Is it now time to rethink the Management and Funding of Aviation Security in Australia?

At Australia's major airports there is a mature security environment led by Commonwealth Agencies like the Australian Federal Police, Australia Border Force, ASIO and the like. Unfortunately, this is not the case at the other airports around the country.

However, the constant security participant at all security categorised airports is the 'Screening Authority' who in most cases now is the airport operator who is responsible for the screening of passengers, their carryon and checked baggage and other persons entering the sterile and apron areas at those airports.

During my fifteen years as head of security for the Qantas Group of companies, Qantas raised this issue with the industry and the government on numerous occasions as being a serious vulnerability for aviation security in Australia.

I am and have been a strong advocate for a single centralised security screening authority in Australia for many years. Such a structure would be better positioned to not only maximise consistency, but also advance improvements in security service delivery and optimise security out-comes.

The diversity and large number of Screening Authorities leads to a significant number of operational challenges and risks including:

- the lack of intelligence and information sharing between government agencies and those performing security screening duties.
- a lack of consistency in the technologies deployed, recruiting, training, supervisory standards, and overall performance.
- a lack of security experience within local councils and smaller airports.
- a lack of suitable experience in security and supplier/contract management that can lead to security processes being determined by contractors and staff at a local level. This potentially compromises security outcomes and will inevitably lead to inconsistent application.

- security contractors being subject to variability of application of regulations and other requirements by the various screening authorities which results in inconsistent customer experiences that significantly undermines community confidence in the aviation security system.
- security authorities operating in isolation, which does not enhance vocational development, network performance management, consistency of security outcomes and/or service and in some cases, security screening is seen simply as another revenue opportunity; and
- security being financially driven rather than outcomes driven

In my opinion, the majority of performance, management, resource and morale issues faced by the industry would be best addressed by the establishment of a single screening authority in Australia. Given that aviation security is part of Australia's national security infrastructure, this is regarded as most appropriate. This single screening authority should be a government enterprise that has the responsibility for managing security screening at all airports. The screeners themselves would not have to be employed by this agency but simply contracted from the private sector as is now the case. The agency could be overseen by a board representing the government, industry participants and the public and it could be entirely funded by a network wide levy on all passengers.

An added benefit of this proposal is that it would save airlines millions of dollars as they try to recover from the COVID 19 pandemic. Currently airports simple pass through the cost of security to the airlines.

Another benefit would be to expand the requirement to screen all passengers on regular public transport flights regardless of the size of the aircraft. To say that a flight of 49 people is less at risk than a flight of 55 people really does not pass the pub test any more.

As the requirements to screen passengers, baggage and cargo continues to expand and airside inspection regimes are increased, the number of industry participants with responsibility for security screening activities will continue to increase and the current deficiencies will be amplified across the Australian civil aviation network.

All of these deficiencies are, in my opinion, best addressed by a centralised screening authority. Specifically, a centralised management model would:

- enable security screening to be intelligence led and risk based on a national basis.
- facilitate rapid, co-ordinated roll-out (and roll-back) of new screening requirements if warranted by the security environment.
- determine screening priorities for national interest reasons and implement these in a consistent manner.
- deliver a coordinated approach in relation to the deployment of modern screening technologies.
- minimise inconsistencies in screening processes and practice through the use of common processes and equipment across all airports.
- facilitate the collection, analysis and dissemination of data on an immediate national basis to support continuous improvement of screening outcomes.
- maximise the potential contribution which could be made to aviation security via the more efficient deployment of resources from other government agencies e via the deployment of police at screening points.
- provide economies of scale with respect to fixed costs, instead of duplicating these costs for an increasing number of screening authorities; and
- ensure management by aviation security experts with a dedicated portfolio focus.

Further, the centralised management of screening model provides a stronger and more flexible foundation for meeting future aviation challenges, which include:

- the need to understand and respond to new threats and apply that understanding to research; and
- the incorporation of behavioural analysis into aviation security measures – effective implementation of which will require real-time analysis and exchange of date between multiple public and private sector players. The industry is unlikely to develop such programs and solve the related privacy issues without close involvement and support from the Government.

Currently each Screening Authority is required to fund its own security requirements.

Given that the number of airports requiring security screening will continue to increase, invariably with smaller throughput, the cost per passenger is disproportionate to that of their capital city counterparts. Aviation security costs should be equally apportioned across the industry as a fixed fee per passenger cost (network pricing) in order to preserve and encourage growth in vital air services to regional communities.

This approach also ensures commercial neutrality as each passenger is paying the same security fee regardless of the airports or carrier.

Security technology continues to develop at a rapid rate, and I anticipate significant new equipment becoming available in the coming years. The limited financial capability of some screening authorities, especially in regional areas, may restrict the deployment of new technologies. Security technologies have a useful life of around 7 – 10 years. However, new technology advancements will mean current equipment, while still being effective for the purpose designed, will have been superseded by equipment capable of delivering greater security outcomes. With large capital expenditure still being depreciated over longer periods, there will be a reluctance to implement new technology unless regulated to do so.

A centralised model that owns and operates all the equipment would be best placed to ensure deployment of this technology in a consistent, considered and timely manner. Australia's large land mass adds extraordinary challenges for those organisations addressing the issue of timely maintenance of sophisticated technical equipment, particularly if that equipment is not supported nationally.

Of all the models for the management of screening, I favour a part outsourced model which is managed by the industry and government in partnership. The Canadian Air Transport Security Authority (CATSA) approach is one that potentially could provide valuable lessons for Australia as an effective means of managing security screening in the aviation industry.

In Canada CATSA is also responsible for the management of the equivalent of Australia's Aviation Security Identity Card (ASIC). Again, a single issuing authority enhancing the integrity of the card and reducing the risks associated with having numerous issuing authorities.

A comprehensive assessment of the benefits and experiences of the CATSA model since its implementation in 2002 may identify features that could work effectively in the Australian context.

I truly believe that a centralise management model would significantly enhance aviation security in Australia whilst providing economic benefits as well.

It has been 15 years since The Rt Hon Sir John Wheeler DL was appointed to undertake: 'An Independent Review of Airport Security and Policing for the Government of Australia'.

With the industry in economic turmoil - now is definitely the appropriate time for another detailed review of the management and funding of aviation security in Australia.

Geoffrey D Askew   AM

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