

Safety incidents plague Australian airline

Air safety deregulation

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22 September 2008

A string of safety incidents has raised mounting questions about an underlying deterioration of maintenance and safety standards at Qantas, the privatised Australian airline. Throughout this year, planes have been repeatedly grounded following engine and other mechanical troubles.

A major incident on July 25 forced the federal government's Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) to announce a Qantas safety review. An oxygen bottle on board a Qantas jet apparently exploded mid-air, tearing a gaping hole in the fuselage, requiring the packed aircraft to make a rapid descent and an emergency landing in Manila. It was the third serious episode in days.

CASA's review was also prompted by revelations that Qantas had failed to carry out essential maintenance designed to stop cracking in the bulkheads in its Boeing 737 fleet—work that was ordered eight years ago by the US Federal Aviation Administration.

CASA's findings, announced on September 1, were extremely cautious, but nonetheless disturbing. Spokesman Mick Quinn stated the review indicated "broad deficiencies" and "some adverse trends" in the airline's maintenance program, with Qantas only meeting a handful of its own benchmarks. At an ensuing media conference, Quinn refused to provide any details and CASA has released no documents.

CASA said it would undertake two further investigations, including a maintenance audit of one aircraft from each major aircraft type in the Qantas fleet—a three-month process that will involve checking maintenance documentation and "physically examining the aircraft on the ground".

CASA, however, sought to down play any dangers, issuing repeated assurances that Qantas remained a safe airline. Its media release declared: "CASA is confident Qantas will act quickly and appropriately to address the issues and this will ensure Australians can continue to have full confidence in the airline."

Quinn claimed that the review "did not find any evidence that the recent spate of incidents, which was largely why the review was called, [indicates] any systemic failure," adding: "We believe these are random events, and the sort of events that would happen in any airline on any given day in any part of the world."

While none of the "spate of incidents" resulted in fatalities, the potential for a catastrophic event certainly existed. That was especially true of the July 25 explosion, which Quinn dismissed as merely "an extremely unusual event".

Under questioning by reporters, Quinn denied that the safety problems were linked to the company's cost-cutting. Hundreds of maintenance jobs have been eliminated over the past 10 years and about 20 percent of Qantas's maintenance work has been outsourced overseas. All Quinn would say was that it was none of CASA's concern how Qantas "run their business".

Quinn admitted that CASA had not set the company any specific requirements, apart from meeting its own benchmarks, and was instead happy to secure "cooperation" from Qantas in order to "move forward".

Even while the review was underway, there were further incidents in August. These included a Qantas 767 being forced to make an emergency landing in Sydney after hydraulic fluid leaked from a wing. Another flight had to return to Adelaide after a wheel bay failed to close. Then an air-conditioning fault forced the grounding of another plane.

Later in the month, Qantas confirmed that an access panel had fallen from one of its aircraft during a flight from Singapore to Melbourne. A flight due to leave London was grounded following a "technical" problem with a rudder and a 747-400 aircraft en route from Singapore to London was diverted to Frankfurt after the captain detected a vibration in one of the engines.

The airline's problems have continued this month, with one flight from Brisbane cancelled due to "technical

difficulties” while another from Melbourne to London was delayed overnight because damage was found to an access panel on the plane’s wing. A further flight was cancelled because of fumes in the cabin.

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Qantas brushed aside concerns about the safety of its aircraft. Chief executive Geoff Dixon first claimed that the airline had been subjected to undue media attention and then attempted to blame the problems on work stoppages by licensed aircraft engineers. He went on to make the incredible claim that “the issues are not about safety or compliance”.

Even CASA was obliged to distance itself somewhat from Dixon. While Quinn said problems were probably “exacerbated by the industrial action taken by Qantas engineers,” he admitted that the airline “had been heading that way before the dispute”.

As for the federal Labor government, it has rushed to Qantas’s defence. Addressing parliament, Transport Minister Anthony Albanese said CASA’s actions “had sent a signal to the public and the industry that Qantas was serious about maintaining its high safety standards”. He declared: “Australia can indeed be proud that we have a rigorous, world’s-best-practice safety regime and that Qantas is rightly regarded as an airline with a reputation for safety that is second to none.”

Albanese’s statement, which was false on both counts, was designed to protect the airline and cover up Labor’s own role, not only in privatising Qantas but also deregulating Australia’s aviation industry.

In 1991, in line with its free-market agenda, the Hawke Labor government established a system of self-regulation, instructing CASA’s predecessor, the Civil Aviation Authority, to ease its regulatory control to cut costs. Transport Minister Laurie Brereton slashed the authority’s staff by 1,000 or 20 percent and began reducing its surveillance programs. The agency became increasingly reliant on data from internal maintenance audits carried out by the airlines themselves.

In 1993, Labor privatised Qantas, thereby subjecting every aspect of its operations to the overall drive for profit. In a glaring example of deteriorating safety standards, a Qantas jumbo ran off the runway and nosedived onto an adjacent field when making a landing

in Bangkok in 1999. Fortunately no one was killed. A subsequent investigation said a major contributing factor was Qantas’s order to pilots not to use reverse thrust when landing, so as to cut fuel costs.

Writing in the *Canberra Times* on August 25, John Woods, a former pilot and now a flying operations inspector with the Department of Aviation, pointed to the “predictable results” of the “mantra of affordable safety” introduced under Labor and continued after 1996 by the Coalition government.

Wood wrote: “From 1993 to 2005 there were several fatal crashes of light aircraft engaged in commercial air transport, culminating in the crash of Transair’s Metroliner VH-TFU near Lockhart River in June 2005. The total loss of life from these accidents was 54 people. In the investigations, conducted by the Australian Transport Safety Bureau, neglect or incapacity by CASA was found to have contributed. The bureau’s report on the Lockhart River crash was highly critical of CASA’s oversight of Transair prior to the crash.”

Wood warned: “The foregoing compels me to believe that the culture of ‘affordable safety’ has had a corrosive effect on standards and that the rot must be stopped if we are to avoid a catastrophe.”

However, Transport Minister Albanese’s response to the CASA review demonstrates that the Labor government has no intention of imposing tougher safety requirements or monitoring, as that would interfere with the efforts of Qantas and other airlines to stay profitable amid high oil prices, an economic slowdown and fierce international competition.



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