Continuing reluctance to commit to a fully-integrated European ATM system

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As an airline operating across the European network our requirements of air traffic management (ATM) are simple: to improve safety, punctuality and cost. While I would have to admit that traffic has increased significantly over the past 20 years I would question the benefits (if any) of many of the strategic programmes. The recent release of the 2015 European ATM Masterplan highlights the Single European Sky ATM Research (SESAR) initiative as a critical element in the future air transport system and is intended to offer a high-level view of what is required to deliver a high-performance aviation system for Europe. My thoughts on reading this went back to the European Air Traffic Control Harmonisation and Integration Programme (EATCHIP) and the later ATM 2000+ Strategy which were heralded at the time as the means by which a quantum increase in ATM and airspace capacity would be delivered. Fifteen years separate the two concepts and yet we are still waiting for the promised paradigm shift in European ATM.

Safety is paramount for Monarch (as it is for every airline) and this is one performance target that we expect to be delivered. Over the past 20 years there have been setbacks (such as the Linate, Milan runway incursion in 2001 and the Überlingen, Germany collision in 2002) but we continue to climb the learning curve with new safety management system (SMS) programmes and, despite increasing traffic, it is rewarding to note that 2015 has turned out to be one of the safest years for commercial aviation.

Monarch has set On-Time Performance (OTP) as one of its key operational targets and, alongside company policies and procedures to maximise punctuality, it relies on ATM to deliver the operating environment to achieve this goal. Recent years have seen improvements in air traffic control (ATC) and reactionary ATC delay but we operate in specific markets which are very prone to peak time capacity issues. The global reduction in ATM delay is irrelevant to us when our on-time performance targets have been destroyed by industrial action, low productivity and even training – the winter delays through Brest, France, due to En-Route Air Traffic Organiser (ERATO) training ensured our company annual OTP target would be unachievable. Apart from the disruption to our passengers we also risk legal challenges and financial penalties through EU261 claims for reactionary ATC delay. There has been much self-congratulation by the ATM community over improved global delay figures but I believe opportunities were missed during the years of financial crisis when increased investment would have built up a significant buffer to absorb future traffic growth.

I have been a member of the EUROCONTROL Route Network Development Subgroup (RNDSG) for over 20 years and am pleased to see improved flight efficiency brought about by increased use of dynamic airspace – through programmes such as Free Route and Flexible Use of airspace. One of the greatest innovations in increasing capacity has been the implementation of reduced vertical separation minima (RVSM) which has undoubtedly helped improve the efficiency of our flights. I joined RNDSG representing the International Air Carrier Association (IACA) soon after the implementation of the basic ATS route network (ARN1) ‘trunk route’ structure and became increasingly concerned that for all the improvements shown on the new map of Europe the reality was somewhat different. We found that as soon as interesting new airway links were added we faced increased route availability document (RAD) restrictions applied by the States that prevented us from making use of them. Many of the best options were conditional – and it has taken many years to reach a point where we can feel that as airspace users we are equal partners in some parts of Europe.

Cost efficiency is not the same as flight efficiency and while EUROCONTROL (at the behest of the European Commission and its flight efficiency targets) bases effi-
ciency on the shortest route, airlines take greater account of upper air winds and overflight charges. Our goal is to achieve a safe on-time departure and on-time arrival at the lowest cost and this does not always equate to the shortest route. One of the early benchmarks used was to compare Europe to North America and it can be argued that hard work over the past 20 years has seen safety, environmental impact and punctuality at comparable levels. When SESAR was launched in 2005 its key performance targets for 2020 were to enable a threefold increase in capacity, to improve safety by a factor of 10, to reduce the environmental impact of each flight by 10% and to cut ATM costs by 50%. In 2011 70% more flights were operated in the US compared to that covered by Single European Sky (SES) but with 7% fewer staff and at an air traffic controller (ATCO) cost per flight hour of 48% less.

In 2012 user charges cost the airlines some €7.5 billion – and it is only natural that we question what, exactly, we are paying for. There are a number of air navigation service providers (ANSPs) in Europe with very low productivity levels while others strive to increase throughput in very complex and dense airspace. While some ANSPs (and States) have worked (some under new corporatised structures) with their staff to deliver capacity, to become more proactive in seeking solutions and to increase flexibility, others remain glued to a modus operandi prevalent in the 1970s. We still find unused capacity, rigid structures, inflexibility and a lack of will to provide capacity where it is needed and during the hours that traffic demand requires it. Failure to address productivity and operational efficiencies in a small number of European Civil Aviation Conference (ECAC) States is having a significant impact on the ability of the network to achieve what has been promised to the airline industry and the travelling public.

After so many years and so many ATM programmes we are led to expect that Single European Sky and SESAR will provide the step change, but the elephant in the room has always been the acceptance of all those providing ATM (and by this I mean all – at State, National Supervisory Authority (NSA), ANSP management and ANSP staff level) to commit to a fully integrated European solution. I know I am not alone in fearing that SES and SESAR will fail because States and ANSPs will block progress as they always have done. This can be because of issues of loss of sovereignty, legal/institutional concerns, military issues or what is referred to as the social dialogue. The implementation of Functional Airspace Blocks (FABs) was intended to overcome these blockers but it would appear they have not only succumbed to the same issues but have actually increased fragmentation of the network by protecting States and ANSPs within another line of defence. For those of us longing for one Single European Sky, the FAB empires appear to be the biggest blocker of all.

I remain sceptical that the much alluded to ‘paradigm shift’ in European ATM can ever be achieved while social issues remain. I fully understand the concerns of those who believe that technology and new working practices will see a reduction in employment within ATC/ATM, but the airline industry has for years been forced to downsize and adopt new
technologies and ways of working in order to survive. In the air we have lost flight engineers and navigators and ground staff numbers are now being reduced through automation and outsourcing. The significant costs expected to be borne by airlines for airborne equipage to meet SESAR targets were expected to be covered by the reduction of ATM costs by 50%, an aspiration that may be regarded as a challenge too far. User charges remain one of our biggest costs and yet I see little sign that there is either a willingness or a clear path forward among many ANSPs to reduce this financial burden imposed on their customers irrespective of the level of service provided.

We are now building the future of Monarch Airlines, which came under new ownership in October 2014, with investment in new technologies and a fleet replacement programme commencing with the delivery of the first Boeing 737 Max-8 in 2018. We are currently considering our equipage options but, despite the huge investment required, past experience of European ATM programmes gives us little confidence that the mandates we aim to comply with will be in place, the promised ATM systems will deliver or the planned advanced airspace structures will be available. We require some certainty that our significant investment will be an enabler for the savings that we have been promised for many years.

The updated European Master Plan includes yet more ATM roadmaps that highlight the performance improvements we can expect from new ground and airborne technologies which should enable us to make the right investment decisions. My fear is that over the years we have built up a sizeable atlas of such roadmaps but the vision we had 20 years ago has still to become reality and what is planned for SESAR is little more than what we were promised from long-forgotten ATM programmes. In comparison, the early SESAR targets now appear rather ambitious.

Given that it is now too late for reporting period two (RP2), I would like to see strong RP3 performance targets agreed and delivered by all and, most importantly, that these are not watered down by States and ANSPs putting their own interests before those of the travelling public. I expect the vision outlined in the updated European Master Plan to become a reality within the agreed timescales and I expect a significant reduction in ATM costs alongside the promised threefold increase in capacity and improved flight efficiency. We have wasted enough time and money on European air traffic management and only when the promised long-term benefits are finally delivered will airspace users be in a position to offer their congratulations.