

THE EMPIRE AIR ROUTES

Need for a general speeding up : £. s. d. the Problem : A Review of past Policy

On all hands there is general clamour for a speeding up of the Empire Air Routes. The demand can be satisfied if the necessary funds are forthcoming. In the following notes the subject is examined in the light of the Australian Race Results and some of the problems are brought to light

FROM the panic in the Press one would almost think that Great Britain had lost instead of won the great race to Australia. The writers seem to regard it as a national disgrace that two American commercial passenger aeroplanes should have won second and third places in the speed race, being beaten only by a specially designed British racer. They clamour for greater speed on British Empire air lines. That demand can be granted, provided that the taxpayers are willing to provide a larger amount of money by way of subsidy or mail contracts. It is only a matter of £. s. d.

A somewhat hysterical outburst in the Press cannot be taken as sure proof of the will of the people. If the Government decides that the time has come to spend more public money on expediting our air services to Australia and South Africa, no one will be more delighted than *Flight*. It must not, however, be hastily concluded that a decision to alter our air policy now proves that our policy in the past has been all wrong. It is always wise for those who would legislate for the future to examine the history of the past. Let us therefore remind our readers briefly of the history of British air subsidies.

Looking at the Past

Our present commercial air policy dates from the first régime of Sir Samuel Hoare as Secretary of State for Air. No sooner was he in office than he instituted the Hambling Committee to examine the situation and advise on a policy. There were at that time three companies running landplanes to the continent and one running seaplanes to the Channel Isles. This diffusion of British effort was not producing the best results, and the Hambling Committee advised a mobilisation. Hence there came into being Imperial Airways, Ltd., to which was granted a monopoly of subsidies so far as Europe was concerned, with a very distinct understanding that the same company should work up to Empire air services.

Monopolies have been much abused as unhealthy things; so have subsidies. As permanent institutions they would undoubtedly be very unhealthy. But British air transport was then a very sickly infant, and at times sickly infants have to be coaxed into health on brandy. So brandy was metaphorically poured into the feeding bottle of Imperial Airways. At the same time it was made very clear that as the child grew in vigour, so the doses would be diminished until they ceased altogether. It was, perhaps, an unorthodox prescription, made necessary by the desperate nature of the case. It did, none the less, produce the desired result. Looking back on it, we cannot imagine any course of treatment which would have done better.

This agreement laid down a very definite policy for Imperial Airways. Its directors were obliged always to work so that the company should become self-supporting by the time the subsidies should cease. They had to make their service attractive to the public, but always with the idea of making revenue exceed outlay at the earliest possible moment. The attractions offered could never be so costly as to jeopardise the attainment of that goal. Improvement in all directions (e.g., speed and comfort) had to be steadily continuous but never extravagant. When

an air transport company has no real rival (and in the early, uncertain days it was a blessing that there was no rival) its wisest policy may be summed up in the maxim "fly as slowly as you can (economically) provided that the public finds that speed attractive; charge as high as the public is willing to pay for that speed." The ordinary course of operation has year by year varied the figures implied by that maxim, but any expenditure which violated its principles would have been against the policy which the Government had laid down for the company. In adhering to that policy, the directors of Imperial Airways have been neither knaves nor fools.

Changed Circumstances

Two circumstances only could change the policy which Imperial Airways have been obliged to follow. One is outside competition, and the other is a further dose of the stimulant which is so often condemned—public money: Competition, at least as far as the East Indies, has been provided by the K.L.M., and to some extent by the French line to Indo-China. The MacRobertson race has been a great demonstration of the Dutch challenge. The consequent clamour in the Press may bring about the other condition, namely a further dose of public money.

Unless more money is spent on our air service to India and beyond, there seems a distinct probability that the K.L.M. will attract to itself the majority of the passenger traffic, British or foreign. The fine performance of the Douglas machine in this race has been a magnificent advertisement for the K.L.M., and it has awakened the British public to the fear that Great Britain may be left behind in the air. The public, or at least powerful sections of the Press, is calling the tune. The public must therefore be prepared to pay the piper. We may take it that the time has now come for laying down a new policy, and we may look forward to the future without any shame in the past.

Considering the Future

What the Douglas has done is to show the possibility of combining comfort with speed. Imperial Airways has hitherto concentrated on comfort. It must, none the less, be remembered that the Douglas could not have done all that it did do in the race if it had flown only in daylight. The travelling public in general will not consent to fly night and day for 90 hours or so. One night of sitting more or less upright in a train is enough for most people. Some companies have provided sleeping berths in their aeroplanes, which reduces the passenger capacity by 50 per cent. Such a loss of pay load implies a still larger subsidy. For day and night travel by air as a practical proposition one must look to the *Graf Zeppelin* and her successors. Therefore we must be careful not to exaggerate the lessons taught us by the Douglas and the Boeing in this race.

Mails, however, can be flown on through day and night, with suitable reliefs of pilots and with proper organisation of the route. The K.L.M. and Imperial Airways are alike in opposing the idea of employing separate aeroplanes for mails and passengers. Here again we seem to be at the