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Controlled airspace still under a cloud 25 years on

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It's a nightmare. No wonder I have sleepless nights.

A series of articles in this newspaper last year covered how commercial pilots at dozens of Australian airports (Ballina in NSW and Bairnsdale in Victoria are just two examples) are forced to blunder around in cloud attempting to call other aircraft to avoid a collision.

It's a 1930s system of calling in blind uncontrolled airspace. There is not even a radio operator on the ground at these airports to confirm an aircraft's radio is working correctly and to give local weather conditions.

After five flights around the world where I closely studied airspace procedures, I found the Australian system was unique and existed only because of union demarcation issues after controlled airspace was introduced worldwide in the 1940s.

In 1991 the Civil Aviation Safety Authority decided to follow proven international practice and introduce controlled airspace at these busy country airports so aircraft in cloud were directed by controllers and kept apart using a proven safety standard. Twenty-five years later not one Australian airport has been upgraded to this safer level of service.

How can this be, I hear you ask. The answer is resistance to change and a lack of leadership from those entrusted with aviation safety in this country.

Airline pilots are tested psychologically to follow existing rules and those who have flown only in the Australian system oppose change. Many believe only incompetent pilots require controlled airspace and a local radio operator. So far we have not had an airline accident caused by these 1930s procedures — but we have been close. Here are two examples:

- On May 16, 1997, an aircraft was on approach in cloud to the airport at Bundaberg, Queensland, while another aircraft was on the same approach in the same cloud at the same time. Only luck prevented a collision. The investigators' report revealed one of the professional aircrews had used the wrong "calling in the blind" frequency — a simple human error.
- On June 23, 2006, a Rex airline aircraft was on approach to NSW's Orange airport in cloud from the east as a commercial pilot in a Baron aircraft was approaching in cloud from the west. They were on a head-on course. A collision was prevented only when the pilot of one aircraft broke the rules and turned away at the last moment from the prescribed route.

As covered in this newspaper last year, on July 28, 2004, a Cheyenne aircraft was on approach to Victoria's Benalla airport in bad weather. Because of an error of navigation the commercial pilot was many miles from the correct approach and all six on board were killed when the aircraft hit a mountain.

Previously an alarm had sounded numerous times in the Melbourne air traffic control centre; however, the controller was not required to inform the pilot as the aircraft was heading towards uncontrolled airspace.

Such is the resistance to change of those involved in the Australian Transport Safety Bureau that, even after these two serious incidents and one fatal accident, not one recommendation was made to even consider introducing controlled airspace at these airports as per the 1991 policy.

After numerous false starts to update controlled airspace, John Anderson, the federal transport and regional services minister at the time, appointed me to the Aviation Reform Group in early 2002. This group was to recommend how much-delayed airspace reforms should go ahead.

Other members of the five-person group included the chief of the air force at the time, Angus Houston. A unanimous decision was made to move to the National Airspace System used in the US and this was accepted by the Howard government and announced as policy. Houston was particularly supportive of the system because he had flown in the US during active service.

Anderson agreed that I would be a member of an implementation group; however, I was told later by Houston I should not be "hands on" and therefore I should not be involved with the working group. I was shocked by his request; it was a complete surprise to me.

(Editor's note: Sir Angus has said he did not run the implementation committee and therefore did not have the power to veto Mr Smith's appointment.)

The rest is history. Millions were spent in an attempt to introduce NAS and some good changes were made, only to be wound back later because of a lack of pilot education and the removal of CASA personnel who understood the NAS system.

Sadly, not one airport has been updated to the safer NAS class E controlled airspace and not one airport has the safer Unicom radio operator to give local weather and confirm the airline radio is working. "Calling in the blind do it yourself airspace" will remain until a major accident with fatalities brings in the change. I despair!

Dick Smith is a businessman, adventurer, philanthropist and former chairman of CASA.