

INTERNATIONAL AIR TRANSPORT ASSOCIATION MEETING

In Sydney, 23rd October, 1961.

Speech by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. R.G. Menzies

I am delighted to be here this morning under your presidency, because really Sir Hudson Fysh is one of the most remarkable of living Australians. He was the true pioneer of commercial flying in Australia. I have no doubt that back in those earlier days he thought this was a bold stroke to start a thing and call it Queensland & Northern Territories Aerial Services - hop from here to there, and hop back again, with a little bit of luck. That is how it all began. Now it is one of the great airlines of the world. And the man who began it and who thought of himself, first of all primarily, I have no doubt, as a pilot and an adventurer, still remains an adventurer. But he has in one sense ceased to be a pilot and become a pirate, because he turns out to have, and unexpectedly in those circumstances, a positive flair for business, for driving an enterprise on - he saw with an eye of imagination all round the world - and, what is more, he has, in my experience (and I don't want to say this to encourage any of the others of you) an unrivalled capacity for rifling the Treasury.

Now, Sir, having said that - and all the good bits about you are completely true - I just want to tell you that at the week-end I thought "What can I say in opening a conference of this kind? I suppose I ought to be completely agreeable and pat everybody on the back". But when I sat down I found that at the end of two hours all the things I had thought of about aviation, about civil aviation, were extremely disagreeable. I recall the fact that over the better part of a million miles I have been sitting in mid-air in my time trying to think - and failing, trying to read - and failing, arriving at the other end in a state of complete intellectual dejection, being cross examined by people in press conference and television interview - people who had been to bed the previous night. One has some of these strange memories.

Indeed I want to tell you this great historic disclosure: I am a fairly senior sort of Prime Minister attending Prime Ministers' Conferences and about 5 or 6 years ago, attending one, I proposed that we should form a Prime Ministers' Union. Well, of course, you know not all Prime Ministers appreciate that kind of remark and so it was rather badly received. I said, "Well, it's perfectly simple. The union has only one rule. It won't have anything to do with wages and conditions or any of that sort of thing - we will do the best we can in those departments ourselves - but" I said, "there must be one rule and that is No press or television interview within 24 hours of arriving after a flight of not less than 3,000 miles". I said that to give Diefenbaker a chance - from Canada. And do you know that with the exception of my support, this wise, humane proposal, this statesmanlike idea was unanimously rejected. They all went away feeling that I was an extraordinarily frivolous fellow and I have never had the same status in a Prime Ministers' Conference since.

But, Sir, in spite of these qualified remarks about flying, let us agree that flying is here and your business is to make flying better, safer, more economical, meaning by that economically more sound. I may say something about those things in a moment, but before I do I just want to remind myself, and all of you, of some of the benefits that have come to us through flying.

A great deal of trouble in the world has arisen from notions of insularity, each country tending to live to itself, drag its cloak about it, feel that it is a better country than any other and that on the whole it is prudent not to know the neighbours. This idea of insularity is an idea which has, in our lifetime assailed even the greatest of nations and what flying, international flying, has done, perhaps more than any other instrumentality, is to break down this feeling of insularity. Thousands more people, to take the example of Australia, visit us and we visit them. Thousands of people, in an early day and by other means perhaps, saw little of us except the ports, and ports - with great respect to Sydney - are seldom the most fascinating parts of a country. Lots of people who did not get beyond the ports now, by reason of the greater speed of arrival and the more time that they have available to them, see a great deal more of the country - and that goes for the people of our own who travel abroad.

Then, inside our own country - and this is worth remembering in Australia, a country roughly the size of the United States of America, with only 10½ million people - flying has done more than any other thing in our history to eliminate many of the symptoms and disabilities of remoteness in our country. A country like ours will never develop unless those people who have the feeling can be encouraged to live and work in remote places: otherwise we shall be all city heads and nothing else.

Before flying, a man was remote in the centre of Australia. A man who was in the far outback was indeed removed from his fellowmen. He indeed felt the great loneliness that can come to a man, and that can come to a woman, to the wives even more so. But today with our air services instead of being weeks away from other people, people are only hours away from other people. We have great things like the Flying Doctor Service in Australia. This is one of our prides and joys. People who once would have been left almost literally to die in remote places are today, within a few hours call by a flying doctor and a proper medical aerial service.

People get letters more frequently. They have the great and stimulating advantage of reading the newspapers more frequently, which is an awfully good thing for the digestion because it stirs something up in you.

So, Sir, I believe that inside Australia and outside Australia commercial flying has a great record and an even greater opportunity in the future. But when I have said that I want to turn from prestige to the work of your great Association. I may tell you at once that its recording system is remarkably good because when I said, as one does on these occasions, "Have they sent me any dope so that I will know what to talk about? Has Sir Hudson Fysh drafted a speech for me?" or words to that effect, the answer was to bring indeed all the speeches made by the presidents and the heads of governments welcoming conferences of IATA since it began. I want to tell you that I am a glutton for punishment: I read the lot. But I still found myself left with this: What is it that you are doing? Well you are, I believe, primarily engaged in developing what in effect is a co-operative system, a system based on mutual understanding and mutual willingness to help and to eliminate absurd things. I believe that if you can do this to perfection, the future of aviation is going to be much better than even its very remarkable past.

And safety: you know we read the newspapers and from time to time we read of another crash somewhere. These are dreadful things but, when you compare them against the enormous number of millions of people carried safely every year, I venture to say that one of the most astonishing things in the history of civil aviation has been the safety factor; and I dare say that it is a rapidly growing safety factor when you consider the enormous demand on air services. This doesn't happen by chance. This happens by tremendous scientific research, by vast expenditures on safety measures, vast expenditures on the machinery, the tackle that is needed in order to control flying, in order to make air movements safe movements.

