by a large increase in emigration, the introduction of the ‘air coach holiday’ and the movements of U.S. military forces and families into and out of the U.K. and Europe.

Between 1957 and 1961, - during which time, the main runway was extended further to 9,000 feet (1958/9) placing Manchester in the category of the largest airports by international standards as laid down by Annex 14 of the International Civil Airports Organisation and by the Ministry of Aviation – the terminal passengers on transatlantic flights at Ringway increased from 11,907 to 26,903 representing an increase of 126% with more passengers travelling eastward than westward through Manchester.⁴¹

It may be concluded from the foregoing that by retaining ownership of Manchester Airport, the Corporation was in a position to set and execute a local agenda for the development of facilities and air routes. The financial terms of the 1955 agreement were significant in affording a guarantee of some support from the State that may, in turn, have indirectly influenced airlines’ commercial decisions. In this sense however, it is contended that local initiative rather than any commitment from central government was the crucial determining factor in development. State support was only of marginal significance, particularly as, when considering grant applications, central government in practice, sought to prevent what they regarded as ‘excessive commitments’ even within the terms of the 1955 agreement.

Manchester, ‘Future Operation of Manchester Airport’ Report of the Airport Committee, 18 January, 1956. (MA plc Archive)

⁴¹ ‘Application for planning permission to develop land at Manchester Airport by an extension of the main runway and ancillary works, permanent diversion of Wilmslow-Altrincham Road and Mill Lane, the City of Manchester (Airport Extension)’ No. 3 CPO, 1964. See also W. Barker, Survey of transatlantic Traffic at Manchester Airport, 14 February, 1963. (MA plc Archive)

A case in point is the way in which the Ministry handled proposals for terminal development formulated by the City Architect in the 1950s. The original scheme for terminal building development submitted in December, 1954 had involved an estimated capital expenditure of £2,772,310, a sum which the Ministry had deemed ‘unjustified’ in view of the amounts which it proposed to spend on airports at Glasgow, Prestwick and Edinburgh. An amended plan involving a reduced figure of £2,159,716 was therefore put forward in February 1956. In response to these amendments, the Ministry flatly refused to approve expenditure of more than £1 million for 75% grant. As plans were further modified to anticipate the jet age and the greater payload likely to be carried by the early Boeings, the Corporation went ahead with a £2.8 million scheme despite the limits imposed on grant aid by the Ministry.⁴²

Clearly, Manchester Corporation and the Ministry differed in their priorities for airport development the former seeking to ‘develop [the airport] so that it may attract and retain direct services to all parts of the world that are justified by the commercial and industrial importance of the densely populated area served by the airport’⁴³ whilst the latter wishing to minimise Exchequer losses. Perhaps the Ministry’s position is unsurprising when it is considered that most provincial airports continued to register losses in the 1950s. Nonetheless, the validity of the Corporation’s stance is borne out by the fact that after 22 years

⁴² Council Circular Item No. VI (d), report no. 2642, City of Manchester, ‘Manchester Airport, Proposed New Terminal Building’ Report of the Airport Committee, 23 January, 1957; Council Circular Item No. V (b), Report No. 3204, City of Manchester, ‘Manchester Airport, New Terminal Apron and Taxiways, Report of the Airport Committee, 10 September, 1959. (MA plc Archive)

⁴³ ‘Public Inquiry into the proposed stopping up of lengths of two roads adjoining Manchester Airport in the County of Chester to enable Manchester Corporation to develop the land for civil aviation purposes; Local Inquiry to be held in the Town Hall, Manchester on 4 December, 1958, before Sir Maurice Holmes’ (MA plc Archive)

Manchester Airport recorded its first net surplus of £12,578 in 1957/8.⁴⁴ This was a fact not to go unnoticed and within a year the Public Accounts Committee proposed a review of the 1955 agreement on the grounds that it was not equitable that taxpayers' resources should be devoted to an airport where receipts exceeded expenditure. Two alternatives presented themselves: either the government could take a share of the airport's profits, or the payment of capital grants to the Corporation in the future would cease. At a meeting of the Airport Committee on 22 November 1963 the conclusion was reached that it was in the best interests of the Corporation to forego future capital grants and reject the suggestion of profit sharing.⁴⁵

