

The challenge to Shannon



I WRITE this article for the purpose of expressing my opinion as to why the campaign for the integral defence of Shannon Airport failed, but also to raise morale in the matter of facing its future, in particular, by way of adopting a more realistic approach than has heretofore been done.

We all know how the matter started. While rumblings from Aer Lingus had been heard since the Autumn of 1991, the issue came to a head in 1992, when the Fly Dublin Direct lobby renewed efforts to abolish the transatlantic stopover (Limerick Leader, 21 March, '92). Simultaneously, the Irish Airline Pilots Association, a great number of whose members are based in Dublin, claimed that the defence of the Shannon gateway was 'outmoded' (Cork Examiner, 20 April, '92).

We know too that this prompted Signal, the Shannon workers' organisation, and Status, which represents local authorities and business interests in the area, to mount plans for a vigorous counter-offensive, while the newly formed Government Task Force on Tourism was asked to give Shannon very close attention.

We know as well that the reaction of the public was quick in coming, both on the part of local leaders and the people in general. It will be recalled that I myself and my colleague in the Diocese of Killaloe immediately opposed the Dublin proposals, mainly on the grounds that they were inimical to regional development of which Shannon was the linchpin in the Mid-West (Irish Press, and other papers, 26 March, '92).

Defence mounted

But the most important element in the campaign of defence was the massive support that it received from the people as a whole. Demonstrations of protest against any downgrading of the airport, held at Shannon and Limerick City, where some thirty thousand marched on 12 April, 1992, were impressive and compelling.

Small wonder then that in May the Government rejected the Aer Lingus proposals for a change, at least for the time being, while ordering new negotiations about the matter. This was seen, at one and the same time, as effectively underpinning Shannon's position in the foreseeable future, while keeping its ultimate fate still hanging in the balance (Irish Independent, 25 May, '92).

The former was the view that prevailed, when, at the end of October, the then Minister for Transport and Tourism announced a copper-fastening of the status of Shannon Airport and set up a special traffic develop-

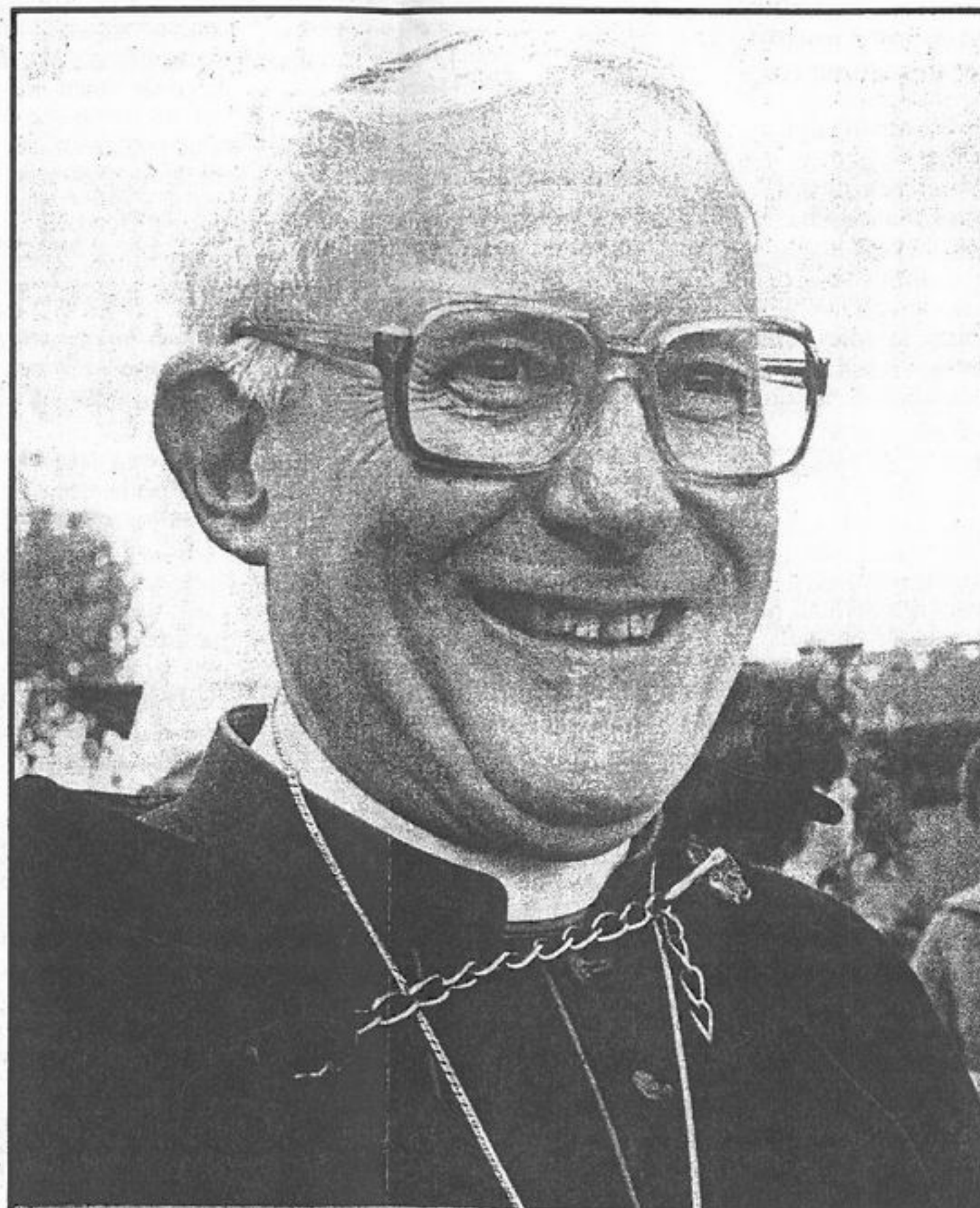
(Cf. Sunday Independent, 6 June; The Irish Times, 19 June; Irish Independent, 26 June). To its credit, the Shannon Status Committee on the last weekend of June, at a meeting attended by the highest Aer Lingus officials, including the Chairman of its survival plan group, delivered itself of a powerful analysis of the issue, showing that there was no case for linking the stopover with the difficulties within Aer Lingus. But it made little impression on the national media while the Taoiseach, on a visit to Ballycasey Aviation Park the following Monday gave ambivalent reassurances about Shannon.

