

Roger Higman

Friends of the Earth

Our next speaker is Roger Higman who I think has spent two periods with Friends of the Earth. He's now the head campaigner and I think his career has taken him through a number of campaigns, which would make any military man look like a novice. He's a veteran of the M11, the M40 and various others and for sometime he's taken an interest in aviation but he does have to cover a very wide area I think in his role in Friends of the Earth. He's crossed paths with us previously in various places including outside of British Airways' Annual General Meeting where we've had good-natured exchanges. Roger, the floor is yours.

Roger Higman: Thank you very much. Good after ladies and gentlemen. As Hugh said my name's Roger Higman and I'm the senior campaigner at Friends of the Earth with responsibility for climate change and transport (slide 1). I'd like to thank Air Travel, Greener By Design for organising this conference and for inviting me to speak to you. I ought to stress what Hugh said, I'm not an aviation specialist. My responsibilities extend across all of transport whether by plane, train or automobile, any other mode of transport, everything to do with climate change – nationally, internationally to encompass everything to do with energy policy. I actually spent most of the last year and a half working on nuclear power and trying to make sure the government didn't give the go-ahead to any more nuclear power stations in this country – something we temporarily seem to have achieved which I'm very pleased about.

I'd like you to bear that in mind during the presentation because I want to make it very clear, I don't live under a flight path. I don't have a grudge against the aircraft industry, I don't have any grudge against airlines or particular airports, neither have I spent the last 15 or so years as Tim has listening to what the airline industry is saying. I'm not particularly hostile but I'm not particularly sympathetic either. I don't have an interest in aviation in that way. I do believe though that the industry has a growing environmental impact that it needs to get a grip on and I do believe it's got to live up to it's environmental responsibilities.

Before that I'm going to say a little bit about Friends of the Earth just so you know where I'm coming from (slide 2). Friends of the Earth is an environmental campaigning network and occasionally we do interesting campaigning activities. More about that later. We're a worldwide organisation; we claim to be the largest environmental campaigning network in the world. What that means is that we're represented in more countries than any other – 68, including pretty much all of Europe, North America, the rest of the industrialised world, Japan, Korea, Australia, places like that, but also quite heavily in the South. Most of Latin America and Central America, part of South East Asia and Africa. Our member groups are completely independent and not all of them are even called Friends of the Earth. Anybody here who's not from the United Kingdom but if you were for example in Germany it's BUND. I'm not going to give you the Korean one because I can't pronounce it. They're essentially indigenous organisations and joined the network and represent a very grass roots focus.

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland and Friends of the Earth Scotland is a separate organisation; we have about 150 staff, 100,000 supporters who give us 95% of our income. We don't get any money from Central Government. A turnover of about £7m and over 200 local campaign groups many of which do have airports in their back gardens and are worried about those airports and development of them.

As Friends of the Earth we're concerned about a host of challenges that can be summed up as the Search for Sustainable Development. In addition to the areas I'm responsible for I have colleagues whose primary concerns are waste policy, chemicals, industrial pollution, pesticides, farming, damage to wildlife sites timber and so on. And increasingly we're integrating those concerns into broad ranging campaigns on issues like tax reform, environmental justice, investment policies, the City – corporate regulations and so on.

Now, my talk today is not going to present a detailed, broad-ranging analysis of the impacts of flying, neither am I going to try and review the progress of companies like BA and other sectors of the industry in trying to reduce those impacts, or the effects of government policy. What I'm going to try and do is to react, from the position of an outsider looking in, to some of the debates that are going on inside the aviation industry and some of the arguments the industry is making as to why maybe it shouldn't be required to tackle its environmental impact. And I intend to talk about three things.

Firstly, I want to say a little bit about climate change because if any of you are in any doubt about the science, the seriousness of the challenge it presents, I think it's important that we try and dispel those doubts and make it very clear what we as a society are going to have to do over the next 50 years (slide 2).

Secondly, I want to address this issue about the aviation industry and it being a special case because it's clearly a perception of mind that many people in the industry perceive it to be a special industry and perceive it to be something that needs special protection. The case I want to make is that when faced with environmental challenge almost every industry goes through a phase first of denial, saying it's not a problem and then goes through a phase of special pleading saying but no, no, we're different, you can't expect this to apply to us.

The people that are in government, in NGOs that are dealing with environmental issues are well used to that whether it comes from the chemicals industry, whether it comes from the motor industry, whether it comes from the nuclear power industry and are quite resistant to our arguments about a special case and I would argue that the aviation industry is no more deserving of special treatment than any other and in many cases is actually going to be easier to tackle than some other industries.

Finally I wanted to build on what Tim was doing by taking a broader look at the sustainability issues of the aviation industry, recognising it's not just about climate. But first something about climate change.

