

Parliament

1st May 2001 Adjournment debate: Motorway Construction (EU Policy)

Mr Anthony Steen described the situation of his constituent Mr John Wood, who having been assured that no developments were planned in the construction of a motorway adjacent to a house he was thinking of buying in Portugal, went ahead and bought it, to find, shortly afterwards, that the motorway was under construction and, moreover...

“the IP1 motorway, as it is now known, is constructed with pre-stressed concrete, which generates far more decibels than a Bakerloo line train coming into Piccadilly Circus. If you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, have ever been on a platform at Piccadilly Circus when a Bakerloo line train has come in, it is pretty noisy, but it is less noisy than the IP1 motorway when cars travel on the pre-stressed concrete, which went out with the ark in Britain. Hearing is believing. The noise is continuous and ever growing. I am told that, in Portugal, on warm summer evenings, as lorries pound over the surface at the speed limit or above, the noise can be heard 12km away or more. The peace and tranquillity of the area have been shattered.

The failure of the Portuguese Government to choose an appropriate surface, such as porous asphalt, with which the Minister will be familiar, which dampens sound, or whisper concrete, as it is known, cries out for explanation. Was it to save money that they put that pre-stressed concrete down, the slabs of concrete that we saw on bypasses in the 1960s and 1970's?

Did they take the European money and say, “We will use the money we have from Europe, but we will only top it up with very little more”?

In 1991-92, the Portuguese Government told residents that the motorway would be a garden highway. Perhaps the Portuguese have a different idea of gardens because there are no trees by the motorway, and no plants by its side. There are no flowers. As there are no sound barriers, the garden highway gives off a piercing noise day and night.

After the motorway was constructed in 1994, the noise levels were so appalling that Mr and Mrs Wood decided to put the home on the market. Their haven of tranquillity had turned into an unmitigated nightmare. Quinta da Madeira is a most beautiful property by all accounts. It is just the place that any of us would love to retire to, but the sound from the motorway directly underneath the house was so great that the Woods, in their retirement could not face the prospect of living there. They placed the house on the market but acceptance of the only offer they received in five years would mean that they had lost about £250,000 in taxed earnings, though no fault of their own, and despite having taken all possible precautions before buying. Mr Steen added

“I lay down the gauntlet to the Government to take up Mr Wood's case, and to make it a cause célèbre”.

Replying, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the Environment Transport and Regions, Mr Keith Hill, after describing the EU requirements for publishing an assessment of the environmental impacts of major projects, said:

“I have set out the clear requirements in terms of European Union legislation, which I assume were applied or ought to have been in this case. It will be important for the Hon. Gentleman to pursue the official record in some detail to advise his constituent, Mr Wood, as to the possibilities for recourse set against the criteria laid down in European legislation that I described”.

Mr Steen: Before the Minister moves on, is he saying that Mr Wood might have a stronger case if the Portuguese did not follow the procedures? They cannot do away with the motorway, nor would he suggest that. Is he more likely to make a case for compensation if the procedures were not followed, or is that only a matter for regret?

Mr Hill: The Hon. Gentleman will understand that I am no lawyer. I am certainly no European Union lawyer, a particularly arcane area of study and pursuit. I am suggesting however that at least some of the provisions that I outlined would have been in place at the time the motorway construction was undertaken and, therefore, might well apply in this case; and that there were procedures that should certainly have been pursued according to European law. It would be very helpful if the Hon. Gentleman and his constituent considered whether those procedures were applied, and then considered further action on the basis of that consideration.

I shall say a few words about noise policy in the UK. Noise is one of the environmental issues to which we have given a great deal of thought. We recognised the benefit offered by quieter road surfaces. The Hon. Gentleman spoke about and have promised that lower-noise surfacing

will be used as a matter of course in all new infrastructure provision and maintenance work on the trunk road network. That means that lower-noise surfacing will be achieved without undue cost or disruption. In addition, we have undertaken to resurface all concrete roads within the next 10 years, including those that would not otherwise be due for resurfacing, because it is now recognised that such roads give rise to much greater concern about noise.

