

Pilot MEP who fights for GA



Timothy Kirkhope MEP has done most of his flying on Piper singles

Private pilot Timothy Kirkhope MEP speaks up for general aviation in the European Parliament, and is working to save the IMC rating. Pat Malone reports

Politicians and private pilots have one thing in common – public perceptions of them are dreadful. Both groups are poorly understood; everything they do is filtered by journalists who find it difficult to get a story straight, even before they start to grind their axes. So the private pilot is rich, arrogant and careless of the environment, and the politician is unprincipled, venal and self-serving. Everybody knows this.

Politicians, however, pretty much reflect society as a whole. For every Archer or Aitken there are hundreds of men and women who got into politics because they thought they could make a positive difference. But because we hound them so, there's an incentive to do nothing that can be criticised, to pander to the mainstream and to avoid being identified with unpopular minority causes – like general aviation.

A politician who speaks up for GA might well win one vote while losing ten, but pilot Timothy Kirkhope speaks out loudly on our behalf in the European Parliament, for which we all owe him a debt. The MEP for Yorkshire and the Humber has a lot on his plate – he is Leader of the Conservatives in Brussels, vice chairman of the Constitutional Affairs Committee, and spokesman for Transport and Tourism among other things. For finding the time, as well as the will, to support general aviation we should tip our hats to Timothy Kirkhope.

There is a deep well of ignorance at the

European Commission, the Council of Europe, the European Parliament and even at Eurocontrol and EASA about general aviation. There is virtually no data with which they can educate themselves, very few decision-makers have ever engaged in GA, and to a worrying extent they share the prejudices of the public – they know only what they read in the papers. But the dedicated work of a small group of whom Timothy Kirkhope is a salient member, coupled with the lobbying of groups like AOPA, is making headway. GA is on Europe's radar like never before.

As EASA becomes established there are hundreds of issues that need to be addressed, such as the fecklessness surrounding Part M, the potential loss of the IMC rating, the renewed attack on third-country registrations – and always, when a politician sets out to make a difference, he knows that if he does not succeed he risks being tainted by his failure. We in general aviation don't always appreciate that there is no guarantee of success for an elected representative in any of these endeavours, and they shouldn't necessarily carry the can when we don't get what we want.

Timothy Kirkhope was a pilot before he was an MP, and like most of us he flies less than he would like to. Personally, he values general aviation as a counterbalance to politics and the law, an absorbing and demanding task which takes his mind off the stresses and pressures of working life. He has IMC and night ratings

and flies Piper singles, mostly from Newcastle and Carlisle. Ironically, he came to GA because of his fear of flying.

"I was never comfortable on airliners," he says. "I flew quite a lot in my career as a commercial lawyer and I did not relish it. But I was elected as a Conservative county councillor in Northumberland in the 1980s and joined the Board of Newcastle Airport, which was then run by a formidable former night fighter pilot, Jimmy Denyer. I had occasion to remark to Jimmy once that I was not keen on flying, and he suggested: 'Why don't you learn to fly? It might well solve your problem, and it would be useful to have someone on the Board who understood the pilot's perspective.'

"Jim used to fly regularly, 'to check the runway lights', he said, and he offered to take me up. I was a little worried in case he might turn us upside down or something, but it was a very gentle flight and I remember thinking, hmm – I'm enjoying this.

"As a result I took lessons in a Cherokee 140 at Newcastle Aero Club. My first instructor, the CFI Peter Crisp, was quite a disciplinarian who wouldn't let you get away with anything. If I didn't get something right he'd make sure I got it right next time. He went on to be a British Midland pilot and I finished my training with the new CFI Keith Lister, who still flies with me today, mostly from Carlisle. He and I have flown together now for 20 years.

Spin training

"Everything about the PPL course at that time was understandable, and for the most part I enjoyed it. The only thing I didn't like was spinning, which went out of the PPL course about three years after that, thank God. I'm

aware that some people would like to see it reinstated but I don't think that's wise. I think you should have an awareness — you should be able to handle the circumstances leading to a spin, but I'm not sure doing spins is terribly good form. You do lose quite a lot of students, not killing them necessarily, but through fear — they do give up at that point."

Timothy got his PPL in 1983 and flew regularly in club aircraft. "You always have these great imaginations that you're going to be able to use it for your business, but unless you continue up to the commercial licences, I don't think it's desperately useful. I got the IMC and night ratings and I did use the aircraft a few times when I was appointed as a mental health commissioner. I flew around visiting mental hospitals — my area stretched from the Scottish border down to Nottinghamshire and it did save me some time, but I can't say it was an indispensable business tool.

"It was, however, a great break. It's always been an enormous relaxation, which I think you need in your life, particularly if you have a fairly high-pressure life. You need something that is completely and utterly contrasting, but which nevertheless has got mind-testing situations and demands full concentration. It's relaxing, too, to be out of contact with the people who normally hassle you."

