

9. Failure to proceed due to self-interest and resistance to change

Ten years have gone by and the reforms have not been completed. There has been a concerted campaign – mainly by a small group of commercial pilots who have never flown overseas – to resist the introduction of Class E and keep the culture of pilot to pilot calls in uncontrolled airspace.

Air traffic controllers have also been against the changes but for another reason. Many don't want their responsibility and risk increased with more controlled airspace at low levels when they believe the old uncontrolled airspace system worked satisfactorily. Today in Australia there is no Class E controlled airspace below 8,500 feet so planes are not protected by air traffic control from collision with mountains in enroute airspace.

A vocal group of commercial pilots insisted that the system they were taught in was safe and could not be convinced otherwise. They believed the system where they attempted to communicate by radio calls with every other nearby aircraft was the best. They didn't accept that this system failed as the number of planes increased. They didn't accept that radar control was necessary for safety. They also didn't believe there was a risk that professional pilots would make mistakes and fly into the ground. They didn't accept that collision risk was many times greater close to a runway than away from it. These genuinely held views got wide coverage in the media.

In Australia today, we have busy airports such as Proserpine with jet 737 airliners – with up to six movements in one afternoon – all in uncontrolled “calling in the blind”, “do it yourself” airspace, even close to the runway, without even a UNICOM radio operator on the aerodrome frequency. With the monsoon conditions there and the very high mountains close by, that is an accident waiting to happen.

This is a story about unions protecting their members' interests – as they should do – and a story about a weak Government failing to protect the interests of the Australian public. It is also a story about pilots resisting change. Now I can understand why many Australian pilots have these views. Most do not understand collision risk modelling and have never been given the chance to fly overseas and experience a modern radar based airspace system.

It is also a story about conflict of interest, where the management of an organisation will have less take home pay if airspace safety costs increase – I will cover this later.

We have now had 24 deaths in a 13 month period – all linked I believe to the lack of airspace and regulatory reform. On top of that we came within a hair's breadth of killing 87 people in Canberra – once again, linked to the lack of airspace reform.

Remember this was a Qantas 737 flying at night into our nation's capital in complete radar coverage but because the airspace was uncontrolled, no radar control was provided.