Small wonder then, this time, that on 6 July, the Government should have approved the Aer Lingus rescue plan, including the ending of the compulsory Shannon stopover. All the national newspapers carried extensive coverage.

Government decision

Naturally the decision drew an emphatically negative response from all those who had hoped for something different - above all from the people of Limerick and Clare, from the bodies that had lobbied against it, from politicians and other individuals like myself. Even some of those politicians who had been ardent verbal defenders of Shannon, even visibly as well as vocally so at the rallies in Shannon and Limerick, yet who did not go against party whips when it came to the point in the Dáil, managed to summon up crocodile tears and facile explanations for their stances.

To their credit, two Clare deputies resigned their party's whip. If anything, though, the entire episode showed up the folly of over-reliance on the promises of politicians, as they themselves are learning in the



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tional Centre, he declared, as reported, that all Aer Lingus transatlantic flights would in future stop and start at Shannon, even though after the new bilateral agreement there could

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was aware of this, when, in June it reminded the Government that the then proposed Aer Lingus plan as it related to Shannon Airport, could, if adopted, create a danger to the ten thousand jobs there (Limerick Leader, 12 June, '93). Yet, under the umbrella of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), jobs as such rather than the infrastructure of their being was to be the primary concern. Even when the Cahill Plan was accepted by the Government, SIPTU - the main Aer Lingus union - was warning only about the fifteen hundred cut in jobs that it entailed (Irish Press, 7 July, '93). Indeed this preoccupation became so glaring as to prompt a leading article in the Irish Independent counselling moderation (17 July, '93).

My main point, however, is that amid all this concern about jobs, the basic Shannon question was allowed to slip from centre stage. The unions continued with their own immediate concerns right up to and even a day beyond the deadline. They are even still exercised by some aspects of the agreement on jobs. Not a word about the status of Shannon.

The way was open as far as the unions were concerned for the Government announcement at the end of October of a compromise about transatlantic flights - Dublin and Shannon to share on a fifty-fifty basis. The decision was defended by the Minister for Transport and Communications on the grounds that "if there was no Aer Lingus, there would be no Shannon", a highly dubious assertion (The Irish Times, 3 November, '93).

While the initial reaction in the Mid-West was one of near despair, we have to be realistic. That Aer Lingus holds an important and loved place in the heart of the nation is undoubted. The unions also play an important role. Hence too their right to look after their members and hopefully succeed in doing so. The

directly or indirectly - to hotels and that there are big American owned hotels in all the forthcoming air-hub cities of Europe.