Flying around 15 hours a year, Timothy's life in aviation has been fairly event-free. "I did have one incident, a mechanical fault which was slightly concerning," he says. "The engine suddenly started to run very very noisily and roughly indeed. The aircraft was slightly down on power but perfectly flyable — the vibrations weren't excessive and we weren't losing oil pressure or overheating, but I got back to

He now has something over 300 hours, mostly on the Indians. "I've flown Cherokees, Warriors, Archers — which I like — the odd Arrow, and the Saratoga," he says. "I've flown a Cessna too, but I didn't enjoy it. I want the wings under me." His wife Caroline flies with him but only occasionally; they have discussed her taking the AOPA Companions Course but haven't yet got around to doing anything about it. He has flown his four children but none has taken up flying, although his youngest son, a lawyer in Leeds, speaks of the possibility. "If the opportunity presented itself, he might do so," says Timothy. "That's what happened to me — I didn't go out looking to become a pilot. I suspect that's the way it is for a lot of people."

Timothy was elected MP for Leeds North East in 1987 and put in ten years at Westminster. He was noted for his support of Leeds-Bradford airport, in particular in helping to get 24-hour operations there. "I flew myself down to London quite often, landing at places like Fairoaks and Blackbushe," he says. "I would fly around the Home Counties to airfields like Shoreham and Bembridge, which is one of my favourite airfields in the whole country. Occasionally I also crossed the Channel. At that time there was theoretically a House of Commons Flying Club, but we always had difficulty finding details of it. The late Sir Hector Munro was supposed to be the Secretary — a marvellous fellow, he'd been a pilot in the war flying Sunderland flying boats. Gerald Howarth and I kept looking through the Articles of Association of this thing, which was a limited company, and there was supposed to be an asset which appears to have been a plane. We were always hunting around trying

environment that takes some getting used to," he says. "It's tiring to begin with because you're dealing with different languages, cultures and attitudes, working in several dimensions. European organisations are looking at all the elements that come together in countries with different attitudes and priorities — and that of course is the issue with EASA and the CAA.

"I have mixed feelings about the way Europe is working. I want certain things to be handled in Britain because they happen to fit with what we want, but I do recognise that the world is shrinking, and I do recognise that in things like aviation it's very difficult not to think internationally. But to what extent is Europe the next step, in terms of an international approach? Is it simply interposed between individual nations and a truly global system?"

"If you're going to have a European entity it must not confuse. It has to be very clear in what it's doing, it has to have the consent of the nation states, and it has to be able to recognise the peculiarities of nation states and



Timothy Kirkhope in his day job as an MEP in Strasbourg



Newcastle very quickly. It turned out that a bracket had broken on the exhaust and the manifold had cracked."

Timothy's fear of flying was forever banished, but he is not attracted to aerobatics or wild manoeuvres. "When I was an MP I got the chance to fly with the RAF in a Bulldog at Finningley," he says. "The chap I was flying with obviously thought I wanted a bit of a show and I didn't discourage him, but when we got back on the ground I was a horrible green colour and felt bloody awful. The station commander came over, slapped me on the back and said: 'Come for lunch! It's fish pie today.' Well, I did stay for lunch, I even ate the pie, and I managed to get home without being sick, but it was a close-run thing."

to find where the plane was, and had we found it we would have flown it, but we never did find it. I was so busy at the time that flying opportunities were rare. I was a whip for five years at a time when the Government was under a lot of pressure, then I went to the Home Office where I was Minister for immigration and asylum, and also for gambling."

Culture shock

Timothy lost his seat in 1997 and began rebuilding his commercial law practice, which again left little time for flying. In 1999 he was elected MEP for Yorkshire and the Humber. After Westminster, Brussels was something of a shock to the system. "It's a very different

the way they handle things, as long as there is a proper regulatory regime in those states. It could be argued that EASA has increased confusion for no net gain in safety.

"Instead of having 27 regulatory authorities in Europe we now have 28. EASA has become a regulator of regulators, short of money, short of staff, and it's taking upon itself a lot of powers which it won't be able to exercise efficiently and economically. It does not have the resources to be flexible, and it is taking the easy option of banning things, which doesn't take much manpower.

"This is the situation with the IMC rating. There's a lot of misunderstanding about what the IMC is, and some in Europe fear the airways will fill up with Warriors flown by 200-hour pilots. There is a process of education to be gone through, and we are fortunate in that the new EC Transport Commissioner Antonio Tajani knows more about aviation than most."

(Tajani is a former officer in the Italian air force and trained at the Air Combat Academy in Florence before specialising in air defence control at the Italian technical training centre in Borgo Piave. He wound up in charge of air



defence operations in Italy, monitoring civilian and military traffic, before becoming an MEP representing Berlusconi's faction. He also has a law degree.)

"I've got to know Tajani quite well, and he's a nice man," says Timothy. "I've had assurances from him and others with regard to the preservation of licensing, and in particular on the IMC. His assurances have not been tested in the fire, but I'm keeping an eye on it and I'm not going to let it drop. With general aviation, encouraging people to improve their skills is a fundamental safety matter, and

flying, and who is competent to continue flying and enjoying their pastime, hobby or business use of aircraft. It's not in anybody's interests to do that. We want to make this sector successful, and if we're going to do things that stop people from flying or utilising aircraft, we have to be careful.

