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COMMENT

MEANS TO AN END

IT WOULD BE EASY to assume from recent events on both sides of the Atlantic that the ultimate power of airline regulation has passed from the hands of the professional, independent, regulatory authorities to a rag-bag of customers, self-interest groups, the media, local politicians and the airlines themselves. In some cases, the result of this apparent transfer of power may have been the right outcome anyway, but in this area the end definitely does not justify the means.

The first murmurings arose after the American Eagle ATR 72 crash in December 1994. Pressure from politicians and media to ground ATRs forced the hand of the regulator into passing new regulations covering all turboprop airliners.

More recently, after the ValuJet McDonnell Douglas DC-10 crash, public disquiet fuelled by public discussion of the case led to such a collapse of confidence in the carrier that the US Federal Aviation Administration's grounding of the airline became just a formality.

Now, there has been the collapse of a UK charter operator following public near-hysteria after its single aircraft was involved in two safety "scare" in ten days. Again, there has to be the suspicion that Excalibur Airlines would have collapsed anyway, but its liquidator leaves no doubt that a welter of bad publicity hastened the end. All three cases are linked by so-called "loss of public confidence", fuelled by intense media interest.

In the ValuJet case, questions of wider public interest have undoubtedly been raised, even though emerging evidence implies so far that the accident cause was not necessarily directly related to ValuJet's low cost-base. In the ATR case, there was (perhaps) an interest of common concern to all manufacturers, operators and passengers of turboprop airliners. In the Excalibur case, there was no significant wider issue at stake. The real issue was that a couple of relatively minor technical faults became news because of the disproportionate effects which they had on the travel plans of a vocal group of passengers.

Instead, the Excalibur case has become firmly imprinted on the public mind as providing another link between "low-price", "old" and "unsafe". This creates an interesting dilemma for the air-transport industry: how is it to separate these concepts? Other industries do it: it is accepted that a cheap car meets the same standards as an expensive one, albeit in a nicer way.

The airlines (and the travel industry in general) need to manage this mis-linking of cost and safety, and replace it with an acceptance that cost has a closer link with the standard of service offered. The trouble is that the industry has survived for many years on selling a dream — of holidays in the sun; of swift,

luxurious, business travel. It has never marketed the reality — of minimum seat-pitch; of cheap meals; of inconvenient times of travel. Neither has it explained the basics of charter-price advantage: that seats are sold wholesale to the tour operator, which takes the risk of unsold seats.

Instead, the marketeers have drummed up unrealistic aspirations. The result is that people paying less than the economy return airfare from London to Glasgow or New York to Washington for a two-week all-in transatlantic vacation now seem to expect the standards of service and punctuality that they would get from a first-class scheduled service.

The crunch comes when such people are confronted with an Excalibur-type incident. The airline will refuse to fly the aircraft until it believes it to be safe; but in this case the delay caused by the necessary rectification and checking underlined the public's perception that the aircraft was unsafe.

If the airline industry is to ensure that it continues to be regulated by independent authorities and not, *de facto*, by mass hysteria, it needs to bring public perceptions and expectations in line with reality before an incident occurs. It is too late to try to explain airline safety and economics to a disgruntled passenger if the vox-pop television crew is already filming his anger. □



"The airline industry needs to bring public perceptions and expectations in line with reality."

Lex PV

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