Having been supported by grant aid towards capital expenditure for a period of nine years, the 1955 Agreement was terminated on 1 April, 1964. During the period of deficit operations the Ministry had supported airport development in Manchester, albeit grudgingly at times, but the first recorded surplus owed much more to municipal ownership, which had given an impetus to growth and development lacking at other major provincial airports managed by the Ministry in the early post-war years. Although receiving relatively equal-handed treatment in the provision of new facilities, cost-minimisation was the over-riding consideration rather than maximising returns on investment. Ministerial bureaucracy ensured that no new facility was provided until the need for it had been 'demonstrated in triplicate', a practice that was to have a stifling effect on innovation and development. Equally stifling was the inability of civil servants charged with the day-to-day running of airports to become involved in attracting new traffic, promoting the use of existing facilities

⁴⁴ Council Circular Item No. VI (d), City of Manchester, 'Manchester Airport, Agreement with the Ministry of Aviation' dated 13 February, 1964. (MA plc Archive)

⁴⁵ Ibid

or publicising any airport in anything but the most guarded terms, for fear of being seen to favour one airport or operation or service over another.⁴⁶

5) Centralisation and *laissez faire* in the 1960s

As deficits mounted and the central responsibility for the running of aerodromes became more onerous, a general trend towards decentralisation of ownership of provincial airports became enshrined in government policy. Following the publication of a White Paper in 1961, the government took positive steps to sell its airports to local authorities in the hope of achieving a more commercial approach to operations.⁴⁷ This set the pattern for the individual planning of provincial airports, but with little regard for development at neighbouring airports – however close.⁴⁸ At the same time, the government rejected any suggestion of financial support, and when handing back airports to local authority control in the 1960s, the terms offered were frequently less favourable than those which had been agreed with Manchester Corporation in 1955. For example, in the case of Liverpool's Speke Airport, there was no suggestion of grant aid for capital development.⁴⁹

Whilst the cornerstones of the development of provincial airports were to be decentralisation of ownership and little or no co-ordination, those airports deemed to fulfil an international role, especially the London group and the international airport at Prestwick became exceptions. The 'rigid plan' envisaged in the immediate post-war years and challenged by

⁴⁶ Butler, P.H., *An Illustrated History of Liverpool Airport*, Merseyside Aviation Society, (Liverpool, May, 1983) p.18

⁴⁷ Cmnd. 1457, *Civil Aerodromes and Air Navigational Services*, HMSO (London, 1961)

⁴⁸ Cmnd. 4018, (1969) op. cit. p. 39, see also Department of Transport 'Airport Strategy for Great Britain, Part 2 The Regional Airports: A Consultative Document' HMSO, London, June 1976.

Manchester Corporation gave way to a hybrid where both centralisation and the *laissez-faire* approaches existed side-by-side. The 1961 White Paper had stated that ‘an Airport Authority should be set up to own and manage the main international airports now owned by the State’, and to ‘plan, build and manage any new airports eventually required’. The Select Committee on Estimates in its Fifth Report in 1961 had made the case for putting the London airports in the hands of an independent authority. British European Airways had been influential in this respect, suggesting that: ‘an airport is potentially a keenly commercial undertaking and for this reason should be run on commercial business lines. A Civil Service approach is often quite inappropriate.’⁵⁰

In establishing the British Airports Authority (BAA), the government recognised the advantages of public ownership for the main U.K. airports, leaving the fate of other aerodromes in the hands of local government. Nevertheless, provision was made for ownership structures to be altered at some future date:

2(3) The Authority shall have power to do anything that is calculated to facilitate the discharge of its duties under this Act.

2(4) Without prejudice to the generality of the last foregoing sub-section, the Authority may provide, or acquire, or assume management of any aerodrome in Great Britain in addition to those transferred to the Authority under this Act.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Butler, P.H., (May, 1983) op. cit. p.23

⁵⁰ Cited in Sealy, K.R., (1976) op. cit. p.42

⁵¹ Report of the Air Transport Licensing Board for the Year ended 31 March, 1967, HC604, Session 1966-7, Airport Authority Act, 1965.

The underlying principles of these clauses reflected a continued concern for the Exchequer to the detriment of rational airport planning. Local authorities were handed the burden of loss-making ventures, but if through their own efforts, fortunes were turned around, the profitable ones could be surrendered to the BAA.⁵²

In practice the public ownership of the State's principal airports at Heathrow, Gatwick, Stansted and Prestwick from April 1966 served to reinforce the domination of London in the air transport system – which had been the outcome of a previously vacillating policy. In the provinces the only challenge to such domination came from Manchester. The group of regional airports including Aberdeen, Belfast, Blackpool, Bournemouth, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Glasgow devolved to local authorities was essentially relegated to a position of secondary importance.

