

STATEMENT BY THE GSLP/LIBERAL OPPOSITION

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The Government's decision to attend the Routes Europe Forum conference in France in a bid to attract new airlines is a reflection of their desperation to bring in different players in order to justify the enormous cost of the new air terminal building. It is a fact that over many years, despite the propaganda, they have failed to attract new airlines and open new sustainable routes from Gibraltar airport.

This policy failure has spanned over a decade and precedes the existing financial and economic climate which the Government now like to blame for almost everything. In 1996 when the GSD came into office there were five air routes to and from Gibraltar airport. There were then flights to London Heathrow, London Gatwick, Casablanca, Marrakesh and Manchester. There are less air routes now than there were in 1996, many millions of pounds and many years later.

There are now no air links at all between Gibraltar and Morocco. It will be recalled that there used to be flights to Tangier and later to Marrakesh and Casablanca. The Government also heavily subsidised Regional Airlines when they resumed the flights to Casablanca and this proved to be a complete fiasco both in terms of passenger numbers and in terms of the level of subsidy per passenger.

For two years in a row the Government announced that an airline called Fly Europa would be commencing flights to London Stanstead and Manchester airports. These flights did not materialise. Then a multi-million pound plan was hatched to establish a Gibraltar airline, which was to be called Fly Gibraltar and was going to offer 28 scheduled flights weekly to six destinations in the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic. This was a private initiative which was closely associated with the Government at the time. This time 11 flights weekly were planned for London Stanstead, 5 to Manchester, 4 to Bristol, 4 to Birmingham, 3 to Dublin and 1 to Cork. The Government said at the time that this project was typical of the investor confidence that existed in Gibraltar and declared that the new markets would be opened up for Gibraltar's tourism. In the event, despite what was said this proved to be another disappointment and the new routes that were announced did not materialise.

The exaggerated claims that were made in relation to air services between Gibraltar and Spain after the airport agreement must be placed against the context of the record of this constant propaganda matched by the failure of the Government to deliver over the years. Gibraltar was told that civil aviation would develop into an industry to rival offshore gaming and that the number of flights would have to be restricted for environmental considerations given the level of demand which was anticipated for flights between Gibraltar and Spain.

Once again, the reality was that both GB Airways and Iberia tried to make the route work and they failed to do so because the demand was simply not there. The excuse was then offered that this was because of the timing of the flights and the size of the aircraft. In April last year Andalus airlines commenced flights between Gibraltar and Madrid, this time with better timings and with smaller aircraft and the project failed as well.

Commenting on the matter, Shadow Minister for Civil Aviation Dr Joseph Garcia said:

“The Government are spending tens of millions of pounds on a new air terminal building at a different location that Gibraltar clearly does not need. The problem is that now we are stuck with it and the taxpayers of Gibraltar will have to pay for it year after year for a long time to come. In an effort to justify throwing away this vast sum of money, the Government will no doubt now travel the world to attract new airlines and open new air routes. While they continue with their delusions of grandeur, air arrivals from the UK were static in 2008 compared to 2009 and dropped by 4000 in January and February this year. This is the harsh reality behind the propaganda.”