

THE KNIFE'S EDGE

THE DE HAVILLAND COMET & THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT: PART TWO / THE BAILOUT

The introduction of the world's first jet-powered airliner into service in 1952 found de Havilland, BOAC and the British government leading the world in terms of cutting-edge technology; but a tragic series of unforeseeable crashes of the Comet 1 in 1954 pushed all three deep into uncharted territory, particularly when it came to the political and financial ramifications, as **Prof KEITH HAYWARD FRAeS** recounts



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IT COULD HAVE been so different. The de Havilland Comet 1, powered by the firm's Ghost engines, entered BOAC service in 1952 and, although not ready for the North Atlantic, it had a comfortable lead over any American challenger, representing the jewel in the crown of the post-1945 Brabazon Committee programme. As a result, the Conservative government was looking forward to a self-financing civil aircraft industry.¹ The tragic series of Comet crashes in 1954, however, dashed these hopes and the government was faced with the need to rescue the Comet — and to some extent the company itself — as the nation's most prestigious and industrially important aircraft programme.

SAVING A NATIONAL SYMBOL

Following the crashes, the Comet was effectively out of the market, pending the redesign of the type's fuselage. Although the Conservative government was determined to wean the industry off public money for civil developments, the collapse of de Havilland, an important military manufacturer, was not acceptable. There was also the question of repaying the public investment in the Comet, which would be "lost — or largely lost — if they [de Havilland] do fail". Moreover, there was no question of half measures, as a Ministry

of Supply (MoS) note of October 21, 1954, reveals: "It is fair to say that any substantial nibbling at the details will result in a failure of the whole plan. Unless Her Majesty's Government [HMG] weighs in horse, foot and artillery, the firm will be bankrupt, and that the most we can hope for is a second-class firm engaged on MoS contracts for military aircraft and perhaps some private-venture work in the small-aircraft field. [The UK could well be] out of the market for large transport aircraft."²

The estimated costs of saving de Havilland were "scrappy", but were put at between £7m and £8m. But if BOAC "played the game" and helped in the rescue, there was "a possibility that the country and de Havilland (in that order) can recover from the setback of the Comet 1". The association between the Comet and the appeal to patriotism was almost "Dunkirkian" in spirit, and indicative of the MoS's determination to save both the company and the aircraft.³

However, a detailed MoS review of the situation distributed on October 7, 1954, had reported that returning the Comet to service would require rather more than minor modifications to the fuselage. This would entail scrapping the Rolls-Royce Avon-powered Comet 2s already built, and the cost of relaunching the aircraft would be

OPPOSITE PAGE A detail from a contemporary advertisement for Sperry flight instruments. **ABOVE** With the Comet Mk 1, BOAC could legitimately claim to be a "world leader in air travel", as this brochure claimed — but as BOAC Chairman Sir Miles Thomas said of the 1954 crashes: "All my aspirations and expectations had fallen out of the sky".