The major growth area in the 1960s was the 'Inclusive Tour' (IT) market, and the future viability of U.K. airports became increasingly dependent upon the attraction of a wide range of these services.⁵³ However, the IT sector was – and still remains – notoriously volatile, so it became equally necessary that U.K. airports should attract a wide range of scheduled air services to provide a cushion against the effects of short

⁵² Indeed the Committee of Inquiry into Civil Air Transport under the chairmanship of Professor Sir Ronald Edwards, KBE which reported in 1969 had tentatively suggested that Manchester Airport should be transferred to the BAA, a suggestion which called forth fierce opposition. The City of Manchester accepted in principle that the diversion of traffic to Manchester from Heathrow and Gatwick could perhaps be facilitated if all three airports were placed under the same controlling authority, but argued that no precedent existed in Europe or the U.S. to suggest that there was any real merit in all major international airports becoming the responsibility of the BAA. Municipal management was supported by a comparison of the financial performance of Manchester and Gatwick Airports for 1967/8 the former recording a surplus of £373,000 whilst the latter supported a deficit of £537,000 and the Edwards Committee was accused of being unduly influenced by the evidence of the BAA. (Evidence is provided in correspondence, Airport Director, Manchester Airport to the Town Clerk, Manchester City Council, Report of the Edwards Committee, 11 July, 1969), (MA plc Archive)

⁵³ Liverpool City Council, *Market Research Study, Liverpool Airport, vol.1*, May, 1971, p.30

term fluctuations in the holiday market.⁵⁴ In the charter market Manchester was making substantial gains with terminal passengers increasing at an average annual rate of 16% - compared with 15% for the London area airports.⁵⁵ Whilst total terminal passengers more than doubled from 1963 to 1972 (1,117,774 to 2,350,656), throughput on IT increased more than tenfold (91,655 to 999,814.) By the late 1960s, Ringway served a wide range of IT destinations.⁵⁶ Entirely new markets such as Naples, Rome, Tarbes and Zurich were introduced and all the major U.K. tour operators offered direct flights from Ringway.⁵⁷

In September 1961, more than 25 international passenger routes operated on a regular basis from Manchester using Viscounts to West Europe and Britannias and Boeing 727s on BOACs routes to North America. From 1965 to 1972, the proportion of international terminal passengers doubled from 25% to 50% of throughput. In terms of scheduled passengers, the continental routes increased their share of traffic from 16% in 1965 to 23% in 1970.⁵⁸ New routes were added to the network, e.g. Chicago, Philadelphia, Malta, Barcelona and Palma reflecting the tendency to concentrate regional activity at Manchester as direct air services intensified.⁵⁹

In contrast to this dynamic experience, in September, 1961 only one international passenger service operated from Liverpool (to Dublin). By September 1966, nine international passenger services had been established (serving, for example, Palma, Rimini, Ostend, Amsterdam

⁵⁴ Cmnd. 4018, (1969) op. cit. pp.15-16.

⁵⁵ Liverpool City Council, May, 1971 op. cit. pp. 34-36 and 117-118.

⁵⁶ These included Alicante, Barcelona, Basle, Bargas, Dubrovnik, Gerona, Ibiza, Lisbon, Ljubljana, Luxembourg, Mahon, Malaga, Milan, Munich, Ostend, Palma, Pula, Rimini, Split, Tenerife, Tunis, Valencia, Varna and Venice.

⁵⁷ The North West of England Advisory Committee for Civil Aviation, *Annual Report 1968/9*, pp. 4-6 and *1969/70* p.5. See also *Liverpool City Council, May 1971*, op.cit. pp. 175-8.