I know that there are organisations which have, perhaps, a more particular interest in that matter and a more particular responsibility than you have but another thing which must have given you great exercise is that there is, after all, a disposition in the world to say, "We have an airline, our prestige requires that we should, so to speak, have no connection with the firm next door". I can well imagine that it is not a simple matter to get a great number of airlines together and get them to work out ways and means of the interchange of their services, the working out of routes so that people, instead of having to be precipitated at their ultimate destination with the highest speed will be able to change over, will be able to pause here, have a look at this country, learn something about this country, and then go on in an orderly pre-arranged progress. This kind of thing seems to me to be tremendously important.

But one of the things I do not envy you and I do not envy governments who are concerned in these matters, and that is that as the world goes on, faster aircraft are produced, faster aircraft are demanded. We are about, I believe, to enter the ultimate miseries of supersonic international aviation. I have a pet theory myself that my successor, because I am bound to have one you know, that my successor, in a few years' time, will be rung up and will be invited by the Prime Minister in London to "nip over and have dinner, there are one or two matters I'd like to have you talk with me about". He will then go out and be put in a sort of capsule, will be fired off up into space, dodging those copper needles on the journey, and will no doubt be brought down by some form of remote control at the other end, and go to dinner. It is a terrible prospect to me, but I do know quite practically, that every time an airline today re-equips it begins a process that is already half over.

It gets the latest as it sees the latest. It knows quite well that in a couple of years' time there will be something later than the latest; it may, when it buys its new equipment or aircraft of a particular type, optimistically say "Well now, we'll amortise the cost of these over X years". At the end of half that time it is sometimes suddenly reminded that after all it's impossible to resist re-equipment with this new one because you are being driven out of business by your competitor and so the partly amortised cost suddenly becomes a write off. How the financial men connected with the great flying companies manage to survive and have dark hair in so many cases, I do not understand.

This problem of the economics of flying is one to which I believe we all - and you in particular - must direct more and more attention, because I do not believe it is possible to go on just keeping up with the Jones's - whatever the cost of keeping up with the Jones's may be. The last thing that you want to have happen, or that I want to have happen, is to have international flying or domestic flying, civil aviation in the broad, regarded as something that is inevitably insolvent - or to put it another way, is something which inevitably cannot live except without massive subsidies.

I do not believe that needs to be true. I do not believe that it is beyond the wit of man to solve these problems, to organise the production of new types of aircraft, and to organise new programmes so that they have some relation to the effective use of the great assets already in operation. I do not know whether there is a temptation among flying people to look down on the earth and say that is a matter for pedestrians. This, of course, is a very pedestrian problem I am reminding you of; but it is a problem that will have to be solved because the people themselves in the world who, in the long run pay, will require to be satisfied that the economics of air travel are regarded today with equal urgency and importance as the mechanics of civil aviation, or the electronics of controlling aircraft and their passage through the air.

Now, Sir, I know that you have all those things in mind. I apologise for reminding you, therefore, of them. But speaking as one who sees no limit to what may be done in the air in the second half of this century, I would like to feel that it was not only going to be something dramatic, something exciting, something of immeasurable use to the world, but that it was something that could, to a very large extent, live on itself, depend on itself and not be beholden too much to the politicians of the world.

Now, before I conclude, I just want to tell you that I mentioned a little while ago how remoteness in my own country was being overcome by flying. Political remoteness, I may add before I close, is being overcome in just that way. In the old days my earliest predecessors, as Prime Ministers of this country, if they wanted to go to Western Australia, travelled by an international ship. They went comfortably, or uncomfortably, across the Great Australian Bight; they had four or five days of leisure, which, no doubt, they devoted to reading heavy matter and engaging in powerful thoughts. They then arrived at Perth, they discharged some of these powerful thoughts at a meeting, and then they got back on to the ship and came back to the Eastern States. This is a marvellous form of life. I look at it now just retrospectively. But it was impossible for them to know very much about Australia. Today, the problem is solved by flying.

In the last six months I myself, just inside Australia and as normal routine, have flown just under 20,000 miles and will fly another 10 or 11 thousand before polling day - if I may refer to that unhappy event.

I think it is quite safe to say that in the course of the last 12 years I must have flown, inside Australia, the better part of half a million miles, and all this has been done into every corner of the continent, into remote mining towns, north, north west, north central, south central - all over Australia, to places I could never have gone to if it were not for flying. This I trust, though I am not the best judge of it, has made me a slightly less incompetent Prime Minister than I otherwise would have been. It has broadened my knowledge, broadened my horizons, brought into my ears and into my eyes, the problems of people whom otherwise I would never see. This, I believe, in a country like ours, is the ultimate, marvellous answer to that remoteness which might otherwise overcome the Federal Capital with its limited opportunities on the part of Ministers to see the country and the people for whom they are responsible.

And so, Sir, in spite of my initial complaints - which are genuine, but not to be taken out of proportion - I stand here as the debtor of civil aviation, and as your debtor, because as I see it, I regard you as some of the great driving men in this business in this country. If I venture to suggest that I have some uneasiness in my mind about where we are getting to, economically, when we consider this tremendous rapidity with which re-equipment becomes necessary, it is only because I think so highly of civil aviation all around the world that I wouldn't care to have it put at the mercy of other people, or put financially into a precarious condition.

I welcome you and I declare this Conference open.

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