

ALL IRELAND SHANNON

Not even the most zealous advocate among the 'Fly-Dublin-Direct' brigade ever suggested that Shannon Airport should be thrust into unrestricted competition for transatlantic passengers. On the contrary, it was recognised that any modification of the mandatory stopover would have to include strict safeguards for Shannon, to maintain jobs in the area and protect the huge investment there. However, a modification of the stopover rule (for example, a requirement that two-thirds of all flights land at Shannon) would have been regarded as menacing by the mid-West region; it would have taken much persuasion to convince its people that this was not the thin end of the wedge.

Mrs Geoghegan-Quinn had these alternatives: she could modify the stopover rule, and set to work persuading the people in the mid-West that a controlled relaxation was in the interests of tourism development and aviation growth, especially across the Atlantic. Or she could ignore the pleadings of Bord Failte, Aer Lingus and the tourism industry, refuse to face the facts and decide to maintain the rule that every transatlantic flight must continue to stop in Shannon. In political terms, the Minister had a hard option and a soft option; and there never really was much doubt about which way she would jump.

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Mrs Geoghegan-Quinn is helped in her choice by the fact that none of the main political parties has had the courage to approach the issue from a national point of view; instead, they weighed the political cost of offending Shannon. A relaxation of the rule would undoubtedly threaten the Dail seats of local TDs who went along with it; and no compensatory places are available: there are no extra Dublin seats for the party favouring a relaxation because, outside Shannon, it was never regarded as a Dublin versus Shannon issue. It was, and will continue to be, only about the development of tourism and transatlantic traffic for the benefit of the whole country.

The Minister fired off a few broadsides yesterday in trying to defend the indefensible. She maintained that Irish aviation policy is one of the "most liberal" in existence; she might name all the other countries which impose mandatory stopovers within 20 minutes flying time of the preferred airport. She criticised Aer Lingus for changing its mind on a direct Los Angeles service; she might ask her officials how west coast fares have tumbled since the application was first made. She maintained that no airlines have approached her with a view to starting up a transatlantic service, if they were allowed direct flights to Dublin; she might explain why huge airlines such as United and American seem to have no desire to fly into Ireland and tell us why not. She said that the interests of Aer Lingus are "currently best served by retaining the stopover". The key word is "currently". Aer Lingus is "currently" in such deep trouble that it would not relish the start-up costs involved in setting up a Dublin-direct service and in fighting off the new rivals that would come in. Never mind that in the medium or long term there is no hope of the airline developing its Atlantic business unless the stopover is relaxed.

There is a time-honoured practice among Ministers of lashing out at state-owned companies, secure in the knowledge that the persons involved, being public servants, are unable to answer the charges. It is to aim one's shots at soft targets. Mrs Geoghegan-Quinn has done more however. She has passed up a golden opportunity to reverse the growing trend of American tourists bypassing Ireland and flying direct to other European countries. It would have required sacrificing simple electoral gain to secure long-term national interests. That is too seldom the way the politicians see it. Mrs Geoghegan-Quinn and her Cabinet colleagues — Progressive Democrats included — have taken the course of self-interest.

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