⁵⁸ Liverpool City Council, May, 1971, op. cit. p.61

⁵⁹ The North West Advisory Committee for Civil Aviation, *Annual Report, 1969-70*.

and Cork), but three years later, all of the new continental services had disappeared largely because of the collapse of 'British Eagle'.⁶⁰ Although this was obviously peculiar to Liverpool, Birmingham Airport similarly had trouble in establishing viable international air services. BEA had operated from Birmingham to four destinations in the early 1960s⁶¹ however, aircraft larger than Viscounts could not profitably operate from there, and as early as 1964 some departures had to be 'doubled-up' – a second aircraft operating ten minutes later.⁶² Although Birmingham Airport was establishing itself as an international airport in the late 1960s, handling the largest number of international passengers in the provinces outside Manchester, in contrast to Ringway the only stable continental route at the time was the Birmingham-Paris route with seven flights per week.⁶³

The airport network that emerged by the end of the 1960s tended towards a feeder/hub system with traffic concentrating on domestic trunk services to and from Heathrow. The hub airport had a near monopoly of international air services. This system had led to a very clearly defined spatial pattern of airports. Within a radius of 75 miles from London, international travellers from the provinces transferred to the London airport system via surface transport. Thus, the hub was effectively surrounded by a wide catchment area in which interlining traffic was sterilised. Anomalies in the airport system both geographically and

⁶⁰ Liverpool City Council, May 1971, op. cit., pp.12-13.

⁶¹ That is Barcelona (April, 1960-October, 1967), Amsterdam (July, 1960-October, 1961 and again from April, 1966), Milan (April 1961-64) and Basle (IT flights 1961-64)

⁶² Negus, G., *'Happy Landings, A Celebration of Birmingham International Airport PLC, 1939-89'* Birmingham International Airport PLC and Geoffrey Negus, 1989, pp. 30,38 and 44.

⁶³ Liverpool City Council, May, 1971, op. cit. p.56

financially emerged, and the distribution of U.K. airports in terms of their size became increasingly lop-sided.⁶⁴

The policy of the 1960s implied no underlying strategy, and pleas for a return to more closely defined planning were made. Rigas Doganis, in a Fabian Tract written in 1967, deplored the fact that so much airport planning had been conducted at a local level without regard for what had occurred, or was planned, in adjacent areas. He concluded that some form of national plan was needed with an administration designed to operate it efficiently.⁶⁵ The Joint Airport Committee of Local Authorities (JACOLA) also favoured a central body undertaking a study of the existing pattern of airports, especially those situated in conurbations, with a view to ascertaining their future potential.⁶⁶

In considering the possibilities of airport planning, the Edwards Committee, reporting in 1969, argued that no government had formulated a positive policy for development, and that what policy there had been had almost invariably been 'negative'. It was suggested that more research on airport planning was required and that this should be closely coordinated with other planning aspects of civil aviation. The Committee, therefore, advocated that a single body should be responsible for airline regulation and for research upon which airport plans could be based. As far as airport ownership was concerned it was held that the planning initiative would not necessarily be undermined by continued decentralisation: 'Nothing we saw in the actual operation of airports suggests that central ownership of them all was necessary for efficient

⁶⁴ Civil Aviation Authority, CAP 372, *'The Development of the U.K. Airport System'*, CAA, London, April 1975, p.5. See also Masefield, Sir P., *An Airports System for United Kingdom Air Service*, Aeronautical Journal, vol.76, No. 275, 1972.

⁶⁵ Doganis, R.S., *'A National Airport Plan'*, Fabian Tract, 377, London, 1967.

⁶⁶ JACOLA, Minutes of a meeting on 31 January, 1968 London, S.W.1, (MA plc Archive)

operation’; and, ‘it seems to us desirable to fit the ownership and management of airports to their function.’⁶⁷

6) A national strategy for developing regional airports? The State encounters local hostility.

The Civil Aviation Authority was established under the Civil Aviation Act, 1971. Section 33 of the Act stated that,

It shall be the duty of the Authority: (a), to consider what aerodromes are in its opinion likely to be required from time to time in the U.K. in addition to or in place of or by way of alteration of existing aerodromes; and (b), to make recommendations to the Secretary of State arising out of its consideration of that matter.⁶⁸

The role of the CAA regarding airports was further defined in a statement of policy placing upon it the responsibility to advise on the provision and development of air services and general aviation.⁶⁹ Thus apparently for the first time a body had been established to pioneer rational integrated planning and development and as the Edwards Committee had suggested it was felt that this could be achieved with little or no alteration of ownership structures.

