Ansett and TAA Ideas on the Jet Airliner

BY STANLEY BROGDEN

WHILE the rest of the world operates jet airliners on domestic routes Australian domestic airlines can only watch and plan. At the moment it would appear that 1964 is the accepted year for the introduction of jet services here in Australia. The internal operators are therefore working and weighing the promises of aircraft manufacturers over the next fifteen months; for by Christmas 1961 they must have made up their minds about their next choice of equipment.

One of the very difficult aspects of this choice is that the Government hold on airline policy, through its rationalization system, is almost sure to force the two operators to select the same equipment—or at least to order it. For TAA and Ansett-ANA are today as far apart in their fundamental thinking on the jet airliners they need as they were about the turboprop types now operating.

Consider the late 1950s. As far back as 1956 the operators were very far apart in their reactions to the equipment being offered. TAA was interested in the Caravelle from the beginning: Mr. R. M. Ansett and his Ansett Airways team liked the Electra. This was before the Ansett-ANA wedding. ANA was in a bad way and could not seriously consider new equipment. It had made what turned out to be a disastrous decision when it decided to order DC-6s and DC-6Bs, for the top-level philosophy was to have a type which could not only operate on all route-lengths but also carry anything human or inanimate with similar profits. The ANA technical people wanted the Airspeed Ambassador and/or the Vickers Viscount, but this was ruled out at the top policy level. There was also the factor of the late Sir Ivan Holyman’s extreme patriotism: he wanted DC-6s because they could form a wartime troop carrier force with sufficient range to operate into Asia or the Middle East. This doomed ANA. It was a tragedy for both the UK industry and ANA that the late Sir Ivan was above all a Douglas man. A good ANA order might have saved the Ambassador project: Viscounts might well have saved ANA, if anything could have done.

Mr Ansett stayed by his Electra preference when the amalgamation came. When the Government’s policy of two equal operators was decided he told the Government and the Department of Civil Aviation the Caravelle was a crazy idea. He had reasons: two engines, too much pioneering effort, unlikely profit. Luckily for him, Qantas also favoured the Electra as against the Britannia or a medium-range jet.

TAA Wanted Jets

That meant two of the three major Australian operators were for the Electra. Qantas was the most powerful of the three in political influence, and still is. The days of great TAA political pull have gradually faded: TAA’s management, technical and administrative, is not the force it was in Canberra in the 1946-54 period. That could return with a Labour Government, of course. In the early 1950s TAA’s opinion might have been paramount, even under the Liberal-Country Parties Government, but TAA influence was so badly affected when it advised BCPA to order Comet 2s. In 1958 TAA was alone in wanting jets on domestic services. Ansett-ANA wanted Electras on domestic routes and Qantas wanted Electras on the short-range international routes, such as Sydney - Hong Kong. (One of the puzzling aspects of the whole affair, by the way, is the mystery of what happened to the very popular offer made by Bristol to the Government, which is said to have had the Electra deal in every way.)

It was obvious that the Government either had to force Ansett to submit to TAA’s introduction of jets or to force TAA to drop the jets. The Government did not want jets on domestic routes because the airports were not prepared for them. Essendon (Melbourne) in particular was a problem, for the Labour Minister for Civil Aviation in the late 1940s had overridden departmental advice and insisted that land be sold to housebuilders right to the edge of the airfield. This was political; and the present Government’s fear of noise was political. It still is. Both wanted votes. There was also the question of handling the jets in the air: the Department of Civil Aviation was working on it until the mid-1960s when the turboprops had been digested and lessons learned from operating aircraft in the 300-400 m.p.h bracket could be assessed. Nevertheless, TAA say that the Department did tell them on an operating level that it would permit some two-dozen Caravelle operations a week in and out of Essendon. Had Mr Ansett agreed to buy Caravell, four would have been permitted on Australian routes from the Department’s viewpoint (two for each airline). The Government would probably have agreed, for another factor was that everybody knew if TAA put on jets and Ansett put on Electras then TAA would simply get the business. The Government just would not agree to TAA having jets and Ansett-ANA having none.

To cut the knot, the Government proposed that both operators should be confined to Viscounts 800s and Friendships until the mid-1960s. Qantas were a little suspicious of this: a decision was taken to keep the lines and TAA would have accepted it, perhaps reluctantly. Ansett-ANA refused.

Mr Ansett pointed out that he could only renew ANA (in which morale was very low) as Ansett-ANA by the introduction of equipment which would give the new airline a fillip in the public mind and prove to the doubting ANA employees they really had a future. He had to have a big and modern and efficient money-maker—the Electra. As Qantas picked this type, the Government had to agree, and the decision was taken that all the Australian operators would buy on the dollar market. (Behind all this was, of course, a mighty sales effort by Lockheed, which included a high-level team, and almost no sales effort by the French.)

The Electra Makes Money

Mr Ansett was unfortunate in that he took up for gospel the promises made by Allison salesmen and did not foresee the Allison engine and Electra airframe troubles. In spite of the delays and the unhappy history of the type this year both operators are making money with Electras, but the effect of the troubles on passengers has been to give the industry a bad name, for which the Electras are being blamed.

The key factor is Essendon-Tullamarine. There is no question of Mr Ansett having a Big Plan: he wanted six or eight Electras right away. TAA, with a super-long range Electra, could have done.

To the writer remarks, they are being forcefully promoted for the Electra. The BAC-107 short-haul jet would make a suitable partner for the larger medium-haul VC11 from the same stable. Both are projects only but.