The threat of withholding EC permission for an Irish Government subsidy unless the survival plan was accepted must surely have been part of the scenario. The EC made it quite clear that it regarded the Government as having no competence or legal right to negotiate at all about the stopover, saying that the Commission was formulating a common external aviation policy (The Sunday Tribune, 11 July, '93). It continues to have other reservations.

Future confidence

Despite all these difficulties, we must avoid a negative reaction and face the future with confidence. The fact that the General Manager of Aer Rianta at Shannon and the Manager at Shannon of the new Aer Lingus-Shannon division have last week stressed that they are satisfied with the outcome of the negotiations should impress us. They are reliable men and have the interests of the region at heart. We should bend our efforts now in backing them as they seek a successful implementation of the plan insofar as Shannon is involved in it.

Many projects towards this end have already been advanced by Signal and the Shannon Airport Task Force. But we must not let down our guard again. We certainly must take nothing for granted. It may well be that, under the new terms, any US airline which operates a direct flight - whether scheduled or charter - to Dublin must also operate a corresponding flight to Shannon (Irish Independent, 3 November, '93). Yet we should heed the spokesman for the US Government when he said, as

while keeping its ultimate fate hanging in the balance (Irish Independent, 25 May, '92).

The former was the view that prevailed, when, at the end of October, the then Minister for Transport and Tourism announced a copper-fastening of the status of Shannon Airport and set up a special traffic development task force for the airport. The pro-Shannon lobby believed that the battle was over and won.

That, in my opinion, is where the first mistake was made. The lobby let down its guard and assumed that all was now well. This, in spite of the fact that the reopened endeavour of Aer Lingus, under the direction of its Chairman, and later to produce what came to be known as the Cahill plan, was rapidly working away on a solution to its problems, into which Shannon had originally been drawn and was unlikely to be let out of in the long run.

There was insufficient realisation of the import of the advice given to the Chairman of the Aer Lingus survival plan by the Irish Airline Pilots Association that transatlantic flights from Ireland would end by 1996 unless direct flights to the United States were permitted from Dublin, although this did draw an angry response from Limerick Chamber of Commerce and Signal (The Irish Times, 15 and 17 March, '93).

Neither was there sufficient realisation of the unhelpful use which could be made of a report by the Economic and Social Research Institute to the Department of Finance strongly questioning the future of the Shannon stopover and recommending a more limited approach, although this too came under strong attack from Signal (Cork Examiner, 7 June, '93).

Inadequate response

In the circumstances, angry responses were not enough. True to its broad interest in the region, the Limerick Leader (12 June) gave prominence to an idea that had surfaced about four years earlier to the effect that two hundred Aer Lingus staff might be transferred from Dublin and Shannon become a 'hub' for future operations. It was an idea that had originally been mooted by Aer Rianta and promoted by it in the U.S.A. Certainly, if it worked well, this might have met the problem. At least, it was a positive suggestion, although Signal may have suspected it as a bribe to end the stopover.

At any rate, by and large, not many positive and constructive ideas seem to have emerged from this end nor even a vociferous campaign sustained. Very quickly in fact the scene came to be dominated by the Aer Lingus demand that the Shannon stop must go, in the interests of saving the airline, and especially its jobs

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However, even after the decision of 6 July, it was felt that, in view of the further assurances that accompanied it, all might still not be lost. After initial numbing shock, Signal called for a rethink regarding Shannon against the forthcoming background of bilateral talks between the Irish and U.S. authorities on the precise implementation of the Aer Lingus plan for transatlantic services.

Overconfidence engendered

Here again the Shannon lobby let down its guard, although some protest meetings were held. I fear that a sense of urgency may have been dulled by certain factors.

In the first place, there may have been an overconfidence engendered by the setting up of the Special Traffic Development Task Force for Shannon.

Actually, as late as October, its Chairperson in Shannon was predicting that the airport could become a global hub by building on its transatlantic gateway record. It could provide a European bridgehead for both passenger and freight traffic coming from and going to North America, Central and South America, Africa, Australia and even Asia (Limerick Leader, 9 October, '93).