⁶⁷ Cmnd. 4018 (1969) op. cit. p.223 and Sealy, K.R., (1976) op. cit. p.34

⁶⁸ Civil Aviation Act, 1971, Chapter 75, p.19f

⁶⁹ Sealy, K.R., (1976) op. cit. p.45

For Manchester Airport however, municipal ownership itself called forth government interference in the guise of Local Government Re-organisation, which in 1974 resulted in the first major change in ownership structures in the history of Manchester's airports (see Figure 3). The Local Government Act, 1972, created a new county council for Manchester stretching from Rochdale in the north to Wilmslow in the south, and from Wigan in the west to Oldham in the east. The old counties of Lancashire and Cheshire lost all powers and control in the new administrative area, and county boroughs such as Manchester ceased to exist. Rather the new county comprised ten districts, with the new authority representatives being elected in April and May 1973. Greater Manchester County Council had 107 councillors, with the Manchester District electing 20 representatives. The new Manchester District covered the old Manchester County Borough and incorporated the parish of Ringway in the rural district of Bucklow, where Manchester Airport was situated. The new district had a population of 590,000 and continued to elect 99 councillors.⁷⁰

Although the general rules for the transfer of property under local government re-organisation implied that the ownership of Manchester Airport would remain with the Manchester District, the Secretary of State took reserve powers to make supplementary orders to amend the general principle. There were three possible courses of action: the airport could remain with the district; the airport could be vested in the Greater Manchester County Council by supplemental order; or the Secretary of State could exercise an option to acquire the airport.⁷¹

⁷⁰ 'Local Government Re-organisation, Manchester Corporation', contained in *Staff Bulletin*, No. 1 (July, 1972) (MA plc Archive)

⁷¹ Correspondence between Mr. D.C. Milefante, Department of the Environment, and the Honorary Secretary, Association of Municipal Corporations, County Councils Association, National Association

A fundamental difference of opinion emerged between the existing airport owners and the newly created Greater Manchester County Council that was only resolved by a compromise prompted by the prospect of central government take-over. The Greater Manchester Authority assumed a significant role in the promotion of industry, commerce and employment in the whole of the Greater Manchester area, which was regarded as the focal point of the north of England. The County Council maintained that in order to fulfil its designated role in the development of the area's economy, ownership and control of the airport was essential. It was argued that the new authority would be conscious of development needs across a wider spectrum and therefore be in a better position to determine the potential for future growth of the airport. The social costs of airport development had registered beyond the city boundary, and so the new County Council felt it should hold responsibility for remedial work and compensation. The new Council represented the wider constituency of airport users, it was said, and therefore was better equipped to shoulder the financial burden of airport development. Finally, as the new Council was the traffic and transportation authority for the area, it seemed logical that the responsibility for airport development should lie with the body that determined surface modes of transport.⁷²

In contrast the majority of elected members on the District Council were adamant that they should retain control of the airport. The Chairman of the Airport Committee maintained that the development of the airport had been one of the most striking examples of local government enthusiasm, initiative and enterprise, and that the acquisition of

of Local Councils, RDCs Association, Local Government Re-organisation – Transfer of Property (MA plc Archive)

⁷² Greater Manchester County Council, Policy Committee, 13 September, 1973, 'Manchester (Ringway) Airport, Report of the Chief Executive, 7 September, 1973 : The Manchester International Airport at Ringway' Memorandum (MA plc Archive)

international status since the Second World War had been the result of the determination of the city and the support given by its ratepayers. Like the County, the District Council was anxious to maintain the airport's international status and improve facilities in the manner of its predecessor, the City Council.⁷³ Considerable prestige also derived from ownership of an airport, which over a 15-year period had contributed £1,789,404 to the city's Rate Fund despite the need for heavy capital expenditure. At an Airport Committee meeting on 13 September 1973, a resolution was passed unanimously:

That the Department of the Environment be informed that the Manchester District Council hold the strong view that the ownership and responsibility for the control, management, operation and development of the existing Manchester Airport should vest in the Manchester District Council.⁷⁴

The views of the new District and County Councils regarding the future ownership of Manchester Airport were diametrically opposed and neither seemed capable of negotiating the middle ground. However, unequivocal agreement could be reached on one fundamental principle: the airport should remain under local governance and any suggestion that the British Airports Authority at some future date might assume responsibility should be resisted.⁷⁵ Avoiding intervention by the Secretary of State was paramount, and a compromise of joint ownership was reached with the Manchester District and the Greater Manchester County

⁷³ *Wythenshawe Express*, 22 November, 1973 and Airport Committee, Manchester District Council, 13 September, 1973, 'The Future of Manchester Airport' (MA plc Archive)

⁷⁴ Airport Committee, Manchester District Council, 13 September, 1973 op. cit.

⁷⁵ Greater Manchester County Council, Policy Committee, Manchester (Ringway) Airport, Report of the Chief Executive, 8 September, 1973, op. cit.

