

Air safety dispute in Australia highlights growing dangers to passengers

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Doubts remain about air safety conditions in Australia after an 11th hour deal on Tuesday averted plans by Qantas and four other airlines to stop all flights in one of the country's busiest air traffic corridors. The airlines had demanded a moratorium on the trial of a new cost-cutting radar monitoring system that has often left pilots flying blind.

Qantas, one of the country's international airlines, suspended its flights in the region last Friday and was about to be joined by Ansett, its chief rival, as well as regional airlines, Hazelton, Kendell and Aeropelican. They threatened to cancel more than 30 daily services to major regional centres in the state of New South Wales.

The ban would have affected flights at less than 8,500 feet along a 1,000-kilometre corridor from the national capital of Canberra to the northern coastal town of Ballina. In a bitter dispute, another regional competitor, Impulse Airlines, refused to join the boycott, flying 20 flights a day across the disputed territory.

Even the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) joined the condemnation of the government's dangerous experiment. Under the trial, the federal Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) has scrapped the previous system, whereby ground-based flight services advised pilots by radio when other aircraft were nearby. The airspace is now uncontrolled, except for partial coverage by a radar system that reportedly cut out below 11,000 feet around the industrial and steel-making centre of Newcastle. Aircraft simply dropped off radar monitors, leaving pilots with no protective guide.

Late on Tuesday, after two days of wrangling, the airlines agreed to continue participating in the trial, with two modifications. First, the RAAF will make military radar and personnel available from 6am to

10pm in the Newcastle area as a stopgap measure. Second, pilots will be obliged to use two radio frequencies instead of three to check on the whereabouts of other aircraft as they approach airports, land and take off.

Before this arrangement was hastily cobbled together the Howard government's recently re-appointed CASA chairman, millionaire company director Dick Smith, lashed out at Qantas for halting its flights, accusing the company's executives of protecting their profit-related personal bonuses by doing so. 'Qantas is now very much profit-driven. Most of their senior executives are on bonuses so they are going to maximise their profits and reduce their costs,' Smith declared.

He accused Qantas of seeking to boost safety without having to pay for the cost of the ground staff needed to do so. He said the airline had itself advocated the same change elsewhere in the state in order to save \$1 million a year.

Yet Smith himself is determined to deliver the cost savings demanded by the government. On Tuesday he refused to participate in discussions with the airlines. He insisted that the new system was of 'world standard,' perhaps unwittingly raising concerns about the global dangers facing airline passengers.

Qantas executive Doug Gillies rejected Smith's tirade and said he found Smith's argument difficult to follow. 'I don't understand his logic, in the sense that I am not quite sure how we can protect bonuses if we cease flying.' Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the airlines have backed the new plan in order to shave their own costs. They only objected after pilots protested against the reported failing of the radar system to provide the coverage promised. Smith then accused Qantas of bowing to union pressure.

Pilots have condemned the strains placed on them by

the uncontrolled system. Australian Federation of Air Pilots spokesman Terry O'Connell said CASA was trying to put increased responsibility onto the airlines themselves for air safety. Speaking on radio, he said: 'As we understand it, the major airlines, Qantas and Ansett, will become responsible for their safety without the expertise that currently exists in the authority [CASA] being there as a back-up.'

Opposition leader Kim Beazley and the Labor Party's spokeswoman Cheryl Kernot sought to make political mileage from the dispute by calling for CASA's trial to be suspended until the airlines were satisfied that the skies were safe. Yet the Labor leaders have no objection to the underlying processes of budget-cutting, public sector downsizing and de-regulation (or corporate 'self-regulation').

In fact, it was the previous Labor government that initiated the cost-cutting drive in commercial aviation. In 1988 the Hawke Labor government disbanded the Department of Civil Aviation that had regulated air safety for years. They replaced it with the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), designed to be a profit-making enterprise. After 1991, under the then transport minister Laurie Brereton, the CAA's staff was cut by 1,000, or 20 percent, gutting it of technical expertise.

To perform this operation Labor appointed the same Dick Smith as CAA chairman. He supervised the introduction of a regime known as 'affordable safety' and boasted of eliminating 'excessive regulation' to save airline owners \$200 million a year.

In recent years, 'affordable safety' --first applied to drastically reduce regulation of small airline and charter service operators--has contributed to many fatal crashes in Australia. Now the lives of all air passengers, including those flying on regional services conducted by major airlines, are directly threatened by corporate profit demands, increasingly cut-throat competition and government cost-cutting.



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