In the second place, the Aer Rianta traffic bulletin (20 July) had reported an overall increase of six per cent in traffic through Shannon. In the third place, an idea, originally put forward when Aeroflot arrived at the Airport on an exploratory direct Moscow-New York flight, namely, that it might make Shannon a hub for the smaller CIS airlines, had begun to surface again (Limerick Leader, 17 July, '93). Indeed it was hoped that a recent US-Russia air agreement might lead to Aeroflot flying through Shannon to a number of new US destinations (Irish Independent, 4 August, '93). In the fourth place, it had been reported that only two U.S. airlines - Delta and TWA - had expressed an interest in flying directly to Dublin (The Irish Times, 4 September, '93).

Finally, the politicians were again not wanting in giving assurances. The Minister for Trade and Tourism proclaimed his belief that the balance of advantage lay in retaining the Shannon stopover (The Irish Times, 5 June, '93). And is it possible that the Taoiseach was taken seriously when, on a visit to Dromoland Castle to open the new Brian Boru Interna-

tional Centre, he declared, as reported, that all Aer Lingus transatlantic flights would in future stop and start at Shannon, even though after the new bilateral agreement there could be changes (Limerick Leader, 24 July, '93)?

If these points have any validity, it would not be surprising if they had caused some apathy on the part of even the most friendly disposed Shannon-watchers. It would have been better to have taken notice of a number of negative signs.

Dangers underestimated

As early as 19 June, it had been announced that Shannon was to lose its direct flights to New York in the Winter months. Dublin Airport was to be developed as a hub, with Aer Lingus feeding in passengers for North America from the thirteen airports it serves in Britain and Europe (The Irish Times, 19 June, '93). On 21 June it became known that twenty five flights from New York had been cancelled for July and August (Limerick Leader, 21 June, '93). At the end of July, only days after the Taoiseach's assurances at Dromoland, the Tanaiste was making no promises beyond the vague one of reaffirming his party's 'commitment' to the Mid-West (Limerick Leader, 31 July, '93).

Then in early August came the news that airline sources had predicted a huge loss on the transatlantic route this Summer, while hoteliers and guesthouse owners in the region had begun to complain that their business would be down by around twenty percent. In early August too, despite what was reported earlier, Delta Airlines declared that it was likely to examine an expansion if it got the green light for direct flights to Dublin (Irish Independent - Business - 5 August, '93). And, contrary to the optimism to be expressed by her even shortly afterwards, the Chairperson of the Shannon Task Force warned that there were no quick fixes to ensure the future of Shannon after the transatlantic stopover ended (Irish Independent, 4 August, '93).

Further evidence of disquiet concerning the future of Shannon came in late September when Transliff Airways threatened to pull out of the airport owing to Aer Lingus and Government policy (The Irish Times, 25 September, '93). And at the beginning of October, suspicion grew that Aeroflot had been asked by the British Government to consider switching its Shannon operation to either Belfast or Stanstead (Limerick Chronicle, 5 October, '93).

The 'Shannon crisis' had not been helped either by a West of Ireland Bishop who was reported as saying that the mandatory stopover had been of little benefit to the West and North-West. "After all", he is reported as saying, "we campaigned to have the stop abolished so that direct transatlantic flights could come into our own Knock airport" (Irish Independent, 12 July, '93). This was promulgated as evidence that opinions were divided among the Catholic Hierarchy on the Shannon issue.

Early in August, the Archbishop of Dublin had understandably visited North County Dublin where he expressed concern for Aer Lingus and "those whose livelihoods depended on it" (The Irish Times, 2 August, '93). Sure, the unemployment figure in Dublin is disproportionately high vis-a-vis the rest of the country, but that kind of imbalance is an economic and demographic fact in the case of all world-wide centres of disproportionately high population concentration. Incidentally, the previous March, Dublin port was said to be awash with ships (The Sunday Tribune, 14 March, '93). One wishes that the same could be said of the Shannon Estuary.

Be that as it may, from the day that the Government decision of 6 July was announced, minds became focussed on the problem of Aer Lingus and its employees to a relative neglect of the Shannon problem as such. During July, from day 7 onwards, scarcely a day passed without this being raised in the national newspapers, the emphasis being on the progress of talks between the unions involved and Aer Lingus management about a settlement relating to jobs. It regularly came to the forepoint too in August and September, as the Government deadline of 31 October for reaching agreement with Aer Lingus approached. But about the Shannon problem little or nothing.

