

YOU MIGHT think that this morning I would be talking about my own feelings — about what it feels like to have sundry people arguing over my head whether I may travel to England, and if so, what I'm allowed to know before I go. I could, indeed, go into the ludicrousness of that. But one of the worst things about the issues raised by abortion is that they wipe everything else out. They obsess the person, they obsess the country, and they use up the time the Government might actually spend in governing.

There are other things to be decided. For example, the Minister for Transport, Mrs Geoghegan-Quinn, is due to announce "immediately after Easter" what she has decided about the Shannon Airport stopover. This is a question that most people, I think, have lost interest in. The arguments are too complex: it is easiest to fall back on one vague prejudice or another.

Dublin people who fly the Atlantic complain about the inconvenience of having to stop at Shannon both ways. People from the mid-west see the threat to Shannon as part of a near-conspiracy of the capital against the regions. The rest don't much care.

But it does matter, nationally. Shannon Airport employs 2,300 people directly. Over 5,000 people are employed in the Shannon industrial estate. Industry, business and tourism throughout the mid-west depend on the airport's transatlantic links. Shannon is, as it stands, a success story — one of the few in the history of State enterprise. If it were to be damaged, the consequences would be devastating, and not just for jobs but for the psychic health of the nation. Thousands and thousands more of our citizens would be utterly embittered against the Government.

At the same time, we have a national airline, Aer Lingus, which is also an extremely important employer, not least at Shannon. It wants the Minister to apply to have the Shannon stop varied. It wants some direct flights to Dublin. The Shannon people fear that this is the thin end of a

Dublin direct. Shannon will also have a direct New York flight, and the flights to Boston and Chicago. Aer Lingus has said that it will guarantee these flights to Shannon. But the Government is the sole shareholder in Aer Lingus and, of course, a government might some day make a different arrangement. There can be no real guarantees in this area.

The point of the direct flights to Dublin is two-fold. It is hoped that they will generate new business. And it is hoped that more people will fly on to further destinations on the Aer Lingus services already existing at Dublin Airport.

The Shannon people question almost all of this. Above all, they point to the losses on other routes, especially the London route. They point out that the Shannon routes were profitable for the seven years up to 1991. How is it, they wonder, that Aer Lingus was recently able to borrow tens of millions to replace part of its European fleet, for a generally loss-making operation,

wedge, and that it indicates a choice of Dublin Airport over Shannon as the hub airport of the future.

The national interest is involved, either way. So ideally, civic-minded people would be able to inform themselves as to the arguments and reach their own conclusions. But you'd need to be an accountant and an aviation expert and a transport analyst of a high order to grasp them all. I can only outline what seem to me to be the central issues. I may have them wrong, but at least I've tried.

Aer Lingus hasn't conducted a public campaign, so one can only piece its position together. But as I understand it, the question is the replacement of its transatlantic fleet. These aeroplanes must be replaced in the next few years. Whether the new aeroplanes are bought or leased, they will be horrendously expensive. Aer Lingus is losing traffic on the transatlantic routes both in to and out of Ireland. Unless it has a plan which promises an increase in traffic, no one will lend them the money to replace the aeroplanes. In which case — well, I don't know. I assume some other carrier would mop up what traffic there is, and that that carrier would be entirely indifferent to Irish interests.

The plan that it has involves acquiring smaller aeroplanes, and more of them. With these aeroplanes, it wants to fly Los Angeles-Dublin direct, and New York-

if it is not able to borrow to replace a generally profit-making transatlantic fleet? Why is it investing in hotels and the like, instead of in the Atlantic? What about the vast sums it could realise from its holdings in Guinness Peat Aviation?

AS for making Dublin a hub airport — well, they want Shannon to be the hub airport. Alan Dukes, TD, in a recent summary paper on the matter, backs them up. He thinks Shannon is more suitable than Dublin simply as an airport to this kind of development. "It is clear," he says, "that the most appropriate response to the future development needs of this country is to base the further development of transatlantic business at Shannon."

Though I must say this baffles me: if Shannon could be profitable as a hub — if it's all that suitable — why wouldn't Aer Lingus develop it? Why wouldn't someone else? There's nothing to stop them.

At the same time, he says that Aer

Needs of the future hold 15 key to Shannon debate

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Lingus's primary interest must be to improve the airline's performance . . . "Without a substantial improvement in yields, probably allied to a change in the nature of its operations, Aer Lingus may well not be flying the North Atlantic in four years time." This is a prospect he seems to view with an equanimity I can't share. This is, in fact, the heart of the matter.

As far as feelings go, I feel for Shannon in all this. The transatlantic traffic is what they have — the base of all they have. Yet it is only 10 per cent of all Aer Lingus business. What would be a major loss to Shannon would only be a marginal gain to Dublin.

Yet it is folly that, at the moment, there are two New York-Ireland flights, leaving withing an hour of each other, and both serving Shannon and Dublin. It is folly that when you go into a travel agent in the US, and ask for the quickest flight to Dublin, the computer will often show that the quickest way is through Frankfurt or wherever, because of the 40 minutes at Shannon.

Shannon has been protected since 1945. It has made a most admirable success of itself in protected circumstances, but it is folly to deny that circumstances change.

The truth is that they are not opposite factions, the Shannon people and Aer Lingus. They're in this together. Both groups are honourable: both are convinced of the rightness of their stance. Both are now dependent on a Government decision,

and if not this Government, then most governments have made ridiculous decisions about transport policy, usually for opportunistic political reasons. What might the citizen-at-large urge the Government to do?

I THINK that the argument has to be all about the future. Aer Lingus's plan for the North Atlantic is about the future. I can see no reason on earth why Aer Lingus should be telling lies or exaggerating or representing a Dublin lobby or be in any way in bad faith in presenting it. If Aer Lingus believes that its most viable future lies with more aeroplanes, smaller ones, and two terminuses in Ireland, then surely that will have to be tried?

How could the airline be constrained to stick with a *status quo* in which it has no faith? Traffic from North America to Ireland is falling. That's a fact. The aeroplanes must be replaced. That's a fact. I just can't see how the Shannon people can get around either of these facts on their own. There is no immediate plan if the Aer Lingus plan is rejected. Then what will become of Shannon? It is intolerable to think of it as a ghost airport, like Prestwick in Scotland.

But there is no trust in Ireland any more. There is no optimism. That is one of the reasons why this particular matter is so painful. It shows up how little scope there is for change — how fearfully people cling to what they have. The people around Shannon are not going to believe that they haven't been betrayed if Maire Geoghegan-Quinn applies for direct Dublin flights. Not until it has been proven that they haven't been betrayed.

There is a terrible onus on Aer Lingus to be right about its business plan. That is all there is: the business plan. Government will no more commit itself to a dynamic, forward-looking investment plan for Shannon than the cow will jump over the moon. As far as I can see, it is go with the Aer Lingus plan or nowhere. From my heart, for all of us, but especially for the people of Shannon, I wish that plan success.