In total, we anticipate that more than 60 per cent. of the trunk road network will have been resurfaced by April 2011.

8th May 2001, From Written Answers: Aircraft Noise

Mr. Andy King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to carry out a new study to update the Aircraft Noise Index Study of 1985 [160726]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: My Department is to carry out a major study to reassess attitudes to aircraft noise. This new study underlines the Government's commitment to underpin our policy on aircraft noise by substantial research that commands the widest possible confidence.

Our current understanding of the relationship between annoyance and aircraft noise over 24 hours is based primarily on research that was carried out in the 1980s, in particular the Aircraft Noise Index Study published in 1985. That was based on the largest survey yet carried out of public attitudes to aircraft noise and eventually led the Government of the day to adopt the Leq (equivalent continuous noise) index for daytime noise contours.

The conclusions have been broadly confirmed by other studies here and abroad, and we have no reason to doubt their validity. But in the light of our commitment to develop a new air

transport policy, of changes to traffic patterns since then, and the general reduction in noise levels of individual aircraft, it is now timely to commission a fresh study.

We want the aviation industry to meet the external costs it imposes. This new study will give us more information on the value people give to relief from noise, and to focus our policies from a broader range of evidence.

In deciding to commission this further research, I have considered the findings of three recent Government sponsored studies on sleep disturbance, and the advice of independent experts. I am grateful to those who sat on the steering and technical working groups for their help in shaping those studies. I have concluded that a new full-scale objective sleep study would be unlikely to add significantly to our understanding; and that the way forward is through concentrating instead on further research into subjective responses to annoyance by night and by day.

I am placing copies of the three reports (Adverse Effects of Night-Time Aircraft Noise, Aircraft Noise and Sleep-UK Trial Methodology Study, and Perceptions of Aircraft Noise Sleep and Health) in the House Library. These have been published by the former Department of Operational Research and Analysis (DORA) of National Air Traffic Services Ltd., and by the Institute of Sound and Vibration Research Consultancy Services and Department of Social Statistics at the University of Southampton, respectively. Further information on Government sponsored research into aircraft noise and sleep will shortly be available on the Aviation section of my Department's website.

Invitations to tender for the new study will be issued shortly. We shall ensure that both environmental and aviation interests can contribute to the oversight of the project. It will last three years, with pilot results planned to be available next year to feed into our White Paper on air transport.

11th July 01 Opening the adjournment debate,

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) said:

"I am grateful for the opportunity not only to complete the trilogy of Berkshire MPs who have spoken in Adjournment debates this week but to bring to the attention of the House a matter that is of considerable concern to my local residents. I believe that it is also of concern to residents in other parts of the country. The issue in question is the need to control noise from light aircraft.

White Waltham airfield in my constituency is one of the oldest and best-known airfields in the country. It is one of the few remaining grass airfields and is reputed to be the largest such airfield in Europe. It started in 1908 when the de Havilland family bought the land and set up the de Havilland flying school. In 1939 the airfield was taken over by the Ministry of Defence and became the headquarters of the Air Transport Auxiliary—the renowned ATA.

Residents are frustrated: not only do they suffer the problem of noise, but when they appeal to authorities to do something it appears that nothing can be done because nobody has the power to enforce any controls over the nuisance from which they suffer. Residents expect their local council to be able to do something, but find that it is powerless to do anything.

I should say at this point that, although residents are worried about the noise, they want the airfield to stay. Having such a wonderful open space on the outskirts of Maidenhead is welcome and, as I said, many of them moved into the area knowing that the airfield was there. Residents need a balance to be struck between their needs and the needs of the airfield and its users.

