

19. ABC's 7.30 Report undermines safety reforms

It is most important that I cover the way that The 7.30 Report on the ABC appears to have been used as a willing tool in stopping or reversing the airspace reforms. Every time the Government has attempted to move ahead with the reforms, The 7.30 Report has run a scurrilous campaign of disinformation.

Why they would do this is beyond imagination. Surely Kerry O'Brien and the other presenters value their lives. What do they think about the 24 who are dead because of controlled flight into terrain accidents – where the use of radar and a local radio operator may have saved the day?

I will give you an example of the disinformation. In May 2004, Kerry O'Brien ran a segment bagging the reforms. He started the segment by stating:

“But the battle over the contentious new system, which allows light aircraft to share airspace with commercial planes, isn't over yet.”

Kerry O'Brien would know that light aircraft have always shared airspace with commercial planes, and I personally have told him many times that the Government policy is directed at moving this “sharing” to the airspace where not only is the collision risk lower, but light aircraft have a mandatory transponder requirement.

The remainder of the segment became more misleading. I had been interviewed for the segment and the major points I made were about the conflict of interest that existed between Airservices Australia regulating airspace and maximising their profits, and also the plan to upgrade Broome Airport to controlled airspace under the Government's NAS policy.

When the segment went to air it was edited to remove any mention of the profit conflict, and also to remove any mention of the upgrades. The message given was that I was actually supporting a reduction of service and safety at Broome Airport – the opposite to what I had said in the interview.

I immediately wrote to Kerry O'Brien with the following request.

“I request that you give me equal time on The 7.30 Report to explain to the public the true position. That is, the extra costs at Broome Airport will not come from a downgrading of the service, but from an upgrading to a full air traffic control tower as per Government policy and the US system. That is what I have always stated and supported.”

**Letter from Dick Smith to Kerry O'Brien
30 May 2004**

A copy of the transcript of The 7.30 Report and the relevant letters are on my website.

Although this was a personal letter to Kerry O'Brien about an important public safety issue, I received an answer from one of the ABC legal officers eleven months later. It basically said, “Get lost.”

It is hard to understand how Kerry O'Brien can be so captured by Airservices Australia and their policies to maximise their profits and minimise their risk. I understand

Airservices Australia was employing some of the most expensive commercial spin-doctors in Canberra. That certainly worked with the ABC. Now 18 months later, Broome Airport (which The 7.30 Report claims has 250,000 passengers each year) still does not have any controlled airspace and jet airliners are flying around in cloud in a “do it yourself” system. It is also an accident waiting to happen.

20. People are dying – why nothing in the media?

At the start of this presentation I mentioned the spate of accidents and that I would explain the reason that little was said in the media. The reason is simple. The Coalition Government has one prime aviation policy, and that is “keep aviation out of the media.” The Government organisations – including the Department of Transport, Airservices Australia, the Civil Aviation Safety Authority and the Australian Transport Safety Bureau – have complied with this direction to the hilt. Anything that may bring media attention to aviation is stifled. In fact, I have found that virtually everything that may be slightly controversial is suppressed or a spin is placed on it – as in the Canberra incident – to divert media attention.

It has worked. Civil Air, the air traffic controllers’ union with about 1,000 members, has exploited this weakness to the extreme. Good on them – that is their job to protect their members’ interests. Not only were Civil Air able to prevent non-licensed people from being radio operators at country airports, and prevent the lowering of Class E airspace where their members could be held responsible for accidents, but two other Government initiatives were stopped dead when the union voiced its objection.

The first was the removal of the conflict of interest relating to Airservices being both the regulator of airspace and the profit making service provider. The Government has been stating for over five years that it is going to set up a separate Airspace Directorate within the Department of Transport. However the union’s stated policy is against this, and so it hasn’t happened.

The other success for the union has been to stop the Government policy to introduce competition for airport tower services. Once Civil Air voiced its objection, the Government’s policy stopped in its tracks. Today we have Airservices Australia operating control towers in the USA at a 50% cost saving under a competitive environment, but no such competition is allowed here.

The union’s success once again reduces safety as many airports including Ayers Rock, Broome and Proserpine, would undoubtedly have a control tower if the Government competition policy had not been stymied.

The Government must be delighted with its success in keeping aviation out of the media. Back in the days of the Monarch crash, when the Labor party was bringing in major aviation reforms and standing up to the pressure groups (both industrial and business), every proposed change, accident, or even small incident was beaten up in the media with huge headlines.

The present Government has found that by appeasement, they can stop almost any controversy. This is a disaster for people who fly, and a disaster for the 24 people who may be alive today if the reforms had gone ahead. There is however some good news. There is a new Board and management team at Airservices Australia appointed since the airspace reversal took place. Hopefully they will be able to go ahead with the reforms – but this can only happen if the conflict of interest is removed by the Government.