Climate change is probably the most significant environmental threat facing humanity. If what scientists are saying is right it could be the most significant medium threat of any sort facing humanity. You may have heard recently that Hans Blix, the weapons inspector that the UN sent to look into Iraq, said that he was more worried about climate change than he was about the threat of weapons of mass destruction. Unfortunately not all of the people who are involved in Iraq at the moment are as worried about climate change as he is.

Scientists commissioned by the world's governments, including the United States incidentally have reached a consensus about what the science says is happening as a result of manmade pollution. They say that observed changes in temperature over the last century cannot be explained in any other way but through the effects of increasing pollution. They predict that massive changes in the world climate will result from continued emissions, average global temperatures could rise by as much as 6° by 2100. Two points are worth remembering I think about these predictions. Firstly, although climate change will affect everybody, not everyone will suffer equally. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is very clear. Those with the least resources have the least capacity to adapt and are most vulnerable. Yet these are not the people who have created the problem. Millions of the poorest people in the world stand to lose their lives and their livelihoods as a result of the pollution of the well off. In other words, we fly; she drowns (slide 3).

Secondly, the lower forecast for quoted temperature increases and sea level rises assumes a certain amount of emissions control and conversely the dramatic cuts in emissions that are now being included in energy policy. For example, the 60% cut in CO₂ emissions over a 60-year period that Jim referred to presume a certain amount of climate change. Sixty percent by 2050 assumes we're aiming for 550 parts per million stability. The worst predictions of the effects of 550-ppm stability are that we will suffer extensive damage as a result of climate change. As the science gets better it could be true, and it's likely to be true I would argue, that we will see a need for even tougher emission cuts. Equally it's worth remembering that the forecast of impacts for unconstrained emissions are awful for everybody – no one is going to benefit from the current trend. What that means is that we have to not only plan for 60%, we have to bear in mind that we may need to go further by 2050. We may be looking at 80% with an eventual target reduction of over 90% CO₂ emissions globally.

Now, Friends of the Earth has been pressing for action on climate change for over 15 years. In the last five years the aviation industry has been a target of our campaign. I don't want to overemphasise the significance of this. We're actually running a boycott campaign against a particular oil company at the moment – please don't buy Exxon Mobil. We've targeted the oil industry generally; we've targeted the motor industry, which is why I met Cedric. We're heavily involved in campaigns about surface transport policy and I spent most of the 90's fighting off plans for major road building in this country. We're targeting electricity generators and I've debated climate policy with a host of energy users, whether it is the Collocation and Hosting Association or more recently the Federation of Small Businesses. But we are targeting the aviation industry and what has its response been? Well, it's been mixed. There has been some very good stuff that has been done and talked about but broadly speaking the industry's been on the defensive and has put up, what I would say, four separate bogus defences as to why it shouldn't take the action we're talking about and they go under these four headings. That the aviation industry is insignificant from a climate point of view, that it has a special position in the economy and cannot be tackled, it will be devastating to the economy if it was tackled, that it would be unfair on the poorest sections of society if emissions from aviation were tackled and that it's too difficult administratively to do so (slides 5 to 7). All of those arguments are in my view bogus.

Take the insufficient ones first. The first thing to remember, and I hope I've stressed this, is that aviation is not alone in being target. All sectors are being targeted and when you are talking about paving the way for 90% reductions in emissions over maybe 100 year period you have to target all sectors especially those ones where there looks likely to be a long term trend of increased emissions.

Globally aviation is responsible for about 3½% of radiative forcing. If the Department of Transport's forecast of the increase, however, for the next 30 years for the UK are factored in, what you can see is that other sectors, if we are to maintain the trend in emissions reduction needed to achieve that 60% that the RCAP and the government has talked about and the government has now set itself a target of doing – if we want to achieve that 60% and we set all emissions on a downward path to do that, and aviation is meanwhile going on an upward path, what we find is that the other sectors, the motor industry for example, has to achieve 20% more over the next 30 years than they would otherwise have to and that's an extremely difficult challenge for them and that excludes, incidentally, the increase in aviation's contribution outside of carbon dioxide. If you actually factor in the radiative forcing it will be a greater than 20% reduction in addition to what they're already planning to achieve that those other sectors would have to deliver. And that is I think an extremely significant difference and that's why I think it is significant for the aviation industry and we have to pay attention to it.