My constituents feel strongly that powers should be available to enforce controls on noise from light aircraft using airfields such as White Waltham. As I said, no one intends to stop activity from White Waltham or to stop the airfield existing. It has a long and proud history, and we wish White Waltham airfield to stay and to provide opportunities for flying for those who enjoy that leisure activity or who use it for business purposes, as do some who use the club.

However, residents want the comfort of knowing that when the nuisance becomes too great, someone can take action. At present, that does not seem possible. Residents expect their local council to be able to take such action. The royal borough of Windsor and Maidenhead wants to be able to take action, but it cannot do so on its own. The matter is in the hands of the Government. They have promised legislation. They say that they recognise the problem and that they will act to resolve it.

I hope that when the Minister responds he will be able to give comfort to my constituents and let them know that they can enjoy the benefit of the open space, but that the noise nuisance can be controlled so that they do not constantly have to suffer from a nuisance that they believe their local council should be able to control.

Replying, the Minister for Transport, Mr John Spellar

Aircraft noise is, as the Hon. Lady rightly said, a subject of great concern to airport neighbours. The Government takes aviation noise seriously and supports measures to limit its disturbance of communities around aerodromes. Although I shall respond as far as I properly can to the points made about White Waltham specifically, much of what I say will be equally applicable to many licensed and unlicensed aerodromes around the country.

Let me make clear the role of my Department in respect of aircraft noise policy at aerodromes. Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted airports are designated under section 80 of the Civil Aviation Act 1982 for the purposes of section 78 of that Act for noise regulation. Elsewhere, circumstances vary greatly between larger airports and the many small local airfields. The policy of successive Governments has been that aircraft noise is a local issue that is best resolved locally. We recognise the legitimate right of general aviation pilots to fly, but as the Hon. Lady said, that right should always be balanced with the interests of the communities that are disturbed by aerodrome activities.

Last autumn, we completed a public consultation entitled "The control of noise from civil aircraft". In this, we proposed providing aerodromes with clearer powers to regulate flying behaviour. The preference is still for local solutions and, where existing arrangements are working satisfactorily, the expectation will be that such arrangements will carry on much as before. However, if the Secretary of State believed that they had been ineffective, he would, under our proposals, be given a new power to require an aerodrome to agree a noise amelioration scheme with an appropriate local authority. That authority would then have powers of enforcement. Independent arbitration is proposed as one way of resolving any disputes that may arise. There were many detailed responses to the consultation, reflecting, as one would imagine, a broad range of views. They are being evaluated and considered, and our conclusions will be announced in due course.

The legislative proposals were intended not to supplant existing planning powers, but to strengthen the hand of aerodromes in controlling their existing operations, and to allow intervention when necessary if voluntary arrangements have failed. We would certainly not expect a local authority to regard itself, in

anticipation of such legislation, as inhibited from exercising its current powers for example, to pursue planning obligations or conditions in respect of noise either from, or affecting, new development.

17 July 200

From Written Answers: Noise Levels

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions if he will make a statement on the proposed EU directives on noise levels, with particular reference to traffic noise.

Mr. Jamieson: An amending directive to Directive 92/23/EEC aimed at limiting the noise from new vehicle tyres has recently been adopted by the European Council and the European Parliament and will appear in the Official Journal of the European Communities imminently. Studies have shown that noise generated at the tyre-road interface is a significant environmental nuisance that, as a contributor to total vehicle noise and, hence, traffic noise, becomes more significant as vehicle speed increases. The directive will apply limits to the permitted noise of tyres that are fitted to new vehicle types entering into service from 2004. In addition it will require most new tyres sold in the replacement market to comply from 2009.

The European Commission also proposed a directive in July 2000 on the Assessment and Management of Environmental Noise. The main sources of noise to which this directive relates are transport and industry. The copy of the draft directive primarily covers noise in built up areas, in public parks or other quiet areas within built up areas and in quiet areas in open country. The proposed directive would require mapping of the principle sources of noise to provide information to the public and the European Commission, and the drawing up of action plans aimed at preventing and reducing undesirable levels of environmental noise.