Councils appointing a committee known initially as the Manchester Airport Joint Committee (later the Manchester International Airport Authority) to discharge all functions relating to the airport. The Joint Committee was to have equal representation from the two local authorities, with ten members appointed by the Manchester District and ten by the County.⁷⁶

Whilst Ringway remained in local hands in terms of ownership structures the CAA became concerned about the wider network of regional airports and began to focus attention on the North West, Yorkshire and Humberside, the West Midlands and East Midlands. By the early 1970s, the feeder and single hub system, which had developed in the previous decade, was already showing signs of breaking up through extension of the airport system. The Metra Consulting Group were commissioned to consider the future structure of the airport system and recommended that concentration should be supported, but at two new rural airports rather than Manchester and Birmingham.⁷⁷

Such recommendations received a decidedly cool reception, indicating that while systematic analysis of costs and benefits had taken place it did not follow that such radical initiatives could be readily implemented. At a conference on regional airports in 1975, the Director of Ringway went so far as to suggest that it might be too late to formulate a comprehensive plan for regional airports as rationalisation would be likely to meet with great opposition from large sections of the population within the respective airport areas.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Manchester District Council, Report of the Policy Committee, Council Circular Item No. 3 (c), 13 December, 1973 (MA plc Archive)

⁷⁷ Civil Aviation Authority, CAP 373, 'Airport Development in the Central England Area' CAA, London, (April 1975) pp. 4-7 and 28.

⁷⁸ Sealy, K.R., (1976) op. cit. pp. 32 and 58 and CAA, CAP 373, (April 1975) op. cit. pp5 and 30.

Ultimately, a White Paper on airport policy issued in 1978 recognised that there was a greater role for the regional airports to fulfil and reinforced the need for concentration of air services. However, the Government firmly rejected the principle of forced diversion of traffic to the regions.⁷⁹

The outcome of attempts at rational paper planning was therefore, an airport strategy that involved the categorisation of airports broadly reflecting their already established roles. Ringway was designated a Category 'A' international 'gateway' airport and the principal airport outside the South East supporting a wide range and frequency of international and intercontinental air services; Birmingham, East Midlands, Leeds/Bradford and Newcastle airports were designated category 'B' with important regional roles providing a network of European scheduled air services. Other airports were classified 'C' and 'D' denoting local and general aviation roles respectively. The White Paper stressed that the categorisation was expected to be interpreted 'flexibly', and accepted that categorisation alone could not succeed in establishing rational airport development; other air transport policies were required to reinforce the strategy, although no specific policies were identified.⁸⁰

Thus whilst international 'gateway' status had been bestowed upon Manchester Airport, the Manchester International Airport Authority claimed that it was the structure of the airline business which continued to hamper the development of scheduled air services. The owners of Ringway challenged the influence of the U.K. national carriers and their tendency to concentrate operations on the London hub, feeding

⁷⁹ Cmnd. 7048, *'Airport Policy'* HMSO, (London, 1978)

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

passengers from the regions via Heathrow to support marginal routes there and to achieve the advantages of the integration of route patterns and fleet utilisation. Rather than introduce new international scheduled air services from Manchester, the carriers were accused of operating only the most mature and profitable regional air services, and even in this, the fear of diversion away from London was seen to limit the ‘pick-up’ at Manchester. For the Airport Authority foreign carriers had been at the forefront of route development and their efforts had often been thwarted by the national carriers.⁸¹

For, example, in the 1960s the ‘fifth freedom’ schedules operated by Aer Lingus, Lufthansa and Sabena disappeared as a result of intensive lobbying by BEA and BOAC. The case of Sabena was to have particular long-term consequences. BEA had joined the service to New York in 1954, ten years later with the revocation of Sabena’s flying rights the U.K. national carrier became the sole operator running a daily service until the summer of 1979. However, within the ensuing months the service was progressively reduced until it was finally abandoned to Laker Airways. In the summer of 1981 British Airways stopped the route – leaving Manchester with no direct service to New York for the first time in 30 years.⁸²

By the 1980s Manchester International Airport Authority had become convinced that, ‘despite the repeated assertion that there are