Secondly, we're told that the aviation industry is essential to the UK economy. On what grounds? Well, the Freedom to Fly coalition says it's responsible for 1.4% of the UK's gross domestic product. Cedric's industry is responsible for 5.3% of the UK's gross domestic product. The aviation industry apparently generates and supports, according to Freedom to Fly, 550,000 jobs. The motor industry employs over one million and the aviation industry transports, so Freedom to Fly claims, £35bn worth of exports and sells £6.6bn worth of services abroad. The British motor industry directly exported £19.8bn worth of vehicles in 2000 and I don't think any of the goods air freighted out of Britain would have reached the airport at all without lorries, trucks and other road vehicles. And yet the motor industry, as you've heard, accepts its responsibility to cut its emissions and accepts, grudgingly, the role of government regulation in taxation in making sure it does and they're charged 400% on a litre of petrol.

Furthermore, the very argument that Freedom to Fly is implying is flawed from an economic point of view. I don't know if any people here have ever seen a report of the Standing Advisory Committee on Trunk Road Assessment, on Transport on the Economy produced back in 1998 for the government. But the point it made, which Brendan Sewell who works on these issues from the aviation point of view has also made, is that failing to charge a user of a service for the full social costs of that activity – the external costs – increases demand beyond the optimal level for the economy and actually decreases overall welfare. Because aviation is not paying its full environmental and social costs, more people are flying and the total level of misery caused is greater than it optimally would be. And yet who here is going to argue that the air passenger is paying the full social cost of their passenger.

Freedom to Fly Coalition also says that two thirds of overseas visitors to the United Kingdom come by plane and they spend around £10bn in the UK yet this benefit is more than compensated for by the loss of money to the UK of our citizens travelling abroad. This deficit is conservatively estimated at £4bn but in 2001/2002 it was almost £15bn – extra money spent by British people abroad that would otherwise have been spent in the United Kingdom. Is it any wonder that our seaside resorts are all in decline?

Now some industries, and collocation hosting is one of them – does anybody know what collocation hosting is by the way? It's a very new, rapidly growing, massively rising emissions – it's essentially all those interchange centres your emails go to when they go from your office via the collocation hosting centre to somebody else's office. Similarly if you download something from the web it goes through one of these interchanges. They're sort of airports for electronic communication. They use vast amounts of electricity but they can argue that people's use of them is to a certain extent accompanied by a decline in people's use of more polluting means of communication – snail mail, faxing and so on. The aviation industry just cannot apply that argument. In fact by facilitating international trade the aviation industry – well it could claim that it's encouraging the uptake of more efficient technology. That would be true if the market signals were encouraging more efficient technology to be developed in the first place and it is true, for example, that Britain imports more efficient fridges and washing machines from Germany than we make ourselves and it's true that not all but some of the cars imported from Japan produce less CO₂ than the cars made in Europe and made in the United Kingdom. But it's also true that international trade serves to import an awful lot of inefficient technology from places like the United States that have refused to ratify the Kyoto protocol and it actually imports inefficiently manufactured technology from countries in the developing world that don't have targets under the protocol at all. The structural effect of airfreight on a transition to a low carbon economy is to weaken the effectiveness of the protocol. The effect of international tourism is similar. Individually British tourists travelling to developing countries can benefit from cheap energy just as they benefit from cheap cigarettes. The net effect is more pollution for us all. So how can the aviation industry justify special treatment on economic grounds? I would argue it cannot.

The third argument made by the industry is that the introduction of measures such as fuel taxes that force it to meet its environmental responsibilities will be unfair on the poorer people in society. They, it is claimed, will be priced out of a foreign holiday. In fact over half of the flights, 53% in 2001, were made by just 11% of the population. Over ¾ of the trips, 77% - were made by – actually that can't be right, less than one quarter of the population, I think that's supposed to be the other way round it's ¾ by less than one quarter and – no, no, no, sorry that is right. Apologies for that, I've quoted my colleague, Paul, and he's going to die for that one because he's written it wrongly. Half of the flights I think are made by a quarter and ¾ just by – no, no, it is half by 11%. Anyway, apologies. The key point is this. Wealthy people tend to fly more. An awful lot of poorer people in society – and it's the same with cars, don't have access to the cars. If you actually then factor in the fact that money raised can either be spent in reducing other forms of taxation, such as income tax, or increasing service provision levels, a charge on aviation, fuel tax, becomes broadly speaking progressive. It depends on the detail exactly how progressive but it actually benefits poorer sections of the community and charges wealthier sections of the community.

When you remember the lady I showed you earlier who was waste deep in water and what IPCC said about climate change and the impacts of climate change it becomes abundantly clear that acting to reduce emissions is going to globally benefit the poorer sections of the world far more than it penalises them and people who will be suffering as a result of action to prevent climate change overwhelmingly are the already well off.

