

## **Lost in Space:**

### **Why the UK Must Restore EGNOS Access**

**by Martin Robinson**

Britain's regulators are protecting their reputations, not pilots' lives — and the consequences are real.

Britain's general aviation sector is being strangled — not by technological limits, but by fear and political vanity. The UK's loss of access to the European Geostationary Navigation Overlay Service (EGNOS) after Brexit crippled the rollout of satellite-based instrument approaches, locking hundreds of aerodromes out of safer, more resilient flight options. Instead of fighting to restore access to this vital service, the government and its regulators have hidden behind emotional arguments about sovereignty, fearing media accusations of “betraying Brexit” more than the real-world risks facing pilots and passengers.

Aviation safety demands leadership, evidence, and pragmatism — not empty symbolism. As Daniel Kahneman reminds us, “Nothing in life is as important as you think it is while you are thinking about it” — and nowhere is this cognitive bias more damaging than in regulatory policy. Rejoining EGNOS is not optional if Britain is serious about revitalising its aviation sector. It is the only logical course to avoid falling further behind Europe, the US, and every nation that values safer, smarter, more connected skies.

### **EGNOS: The Technology Britain Abandoned**

The European Geostationary Navigation Overlay Service (EGNOS) enhances standard GPS signals, providing crucial accuracy, integrity, and availability improvements. In aviation, EGNOS enables precision approaches to LPV (Localiser Performance with Vertical Guidance) minima — offering ILS-like performance without the need for expensive ground-based navigation aids.

This technology revolutionises accessibility. Pilots can land safely in poor visibility at aerodromes that were previously restricted to visual operations, boosting safety and reliability without burdening airports with costly legacy infrastructure. Across Europe, over 700 airports use EGNOS-enabled LPV approaches. In the United States, the equivalent WAAS system has enabled more than 4000 precision approaches,

extending safe access even to rural and remote airfields. Offering greater business opportunity and more services that could good be beneficial to local communities.

Before Brexit, the UK had already introduced EGNOS-enabled procedures at a handful of airports — Guernsey, Alderney, Cambridge, and others — with ambitious plans to expand. The service was tested, proven, and ready to transform general aviation. Then, politics intervened.

## **Fear, Not Fact: The Political Paralysis Behind EGNOS Loss**

Brexit negotiations severed Britain's access to EGNOS, not because of technical necessity but because EGNOS is managed under EU governance structures. Post-Brexit, Britain became a “third country” — and unless specific agreements were made (as Norway and Switzerland have), access ceased. With thousands of pounds of stranded investment.

The technical and safety implications were clear. Yet the UK government chose not to prioritise securing continued access. Why?

Not cost — maintaining EGNOS access would have required around £30 to £35 million a year, negligible compared to the economic damage of degraded aviation connectivity.

Not technical barriers — the system already served the UK well.

The true barrier was political fear: fear that rejoining a European technical system would spark accusations in the media of “betraying Brexit” or “giving away sovereignty.” The optics of total independence, even in highly technical non-political domains like satellite navigation, trumped the reality of operational safety.

Restoring EGNOS access is a technical necessity, not a political concession. Yet within government circles, fear persists — not fear of operational risks, but fear of headlines. Ministers are paralysed by the idea that restoring European cooperation, even for safety-critical services, would be spun as political weakness.

This fear is misplaced. EGNOS membership is a service agreement, not a political alignment. Rejoining EGNOS would not compromise Brexit or sovereignty — it would rebuild vital aviation capabilities and strengthen Britain's reputation as a pragmatic international partner. In truth, restoring EGNOS would be a demonstration of leadership, not submission.

“Political pride may have lost EGNOS — but only courage can bring it back. Britain’s skies, and its future, depend on it.”

- Establishing a sovereign UK satellite-based augmentation system (SBAS) like EGNOS is projected to require a £1 billion investment over 10 years, with ongoing operational costs comparable to EGNOS, estimated at around €100 million per year.
- Whilst establishing LNAV approaches without SBAS it could be said that the UK is spending a £billion on developing its own SBAS system with a £100 million in annual costs compared to £30 million for EGNOS is a waste of taxpayers’ money. Rachel Reeves could save a billion pounds and reduce service costs.

## **The Cost of Emotional Regulation**

The CAA’s refusal to modernise satellite-based navigation policies, coupled with the government’s political fear, carries real-world consequences.

For pilots:

Forced to rely on marginal VFR operations, exposed to increased risks in unpredictable weather, unable to use modern precision navigation at aerodromes without costly ILS systems.

For regional airports:

Lost revenue from missed flights, reduced competitiveness, and growing irrelevance in a global aviation network increasingly built around satellite navigation.

For communities:

Disconnection from essential services — medical flights, business access, tourism — at a time when regional economic resilience has never been more vital.

For safety:

Missed approaches, diversions, and weather-related incidents increase, undermining Britain's commitment to aviation safety leadership.

These are not theoretical risks. Every winter storm that diverts a flight, every cancelled air ambulance operation, every stranded business jet represents the real price of political posturing.

## **What the World is Doing — and Why Britain is Being Left Behind**

The United States has embedded satellite-based navigation into the core of its aviation system. Thousands of rural and secondary airports now have full LPV approaches, transforming accessibility and safety. Europe continues to expand EGNOS services, linking even small aerodromes into a resilient, weather-tolerant network.

Even countries with smaller aviation markets recognise the value of satellite augmentation. Norway, Switzerland, and Iceland, all outside the EU, maintain access to EGNOS or equivalent systems through technical cooperation agreements — without surrendering sovereignty, and without political drama.

Britain's self-imposed exclusion is a strategic blunder. Every year without EGNOS leaves British aviation smaller, weaker, and less relevant to the global industry.

## **The False Fear — and the Real Betrayal**

The choice facing the UK government is simple: lead with courage, or continue to govern through fear.

Rejoining EGNOS would not undo Brexit — it would reaffirm Britain's commitment to pragmatic, evidence-based leadership.

In aviation, as in politics, the real betrayal is failing to act when the path to safety and progress is clear.

The government's refusal to restore EGNOS access has little to do with operational reality and everything to do with political insecurity. They fear media-driven narratives accusing them of weakness. But this fear is not real. It is a phantom enemy, nurtured by spin doctors, not by the needs of pilots, passengers, or communities.

Worse, by clinging to emotional caution, the government betrays the very people it claims to protect.

In aviation, facts must fly the plane — not fear. This issue was raised when Sir Roy McNulty was Chairman of the CAA (2001-2009) and we have made little progress.

“History won’t remember the bureaucrats who played it safe; it will remember the opportunities they were too afraid to seize.”

## **Conclusion: No Signal, No Excuse**

Aviation is built on bold thinking, on accepting that progress demands managing risk — not hiding from it. Britain’s aviation future depends on confronting political vanity and embracing real-world cooperation where it matters.

Restoring access to EGNOS is not just an operational necessity. It is a test of leadership. We rejoined European programmes such as Horizon 2020 and Copernicus because it was the right thing to do without any political concerns- So why not EGNOS..

The longer Britain waits, the deeper the loss: in safety, in economic resilience, and in its standing as a serious aviation nation. In aviation, no signal means no future