

3. The reforms commence under the Hawke Government

I was appointed Chairman of the Civil Aviation Authority in February 1990. The first thing we did was to obtain expert advice on the airspace systems around the world. It became very obvious that Australia was out of step.

This was because our very low traffic densities allowed “do it yourself” separation to work. I could see that as traffic levels increased, the system would fail. It would be better to move to a radar based system in the low level airspace. Most importantly, we had not had any controlled flight into terrain accidents that the radar could have prevented.

The Hawke Government had appointed a CAA Board with top quality aviation expertise. Ron Yates was an aeronautical engineer. Captain Len Heard was a retired airline pilot. We quickly made the decision not to go ahead with unique inventions such as “FISADS”, but to move to proven equipment with a modern, “Two Centre” air traffic control radar system. A decision was made at the same time to increase the amount of controlled airspace so that the radar equipment – costing over \$350 million – could be used to maximise passenger safety. The specification of the radar system included special alarms that would warn air traffic controllers if an aircraft strayed off course or was flying below the minimum safe altitude. This of course meant that to get the maximum safety benefit we would have to extend the radar usage to low level enroute airspace that was presently operated by flight service officers.

It should be noted that radar is not just used to prevent mid-air collisions. It is also used to prevent controlled flight into terrain accidents. In the past, these have been the most common form of airline accident.

At the time we received expert advice on an airspace system and it was decided to follow closely that of North America. It was considered by world authorities to be the best – the equivalent in airspace terms to a Boeing 747. The weather conditions with many months of snow and ice are far more adverse than in Australia. And the high mountain ranges put aircraft in icing conditions and make the chance of an accident far greater. CASA Board member Ron Yates, the ex-CEO of Qantas, said that Qantas flew with Australian passengers in the North American system, both the USA and Canada, every day and found that it was highly efficient and very safe. He said they wouldn't be flying there otherwise.

It was pointed out that North America had more radar coverage than Australia – this depended on traffic densities. This was not a problem. We decided to follow the procedures they used in their radar airspace, and also follow the procedures they used in their non-radar airspace. We noted that about 50% of the instrument approaches in North America are without radar coverage.

With the new radar equipment being installed we knew that we would have excellent radar coverage between Melbourne and Cairns. This was the area which had the highest traffic density and the greatest chance of a plane inadvertently flying into a mountain.

I arranged for a team of experts – air traffic controllers, flight service officers, and professional pilots from Qantas – to travel to Canada and the USA to familiarise themselves with the system. The team flew in the airspace and met air traffic controllers and other airspace experts. The team came back unanimously supporting the system. We then arranged for our controllers to go to San Francisco on paid “Awareness Programs”.