

**AIRPORTS AND THEIR LOCAL
COMMUNITIES:
A WAY FORWARD**

Federal Labor's Plan for Airport Planning

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AIRPORTS AND THEIR LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Airports are a vital part of the nation's transport infrastructure that significantly contribute to the economic well being of Australia. Airports are the critical gateway for holiday makers and business travellers alike and they are an important contributor to first impressions for these visitors. The importance of airport infrastructure to the movement of freight around Australia and around the world is also growing. Australia's reputation for training pilots for domestic and international aviation is also growing. However airports should not be considered in isolation; as well as being critical pieces of national infrastructure, airports are integral to the surrounding community.

Labor is committed to a vibrant and modern aviation industry, an aviation industry that is underpinned by world class safety standards. An aviation industry that can expand and plan with certainty.

Unrestrained development of airport precincts is unwise – for this reason the Commonwealth has retained ultimate planning authority for airport lands. It is incumbent on any Federal Government to ensure that the aviation and non aviation planning for airport land integrates with its host community. Any planning regime must provide certainty for airport operators, state, territory and local authorities and residents.

Since taking office the Howard Government has consistently ignored the wishes of local communities with regard to airport planning and associated issues as it suited them. The privatisation of Australia's airports has compounded this problem as the various consortiums that now hold airport leases feel the pressure of returning record profits year after year. This pressure has intensified in the face of a number of world wide aviation shocks. These pressures have resulted in some airport operators failing to recognise that the primary purpose of airports is for aviation – airports are not merely shopping malls with a couple of planes parked next to them.

The competitiveness and pressure in the aviation sector has caused tension between airport management and the communities surrounding the airport precincts. This in turn has manifested itself in a number of different ways. In Perth and Adelaide we have seen prolonged disputes between the airport leaseholders and local governments concerning the quantum and payment of rate equivalent payments. Again in Perth there has been significant local objection to the brickworks development, seemingly ignored by the Federal Minister.

In Melbourne complaints about the negative impact of the retail development at Essendon Airport on surrounding strip shopping precincts and centres, as well as contribution to congestion on adjoining major roads, continues.

In Sydney there was heated debate on the proposal to construct a \$200 million, 60,000 square metre retail and commercial development creating a so called 'super mall'. In this situation the proposed development was minutes away from at least two other significant retail centres - Eastgardens and Southpoint. The development would have had a significant impact on traffic flows and would have required major infrastructure expenditure by the State Government to deal with this issue. While Sydney Airport Corporation subsequently abandoned this development, an alternative option involving home maker centres and a discount store amounting to some 48,400 square metres is currently before the Minister for consideration.

In addition the Minister is currently considering a proposal for a \$100 million retail complex near the Hobart airport. This development is the size of nine football fields and will house a Direct Factory Outlet centre, furniture stores and also a hardware centre.

Labor in no way advocates a complete ban on development around airports. Labor does support sensible planning with the safety of passengers as well as the health and safety of surrounding communities being of paramount importance.

Another source of dispute between airport operators and relevant stakeholders is the increased costs leaseholders are facing following privatisation. This is particularly the case at several secondary airports located in major cities. While the Government is not a party to the leases between airport operators and lessees, it is incumbent on the Government, as the former landlord, to ensure that disputes can be resolved quickly and as amicably as possible. A strong and vital General Aviation sector is an important component in Australia's economic future. The Labor Party is committed to putting in place policies that support General Aviation as a viable and vibrant industry sector.

Labor recognises that airports are a significant source of employment and contribute to the wellbeing of the Australian economy as well as the economy of the surrounding community. It is critical that airports and communities are able to exist in peaceful cooperation. It is incumbent on the Federal Government to provide a framework where consultation and mutual respect replace combative and confrontational attitudes.

Airport operators must also recognise and accept the concept of mutual obligation. Airports provide employment and important community services; however there is also an economic and social cost to the local community. Airport management must understand that, in lieu of rates, a realistic contribution must be made to offset the costs borne by state and local government in the provision of adequate infrastructure around airports. In some cases non aviation development within an airport precinct will require specific new infrastructure and it may be appropriate that airport operators contribute to the cost of this infrastructure.

A Beazley Labor Government will act to provide communities, state, territory and local governments and airport operators as well as aviation stakeholders with the tools that will enable them to work together to achieve effective solutions to issues that have historically led to intractable disputes.

FEDERAL LABOR'S PLAN FOR AIRPORTS

Labor is committed to:

1. a comprehensive review the *Airports Act 1996* and associated Regulations to establish whether the current regulatory regime is sufficient for a modern and vibrant aviation industry;
2. the adoption of a set of clear and open planning principles that will be applied to any airport development;
3. fostering a sense of involvement and encouraging input for communities into the planning of airport developments; and
4. transparency in the airport planning and development decision making process.

1. REVIEW OF THE AIRPORTS ACT 1996

The *Airports Act 1996* was allegedly reviewed under Minister Truss in November 2005. Labor believes that the conduct of a closed door review with secret submissions and a confidential report and recommendation is not indicative of an open and transparent process. Labor is committed to a comprehensive review the *Airports Act 1996* and associated Regulations to establish whether the current regulatory regime is sufficient for a modern and vibrant aviation industry.

