

# 'Alders Table' Offers no Solution for Noise Pollution at Schiphol Airport

In the Netherlands, the parties that determine the future of the national hub Schiphol Airport have been wrestling for decades with the dilemma that growth means more noise pollution, at least in the short term. In a new effort to reconcile the irreconcilable, the Dutch Cabinet asked former Dutch Minister of Housing, Spatial Planning and Environment Hans Alders to draw up a plan for making future-controlled growth of the airport possible, and to do this in co-operation with interested parties, such as with the airport and with citizens in the surrounding municipalities.

by: Hans Heerkens

Last October, this 'Alders-table' presented its report. Its main conclusions are that Schiphol should be allowed to grow to 510,000 aircraft movements in 2020 (430,000 in 2007) and that the current, statutory noise-control instruments should be replaced by a set of agreements between the airports and the people that live nearby.

Is this the end of the tug-of-war between the airport and its neighbors? Has a reasonable balance finally been found between the economic interests of the Netherlands as a whole and the social interests of a limited number of people living around Schiphol? No, because, once again, no firm choices are made. Actually, the national government turns away from the problem, and, in doing so, turns it back on both the aviation sector and the population involved.

The number of aircraft movements, if no restrictions are applied, will expect to hit 722,000 in 2020, according to a report published in 2006, commissioned by, amongst others, the Dutch Ministry of Transport. This greatly exceeds the number that the

Alders-table set. It is just a matter of time before the airport will ask for new possibilities to grow further.

Anyway, setting a maximum number of aircraft movements is in itself not enough to control noise pollution. Although aircraft generally produced less noise per unit of take-off weight in recent decades, limitation of the number of aircraft movements may well lead to the use of larger aircraft, which are actually noisier (per aircraft movement). Constant pressure to fly more at night is already there, when subjective noise pollution is higher than during daytime. And the pressure for fuel consumption reductions, both economically and environmentally attractive, may lead to the introduction of open rotor (propfan) engines for smaller aircraft after 2018. These engines are likely to be noisier than conventional turbofans of equal power.

So there are several drivers for Schiphol to push for acceptance of more noise pollution within the set limit on aircraft movements. And in the past, Schiphol violated both noise and aircraft movement ceilings on several occasions. How can compliance

with the arrangements envisioned in the Alders-table report be guaranteed? Furthermore, the existing noise pollution is accepted as a guiding principle. That is not self-evident: a situation without thousands of households experiencing, sometimes severe, noise pollution could also have been taken as a starting point.

*Photo: Hans Alders (seated left behind the table) during the Press Conference where he presented the results of his commission.*

### **Government should Take Responsibility**

In theory, it seems like a great idea to let parties who have a conflict come up with a solution themselves. But, in



practice, this will only work under strict conditions. Firstly, the influence of all parties involved should be more or less equal. This is, of course, not the case here. Schiphol has much more money and expertise available to promote – push, if you will – its point of view. And its contribution to the national economy remains a power that the other parties can never match. Schiphol is a national treasure, can for all practical intents and purposes not be moved and has a monopoly position at the national level.

The principal role of any government is to weigh interests against each other that are essentially incomparable (in this case economic against social interests) for which the parties involved (Schiphol, its neighbors and the rest of the Dutch population) have no accepted means of doing so. Having interested parties draw up a policy or a plan together is entirely possible in the case of, for example, the detail design of a new city area, where those who have power to decide also have to bear the consequences of the decisions made, and where a balance of power between the various groups involved can be reached. And even then conflicts lurk.

But with large infrastructural projects like the development of Schiphol, or the building of a new highway, a mediator is required who has both the will and the power to make tough decisions. That is what a government is for in general, but especially in a democracy. After all, the core of the problem concerns what economists call ‘external effects’; effects that cannot be traded on an economic market. Noise pollution knows no market where demand meets supply, and hence there is no way to establish a market price for it.

### **See You in Court**

Even if the present legal instruments for noise pollution control are replaced with agreements between the parties involved, many general laws remain in effect, for example those concerning spatial planning and legal relationships between private citizens or organizations. I am not a lawyer, but it seems likely to me that when private individuals or organizations sue Schiphol on the grounds of these laws for the noise pollution it causes, a court would be forced to see the airport as a private party: as an ordinary company with profit as a goal, even though its shares are owned by government institutions. The danger exists that this will lead to legal outcomes that are less favorable for Schiphol than ones that would be the case under the present regime.

And how can it be assured that all individuals and organizations bound by the arrangements that are to be made are adequately represented in the decision-making process? Who decides what a reasonable level of representation or participation is?

Of all further pitfalls that can be identified, I want to name one: the lack of trust between the airport and some of its neighbors. For years, Schiphol has had the reputation of being rather sloppy with agreements about, for example, approach routes aimed at minimizing or spreading noise pollution. True or not, as far as I can see, little is done to counter this impression. An example: intended or actual violations of aircraft movement limits are justified by pointing at force majeure, the consequences for safety if a certain runway cannot be used and so on. To my knowledge, no offer has ever been made to compensate a violation in a certain year - which should be avoided by proper contingency planning in the first place - by an at least equal decrease of aircraft movements in the next year. So: a hundred movements in excess this year mean at least a hundred movements fewer than planned next year. Such gestures, even if largely symbolic, perhaps give

Schiphol’s neighbors the impression that they are indeed taken seriously.

There are more issues that needlessly antagonize Schiphol’s neighbors. Arguments that the airport uses to justify noise pollution – Schiphol is important for the Dutch economy, aircraft have become much less noisy in the last few decades – merely serve its own interests and do little to help solve the problems that noise pollution causes. Finally, the reasoning – popular in the aviation sector - that municipalities should not build houses in noise-sensitive areas violates the broadly accepted principle that the producer of hindrance should bear the consequences, not the victim. Actions at the airport should not limit the freedom of surrounding municipalities to use their own land as they see fit. Of course, in a densely populated country like the Netherlands, compromises need to be made, but general principles like the aforementioned remain in force.

Schiphol’s neighbors certainly are not free of blame for the present stalemate. Some of them have left the impression of obstructing the growth of the airport for the sake of obstructing, perhaps more out of frustration than out of personal hindrance from noise pollution. But the airport wants something that is not self-evidently legitimate: the acceptance of noise pollution. The people living around Schiphol are not asking for anything special. They merely want something that is perfectly normal: to be left alone by their neighbor. So, the prime responsibility for building a good working relationship lies squarely on the plate of the management of Schiphol. I do not believe that workable agreements in the way the Alders-table envisions can be achieved if the level of trust between Schiphol and its neighbors is not increased.

### **Conclusion**

A popular issue in Dutch newspapers and academic circles is the perceived lack of trust of ‘the people’ in ‘the government’ or in ‘politics’. A frequently offered solution is that politicians should listen more carefully to the people. In the case of Schiphol, the question is whether the national government actually wants to hear what the people have to say. It is hard to see how such an approach can increase confidence in ‘politics’. The elected government, particularly in a democracy, should not try to escape difficult choices; it should use its legitimacy to firmly make those choices. Growth of Schiphol without increasing noise pollution, or together with actually decreasing it to zero, is impossible for the foreseeable future.

In the coming years, Schiphol will be sure to be constrained by the Alders-table limit of 510,000 aircraft movements. Past experience tells us that economic interests will then once more weigh in more heavily than the social consequences of noise pollution. Make a choice for growth, or against noise pollution, or for a little bit of both, but make a choice either way, and accept that not everyone will be happy with the choice made. Choosing firmly not only solves problems, but also commands more respect than not listening, or pretending that listening equals giving in.

### **About the Author**

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