

New man in the hot seat

Gillian Merron MP has moved on to higher things in the Cabinet Office, and we have yet another Aviation Minister in Jim Fitzpatrick MP. He talks to Pat Malone

Zap! The lights dim momentarily, there's a sizzling sound and a vague smell of pork crackling as the Aviation Minister's chair, alias 'Old Sparky', claims yet another victim.

The subject of this month's regular 'Meet the New Minister' column is Jim Fitzpatrick MP, who picked up the aviation portfolio at the start of the Brown Era. Mr Fitzpatrick is the fourth minister in three years to hold the brief, and it is profoundly to be hoped that he stays in the job a bit longer than the last three, who had barely begun to get acquainted with the industry before they were shunted upwards, onwards or outwards.

The early signs are that the new minister intends to treat general aviation with the same level of seriousness as his immediate predecessor Gillian Merron MP, one of whose



achievements was to begin a useful dialogue with the industry. In conversation Mr Fitzpatrick seems open and accessible, is careful not to promise what he can't deliver, and has a grasp of the importance of GA to the country, along with some of the most pressing issues facing the industry.

Although it is a tenuous link with GA, Mr Fitzpatrick's wife, Dr Sheila Fitzpatrick, is a PPL who had a share in an Aztec in the north east of England; the Aztec has gone and the PPL has lapsed because of Dr Fitzpatrick's workload. The minister did not volunteer this information and indeed was keen to keep his family out of the story; I heard it from a third party, and Mr Fitzpatrick confirmed it. But if any AOPA member knows Dr Sheila Fitzpatrick, let's try to get her back into flying and foster some back-door influence here.

Mr Fitzpatrick is a Glaswegian by birth but represents an East London constituency, Poplar and Canning Town. A former London fireman, he came into Parliament on the Blair landslide of 1997. We met in the same office in which I interviewed the last three aviation ministers, and Mr Fitzpatrick accepted that in politics, one is very much in the hands of one's civil service advisers when taking on a new job. "The transition can be difficult," he said. "I'm still very much in information-gathering mode, still getting around airports and meeting representative groups from all sectors of aviation. It's a matter of mugging up as effectively as one can, as quickly as one can."

The handover between ministers is fairly perfunctory, and the outgoing office holder spends very little time discussing details with his or her replacement. "The only conversation I had with Gillian was about the private office and the staff," Mr Fitzpatrick said. "The induction is very much done by officials in the department, and of course I'm informed by people like AOPA who immediately beat a path to the door to set out their concerns. Parliamentary correspondence, MPs writing letters, is also a very good litmus test as to what's happening out there, reflecting the depth of feeling in the constituencies."

"What I've learned so far about general aviation is that it was a much-neglected corner for a considerable period of time, but in recent



years, possibly because of Gillian Merron's personal interest, greater attention has been given to it. The impression I'm getting is that with the Strategic Review and the establishment of the Strategic Forum, while there are as yet no conclusions on any of the big issues the sector is putting forward, they are being addressed, and there is work in progress."

General aviation is a relatively small sector of aviation, which in turn is only one of Mr Fitzpatrick's portfolios – he also has responsibility for shipping, road safety and environmental issues related to transport. How much time attention can he give to the sector? "I'd like to give general aviation as much time as it needs," he said. "David Shepherd, who is general aviation's point of contact here at the Department for Transport, is working tirelessly to ensure that GA issues don't slip down the agenda. He will get all the access I can give him."

Being an aviation minister must be a thankless task. The Secretary of State surely wants a safe pair of hands who can defuse an issue before it attracts attention. The best any junior minister can hope for is a quiet watch, so how can one hope to progress in a political career? Mr Fitzpatrick says it's not as simple as that. "There are important issues to be addressed now, particularly with regard to

commercial aviation, security and terrorism that attract a great deal of media attention, so the level of attention is less important than overall performance in the job. If you're not cutting it, you'll be found out pretty quickly. People don't survive in any business if they can't show that they have a grasp of what they're supposed to be doing."

He reckons it takes a minister up to six months before he or she can start to feel comfortable in a new job. "At about that point you can think about becoming proactive instead of reactive," he says. "In the area of aviation and transport, the details are complicated but the issues are not complicated, and a level of common sense is enough to understand the immediate issues."

One of the facts that surprised Gillian Merron when she took over aviation was the situation with pilot training, where UK airlines play little or no part in bringing on new pilots. AOPA has repeatedly stressed the anomaly of VAT on professional flight training, and the new minister has already given the matter some thought. Ultimately, he says, it's a matter for the Treasury.

"That's the easy answer, though," he said. "I can understand why people in aviation feel there ought to be more sensitivity. The Strategic Forum is looking at this, in terms of putting together data for the Treasury, and clearly it's possible for me to put in a word with the Treasury. When the Forum comes forward with its conclusions, it would be entirely appropriate for me to write to my ministerial counterpart at Treasury to make sure it was brought to his or her attention."

"One plays a dual role in government. On the one hand, you're the champion for that sector, on the other hand you are the government's face in explaining the decisions of the government to the industry, decisions for which you accept collective responsibility. Sometimes you walk a difficult line."

In conclusion, it might be said that Mr Fitzpatrick intends to continue the work that Gillian Merron started. "David Shepherd and others have impressed on me that general aviation was neglected, and having addressed that, it would be a retrograde step given all the good work that's been put in to let that just evaporate." ■

Getting a story straight

This interview was conducted before the announcement that general aviation was to be kicked out of Lee on Solent – see full story on page 16. It is feared that the decision was nodded through by the aviation minister on the basis of incomplete or selective information. In particular, there is concern that he was told there were alternatives for general aviation within striking distance. This is untrue.

One of the FTOs recently forced out of Lee on Solent had earlier been forced to leave Southampton, as had the remaining GA operator at Lee on Solent. Southampton Airport has been bought by Ferrovial, the Spanish company which owns Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted, and it has no time for general aviation. If Lee on Solent is also lost to GA, there will be one airfield left between Brighton and Bournemouth, and that's the grass strip at Goodwood. With uncertainty over the future of Shoreham rising (see separate story on Erinaceous) the situation can only get worse. If a youngster in Southampton wishes to pursue a career in aviation, he or she can forget it or ship out.