Needless to say, during October itself, the Aer Lingus coverage reached a peak. I found it in one or other of all the national newspapers on 3, 4, 5, 9, 14, 15, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25-26, 28, 29 of that month.

Jobs preoccupation

As I have said already, the whole business seems to have become centred on the jobs question. In this respect, the unions do not appear to have realised sufficiently that a demise of Shannon Airport would undo short-sighted efforts to secure jobs elsewhere. In Shannon Signal

November, '93).

While the initial reaction in the Mid-West was one of near despair, we have to be realistic. That Aer Lingus holds an important and loved place in the heart of the nation is undoubted. The unions also play an important role. Hence too their right to look after their members and hopefully succeed in doing so. The Government also has its task to perform and it is not at all an easy one, involving often the reconciliation of almost irreconcilable differences.

Government difficulties

In respect of the Aer Lingus, and Shannon problems the Government was indeed faced with great difficulties. There was the pressure from US airlines, themselves faced with huge financial losses and redundant aircraft (See Irish Independent, 1 November, '93 and 4 November, '93). There was the pressure from the US Government to negotiate the original bilateral agreement regarding transatlantic flights, backed by a clause in it which provided a loophole. There was the pressure from Irish pilots, chiefly from North Dublin, for an arrangement more suitable to them. And, of course, there was the pressure from Aer Lingus to be allowed to produce its survival plan.

There were also less obvious pressures, about which the public are largely unaware. In Europe a bunch of airports have or are being developed in such a way as to constitute super hubs for traffic. Paris has seen the opening of a five million passenger terminal within its existing complex. It is preparing another for six million passengers. In Italy, Milan Airport is also being extensively developed as also are those of Brussels and Frankfurt, while in Germany Munich has a brand new airport which is said to have cost over five billion dollars. Then, of course, there is the continual expansion of England's Heathrow, with plans for further extension at Gatwick. Given that all of these will be fed by 'bullet trains', there is no doubt but that they will be the real hubs of European air traffic in the near future. That all or some of this does not constitute part of the Continental move towards a United Europe is highly unlikely.

Given this, one can see that there must have been pressure from the EC also, which would see Dublin as a feeder into the hubs. That is borne out, I think, in the National Plan, to be financed out of the seven plus billion EC aid in structural funds, which envisages the upgrading of the country's road network with practically all of the major roads leading to Dublin. US interests could coincide with those of the EC in all this planning. For it is notorious that airlines are closely linked - either

guard again. We certainly must take nothing for granted. It may well be that, under the new terms, any US airline which operates a direct flight - whether scheduled or charter - to Dublin must also operate a corresponding flight to Shannon (Irish Independent, 3 November, '93). Yet we should heed the spokesman for the US Government when he said, as reported, that the US hoped "the stopover requirement (sic) can be relaxed even further in the future" (The Sunday Press, 31 October, '93). The same holds for assurances from the US Immigration authorities about the retention of a Clearance System at Shannon (Limerick Leader, 2 October, '93).

Equally, we should be alert to the machinations of the EC, particularly as regards attracting flights into Shannon by Continental airlines. After the deregulation of European airlines as from next January, allowing them to fly between any of the EC countries without previous negotiation, there should be great possibilities for Shannon to attract quite a number of them. Yet we should be wary of the EC. In this respect, we should know the limits of its power, because it is a past-master at bluffing.

Its different types of law are: Regulations, which are immediately binding on member States in every respect; Directives, which are binding but implemented by means of national legislation, which may take a different form in each member State; Decisions, which are addressed to Governments, business or private individuals, binding in every aspect; and Recommendations and Opinions, which are advisory but not binding (Cf. EuroBusiness, London, June, 1993). It would be well for us to pay attention to which type is in question when dealing with Eurocontrol, the EC airlines agency.

For a start, we might insist on the relocation of some Aer Lingus pilots and cabin crew to serve the new transatlantic plans from out of Shannon. After all, and strangely at the last minute before the famous deadline, they are reported to have agreed to this (Irish Independent, 28 October, '93).

Rural Ireland

Above all, we must realise that the maintenance of Shannon, in whatever way that is feasible, is not just a matter about the well-being of Aer Lingus. It is a vital ingredient in the preservation of what is left of the population of the Mid-West region. Any further large scale aggrandisement of Dublin at the expense of the regions would not only contradict the stated regional policies of the Irish Government and the EC. It would spell the end of rural Ireland.