⁸¹ In 1938 KLM operated the first international scheduled service to Amsterdam using DC2s; in 1946 Air France operated the first post-war scheduled service to Paris with DC3s; in 1953 the first scheduled transatlantic service was operated by Sabena to New York with DC6Bs; the first scheduled service to Canada was operated by a Lufthansa ‘Constellation’, to Montreal in 1956; in 1960 the first scheduled jet service using a B707 was operated by Sabena to New York; in the same year the first European jet service was inaugurated by Air France operating Caravelles to Paris, and in 1974 Wardair (Canada) operated the first regular B747 air service. (MIAA, Submission to the CAA on Airline Competition Policy, January, 1984) (MA plc Archive)

⁸² Mercer, N., ‘Manchester Airport, Fifty Years of Steady Growth’, *Air Pictorial*, supported by oral evidence, Rigas Doganis, Transport Studies Group, Polytechnic of Central London, 4 September, 1989.

positive policies to promote the development of regional airports, this has in reality amounted to lip-service.’⁸³

Conclusions

Some form of airport planning is generally held to be essential for the development of a rational network of airports on a national scale. However, in the U.K. experience, attempts at planning have been characterised historically, by inconsistency, prevarication and equivocation. All too often the definition of ‘the public interest’ has been regarded as synonymous with ‘the national carriers interest’ or ‘the interest of the capital’ to the detriment of the provinces. In the early years of development of the civil air transport industry, central government policy tended towards a *laissez-faire* approach, the initiative for airport development fell to local government, with little or no guidance and assistance from the centre. Within such an environment, driven by considerations of economic necessity on the one hand, and municipal prestige on the other, Manchester Corporation proved eager to establish an early foothold in the newly emerging civil air transport industry. With the outbreak of the Second World War, central government was forced to take an active part in airport development, providing funds to cater for the needs of the armed forces. However, in contrast to other airports, non-requisition was a determining factor, which allowed the Corporation to pursue its own financial and development objectives despite the needs of the national emergency. Extensive investment in buildings strategically placed during the period of hostilities provided the Corporation with

⁸³ Manchester International Airport Authority, Airports Policy, 1985 (MA plc Archive)

facilities which were readily adaptable to passenger needs in the immediate post-war years, and such facilities had effectively been provided at little cost to the local community.

War-time experience engendered an apparent sea-change in central government attitudes regarding the planning, ownership and financing of airports – at least as far as public pronouncements are concerned – although the record of private negotiations suggest continued misgivings and uncertainty. On the face of it, State ownership and direct State funding were seen to be the pre-requisites for securing facilities to cater for growth and technological change. However, the ink of the ‘rigid planning’ approach embodying State control and ownership was barely dry, before Manchester Corporation set a fundamental precedent for the devolution of responsibility back to local authorities. In retaining the Airport in local hands from 1955 the Corporation was free to set and execute a local agenda for development, irrespective of the aspirations of Whitehall. The financial terms of the 1955 agreement had embraced the important principle of government support, – albeit given reluctantly – whilst other provincial airports were forced to fiercely compete for the limited resources of the State. The guarantee of some financial assistance may have indirectly influenced the airlines – the key players. Nonetheless, the international operations of the British airlines were concentrated on the ‘safer-bet’ of the London airports, with demand on overseas routes from Manchester being satisfied by foreign operators, at least until such time as the financial viability of individual routes had been proven. Historically, therefore the airport owner had little alternative but to argue the case of the foreign carrier simply in order to establish scheduled international air services. Development at Ringway, particularly in the post-war period took place despite the regulatory

system that supported, first and foremost, the interests of the national 'flag' carriers.

The principle of de-centralisation of airport ownership established in Manchester was reinforced in the 1960s when many local authorities resumed control of aerodromes in their locality. However, the terms for transfer from the State were never as favourable as those that had been agreed with Manchester Corporation in 1955. As local authorities were bestowed with airports already in deficit, with the little or no prospect of financial assistance in the future, the lop-sided development of the airport network, which had been the legacy of nationalisation, became virtually irreversible. The attempts at rational paper planning in the 1970s were essentially, 'too little, too late' and in substance, continued to pay mere 'lip-service' to the problems which dogged the regional airports. The system of categorisation of airports, which emerged in the 1978 White Paper, had few real implications for future airport development, as it was not backed by administrative measures to divert traffic back to the regions. The granting of category 'A' gateway status to Ringway represented only the formal recognition of what had already been established. Historically, the environment within which such status had been pursued was one in which considerations of local knowledge, enthusiasm, enterprise and prestige had been compelling. This coupled with the complementary desire to preserve the local interest and resist the overtures of the Interventionist State proved crucial in securing the long-term development of Manchester Airport.