

Money down the drain

Recent visitors to Spain have noticed the excellent motorway system the country has recently built – indeed, it almost seems a case of overkill, as a lot of them seem to be empty. It's the same with Spain's airports. The country has a staggering 47 state-run airports. Does a country with less than 75% of the population of the UK need so many?

The answer according to the Spanish government is no, and two and half years ago, they started to close them down. Indeed, some of them never really opened. Not a single flight has ever landed at the International Airport of the Murcia Region, which cost 266 million euros.

How has Spain, which has been through such a tough time recently, found the money for these grandiose projects? The answer is that it hasn't. You and I, the European taxpayers, have footed the bill for these white elephants.

The auditors of the European Union have finally woken up to this waste. They recently declared that more than £100 million of European Union funding to build airports has been "wasted" and an additional £165m was "poor value for money". Nine of the 20 airports across the EU they studied were "not needed at all".

Unsurprisingly, the European Commission claims that the auditors are not presenting the full picture. "It is a completely unrepresentative sample of Europe's airports," said a spokesman.

Perhaps, but the busy airports like London Heathrow or Amsterdam's Schipol were not built with EU funds.

Furthermore, infrastructure spending in Spain and Portugal has always been viewed as an investment worth making in order to have a "dry run" for the bigger infrastructure improvements

needed by the former Soviet bloc countries. These have already started and no surprise, airports in Poland and Estonia were also mentioned by the auditors. In Poland, according to *Euractiv*, over 100 million euros has been spent on three "ghost" airports.

Anyone who visited Central and Eastern Europe during or immediately after the Days of the Warsaw Pact would agree that the infrastructure of those countries was inadequate, but are these white elephants really good value for our money? Tony Blair defended his decision to give up Mrs Thatcher's hard-won rebate in 2005, saying that we must "transfer wealth from rich countries to poor countries", and that we were, "investing in Eastern Europe."

The British people are remarkably generous in supporting worthy causes, voluntarily giving millions of pounds in relief aid following last year's typhoon in the Philippines, for instance, but we have no choice about this international compulsory wealth redistribution. We were never consulted as to whether we wanted to support the worthy cause of improving the infrastructure of Eastern Europe. It was certainly not included in Labour's 2005 election manifesto. Even if the money had been spent wisely, our own government urgently needs it to reduce our national deficit. Given it has been spent very badly, Blair's arguments nine years ago look more vacuous than ever.