Finally, the last argument made is that forcing this international foot loose industry to meet its environmental responsibilities would be difficult. This in my view is completely fallacious. Firstly, the aviation industry isn't particularly foot loose. Compare its position with that of electrical engineering, who incidentally has to pay the climate change levy. Airlines and airports in Britain and the Netherlands compete for transit passengers but the scope for this is limited. Transit passengers, I understand according to AEF are less than 1% of those passing through Heathrow. The scope for transit would be reduced even further if aviation fuel were taxed because there would be that much greater incentive for people to fly from the airport nearest to their destination. Somebody wishing to fly to London is hardly going to accept a flight to Bangkok as an alternative, yet electrical engineering manufactures are in direct competition for the whole of their market with companies right across the world and as I said they have to pay the climate change levy whereas the people in Bangkok don't have to meet the emissions reductions target. So aviation compared to many other industries is not particularly foot loose.

Secondly, aviation is dominated by large players. You may not think of the likes of Ryanair as a large player but compared to say the hotel industry I think you can understand that there are many small guest houses in this country that are considerably smaller than Ryanair. Again, research shows that the big players – medium sized companies, large companies, find it much cheaper to meet their environmental responsibilities than small companies do. The reason being that there's an information deficit that is much, much more difficult for the small companies to pick up. They each individually have to educate themselves about all aspects of their environmental performance whereas British Airways or whatever can get one person or maybe three or four people working for Hugh to do that and when you consider the scale of the company it's much more efficient for British Airways to do that than it would be for a small hotelier. Yet again, hoteliers have to pay the climate change levy and airlines don't. Does there seem any justice in that? It seems completely ridiculous to me. There seem to be no end of excuses that are being put forward.

Two weeks ago an industry spokesperson told me that a fuel tax was unworkable because a given cargo of aviation kerosene could be bought or sold while still at sea. Of course it can, any cargo of oil can be bought or sold while it's still at sea but it has to be loaded onto the aeroplane on land in most cases unless you're looking at sea planes – most jet liners – it has to be loaded on land. As soon as it gets to land the government have an awful lot of experience of tracking down imports of fuel and ensuring that the eventual user of that fuel pays the right duty. An aviation fuel tax would not pose a difficulty in collection; in fact compared to most forms of taxation it's an incredibly easy form of taxation.

Climate change is a threat that cannot be ignored. The aviation industry is a significant and growing polluter. Like all industries it is pleading for special treatment. However it's pleading in my view is baseless. It should expect to face regulation, charges and other measures to limit and reduce its emissions. Even if emissions from aviation are controlled through an emissions trading system, which is the current preference for many of the industry players, passengers are going to have to get used to paying more and the industry eventually is going to have to face controls on it's growth.

Finally I said I'd say something about other environmental impacts (slide 8). I'm going to be very brief about this because I've probably gone over time. The thing to remember is it does have a range of other impacts and Tim outlined this quite critically. I think the key things I'd want to point out about these impacts are that similar to climate change there is no greater justification for exempting an airport from European air quality directives than there is a justification for exempting a steel plant from European air quality directives. Similarly, there is no greater justification for exempting an airport from noise controls than there would be from a plant operating heavy machinery such as steam hammers and so on. Similarly, there is no greater reason to expect an airport to be developed on a wildlife site than any other form of port facility or any other factory. And there are two implications for this I think for airport policy that need to be borne in mind, one of which has largely already been accepted. The first one is the need for strategic planning. I welcome the way the government's tackled the airports' white paper, its proposals and the debate there to try and get an airport policy for the United Kingdom. The fact that they seem to have given the go-ahead – let one of the horses out of the stable door while the discussions are taking place is completely and utterly ridiculous but we welcome the fact that they have at least tried to introduce strategic planning (slide 9).

The second point, which hasn't been accepted, I think is what Tim was alluding to is that the very fact of having to meet air quality standards, noise standards and so on means that some airports are going to have to accept environmental limits on their operations. Other industries accept that their operations have to be limited; I can't see why the aviation industry should be any different (slide 10).

To sum up – I already explained these slides. These slides incidentally were taken at the BAA disco at the Labour Party Conference this year and then that's – I don't know if you know Steve, the government affairs director for BAA – that is Steve asking me to leave their party, which is a shame. Very polite he was! Anyway, the point I wanted to make is that aviation is no special case. The party for the industry is over in terms of being able to grow without paying much attention to people who live around it and its environmental impact. The time is now for action. We're not targeting the industry because we have an irrational prejudice against planes or airlines, we're targeting it because its impacts are growing and it's failing to meet them and the sooner it does meet them the better. Thank you for listening.

Chairman: Thank you, Roger. No doubt that contribution will stimulate some good discussion. Could I ask the other speakers to come up and join us and I think the last one to come up should bring a chair. We have about 15 minutes left before we have to start wrapping up and I would like to ask people who are contributing to try and be as concise and clear as possible and also maybe for the panel members in order that we can get the maximum number of contributions to keep their answers brief. So who is going to lead off on a point? I'll take somebody who has not contributed so far.