"This argument now has real resonance in Brussels. The EC openly acknowledges that GA is necessary and must be encouraged and developed. It accepts the need for 'proportionality' in regulation – there is no one-size-fits-all regulatory model, and you cannot

affected, it should be obligated to provide help and support to another airfield which is more suited to general aviation.

"I think there's room in most parts of the country for something like a Section 106 planning requirement, which requires an applicant for certain types of planning permission to provide some social gain in the area – if you want to build an office block, you must also build a community hall, that sort of thing. Something similar could be applied to regional airport development. You'd have to get the Council of Europe to agree, and there are many other considerations, but it could be very good for the GA industry. It would allow the regional airports to do what they need to do in terms of moneymaking, but would obligate them to help the people they are displacing and help develop the GA sector."

As an MEP Timothy is beset by lobbyists for businesses and special interests, but not for general aviation. The fractured nature of the industry, and rivalries within it, mean that it's never been possible to raise serious funds to pay for offices in Cologne and Brussels and for lawyers and lobbyists – AOPA is the only organisation that directly asks you for money for lobbying and influence, but while it punches far above its weight, its membership is small and its effectiveness is circumscribed. "I organised the recent Hearing on General and Business Aviation in the European Parliament in September, and the number of people there who were in GA as opposed to business



Left: Timothy Kirkhope MEP at Newcastle with one of his favourite aircraft, the six-seat Piper Saratoga

Below: Timothy Kirkhope (that's him on the right) with his non-flying leader

particularly in the UK the IMC rating is an aid to safer flying and it is a means whereby people can hone their flying skills.

"I'm hoping that it will be accepted and tolerated in the UK at least. I'm trying to persuade Tajani that it is a good thing to export, a good example that could be used in other countries. After all, a lot of European pilots come to the UK to do the IMC rating because they know it makes them safer, even though they can't use it at home.

"In terms of what it allows you to do, even in the UK it's pretty limited, but it does mean that I feel much more confident about flying and I know for a fact that I can avoid some of the problems that people who haven't got one can get themselves into. You see a lot of accidents where people continue flying into IMC without the skills to get themselves out of it.

"The full Instrument Rating has always been a problem for a lot of people in terms of resources and training, and the question in my mind is, how necessary is IR for the average GA pilot? The IMC fills a perfect spot, giving you a level of safety without requiring the IR."

Attempts are being made to strip the extraneous theoretical knowledge out of the full IR syllabus in order to make it more attainable, but progress is slow. "I don't wish to predict its demise as a concept," Timothy says. "You need either an IMC rating or an IR attainable for a far wider section of the pilot population. The bottom line is that we must preserve the IMC in the UK; a better option would be to have it adopted Europe-wide.

"But in general, EASA is lacking in sensitivity in areas where it is needed. We don't want to stop anyone who is currently

impose requirements or costs on general aviation that are better fitted to commercial air transport. Putting that into practice is, of course, very difficult – you can't just snap your fingers and make it so, but the intent is there."

Blood from stone

There is insufficient understanding, Timothy believes, of the particular burden of regulation in the UK, where uniquely in Europe, the CAA must make all of its costs back from the industry, plus six percent profit. "Regulation that is paid for from central taxation in other European countries is paid for directly by the person on whom it is imposed in the UK. The idea that GA must pay the CAA's sort of rates is completely unrealistic, and indeed crazy if you're trying to develop the sector. I'm very critical of the CAA and I have repeatedly protested to them that you can't squeeze blood from a stone. CAA charges have gone up to an unacceptable degree. At the European level they know that the UK has the CAA problem, but they don't take enough account of it.

"I'm also deeply concerned about proposals for charging for radio spectrum, which will have direct and detrimental safety implications in aviation. Ofcom has gone away to rethink its plans, but I'm sure they'll be back."

The loss of airfields to GA is an issue where Timothy has put forward his own proposals to improve the situation, which would involve regional airports which squeeze out GA having to support airfields at which GA is welcome. "Newcastle is a good example," he says. "You can operate from there, but delays are onerous and landing fees have gone through the roof. I'm proposing that if an airport wants to develop its CAT business and GA is adversely



aviation was very small indeed," says Timothy. "But it was worthwhile because it drew attention to the fact that there is a lot of good news in what's being done in Europe. We are making progress. It's not great progress, but before the Commission expression of interest in GA last year, there'd been hardly anything at all.

"An awful lot is happening now. We need to know how far EASA's powers will extend, and the discussion on this can only be held now, because when the talking stops, it's too late. The horse has bolted on Part M, for instance, and there's no mechanism for retrieving the situation. I think EASA could go right and it could go wrong. It all depends on what happens in the next year or two. That's why it's important to get involved now.

We can only do what we can do. We're not going to succeed in everything, but it won't be for the want of trying." ■