Labor's review will include a full examination of Part 5 of the *Airports Act 1996* (the Act) which details the requirements relating to land use, planning and building controls of core regulated airports and airports prescribed under the Regulations. In light of the level of community concern over airport master plans and major development applications, Labor believes that to ensure confidence in the process such a review must determine whether the current planning regime is the most appropriate model and that this must be done in an open and transparent manner.

The planning provision of the Act must enable the needs and concerns of the community to be given sufficient consideration when balanced against the business requirements of airport operators. Labor considers that a review of the planning provisions of the Act is necessary to ensure that the planning provisions represent best practice. The review of the planning provisions of the Act will be conducted against the six planning principles canvassed in Part 2 of this paper.

2. PROPOSED PLANNING PRINCIPLES FOR NON AVIATION DEVELOPMENT

Labor considers the principles currently outlined in section 81 of the *Airports Act 1996* regarding approval by the Minister for Airport Master Plans and section 94 in regard to Major Development Applications are insufficient to guide the Minister regarding the types of issues that need to be considered before any approval. As such Labor believes that the following additional principles would provide the opportunity for greater community consultation.

The Minister in considering airport major development applications will have genuine regard to:

1. the safety and security of the airport and surrounding areas;
2. the current and future aviation needs and requirements of the airport.
3. the potential impact of the proposed development on the surrounding community, including but not limited to:
 - the impact on local infrastructure
 - the costs of additional or improved infrastructure;
 - affected businesses;
 - the environment;
 - effect of noise; and
 - urban amenity.
4. any concerns raised by residents and relevant stakeholders.
5. current and future needs and requirements of the local community.
6. genuine regard to the planning principles of state, territory and local governments, including consideration of the current zoning of the surrounding area and the airport to ensure that any proposed development is not out of character.

3. FOSTERING A SENSE OF INVOLVEMENT IN THE PLANNING OF AIRPORT DEVELOPMENTS

Labor recognises that airports are a significant source of employment and contribute to the wellbeing of the Australian economy as well as the economy of the surrounding community.

As such it is critical that airports and communities are able to exist in peaceful cooperation. It is incumbent on the Federal Government to provide a framework where consultation and mutual respect replace combative and confrontational attitudes.

To assist local communities, local authorities, state and territory authorities and airport operators in establishing cooperative working arrangements Labor seeks comment on the following options.

Option 1

Appoint an Airport Ombudsman

Appoint an independent Airport Ombudsman with the power to investigate complaints, make recommendations to the Minister, airport operators or any other relevant party. The Airport Ombudsman would be required to report to Parliament regularly and to publish any findings. The office would be independent of the Department of Transport and Regional Services, however secretariat support would be provided by the Department.

The Airport Ombudsman would have the ability to respond to individual complaints or to initiate inquiries in response to requests by the Minister, airport operators or individuals.

Comment is sought on the range of issues that may be referred to an Airport Ombudsman for investigation and report to the Minister and the Parliament.

Option 2

Establishment of Consultative Committees

The Government would mandate the establishment of consultative groups drawn from the stakeholders and the surrounding community. This option could be modelled on the Airport Consultative Committees (ACC) in place in the United Kingdom where, for example, Heathrow Airport has had in place an ACC for nearly 60 years.

These committees would be able to discuss community concerns as they arise and act as a conduit for two way communication between airport operators and the local community. The committees would provide an opportunity for stakeholders to put forward concerns or points of view to airport operators which in turn will foster a greater understanding of the impact of airport operations on the surrounding community.

The committee would have the ability to make recommendations to airport operators and in the event of disputes that are unable to be resolved within the consultative committee process would have the ability to raise concerns with the Minister.

It is important to note that the formation of consultative committees would not replace the public consultation currently required under the Act in the development of Airport Master Plans or Major Development Plans or the improved guidelines considered above. However airport operators would be encouraged to provide the opportunity for the consultative committee to provide advice and feedback early in the drafting stages of these documents. This in turn would enhance the process and, for the community and stakeholders, provide a sense of involvement in the airport and proposed developments.

Comment is sought on the range of issues that would be considered by a consultative committee. Interested parties are referred to the Guidelines for Airport Consultative Committees produced by the British Department of Transport: <http://www.ukaccs.info/guidelines.htm>.

Option 3

Hybrid model

Comments are also invited on the possibility of merging Option 1 and Option 2 to create a hybrid model. In this scenario ACCs would operate, however the ACC or the public would also have the opportunity to refer matters to the Ombudsman for investigation and recommendation.

Option 4

No change the current arrangements remain in place.

4. TRANSPARENCY IN PLANNING DECISIONS

A Labor Transport Minister will provide a statement setting out the reasons for a decision to demonstrate that the six planning principles outlined here are given just consideration.

The community and the environment need to have a proper voice. Obligation must be on the Minister to have regard to issues raised by Commonwealth, state, territory and local government authorities and to be seen to do so. The release of a statement of reasons by the Minister will ensure transparency and inspire confidence that due process has been followed.

Labor invites all interested persons to comment on the options put forward in this discussion paper. Comments may be sent to:

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