

Europe's grand designs

Does Eurocontrol have GA's interests in mind as it works towards the Single European Sky? **Pat Malone** talks to its director general **David McMillan**

Was there ever a no-brainer like the Single European Sky? Let's have everyone adopt the same rules and systems so an aeroplane can take off in one country and go by the most efficient route to another country, and every country's airspace in between will form a contiguous, seamless whole that promotes maximum safety and minimum delay.

Great idea! All we have to do is get 27 EU governments, each with diverse issues of its own, their bureaucratic authorities, with empires to preserve and patches to protect, their regulators with revenues and fiefdoms to consider, airlines with keen protectionist instincts, airports with competing commercial imperatives, military men with national jealousies, insecurities and pride, service providers and operational staff with jobs, fears and mistrusts in mind; we need to smooth

over cultural and philosophical differences, particularly over widely divergent attitudes to aviation, surmount language barriers, finesse pressures from the European Commission, the JAA, EASA, the FAA and ICAO, and get everyone moving in the same direction at the same speed with the same end in view, and Bob's your uncle.

Oh yes, there are the safety issues and technical problems to resolve, too – and it's not 27 governments, it's 42, because everyone from Casablanca to the North Cape wants to be in the gang, EU or no. And always at the back of the crowd, fitting no particular pigeonhole, there's general aviation, jumping up and down with its hand in the air and shouting well, that's all fine and dandy for the airlines, but...

The man currently charged with leading us bravely towards the bright European horizon is

David McMillan, director general of Eurocontrol since January. Fittingly, he is a product of the diplomatic corps, although he also has an unrivalled knowledge of air traffic issues, having been director general of civil aviation in the UK and having overseen the privatisation of NATS. His wider transport credentials are impressive; road and rail are his meat and drink, and he even managed to sort out the Railtrack debacle with no apparent detriment to his career. During his term at Eurocontrol we seem to be making tangible progress towards the Single European Sky, which is good because we've been trying to do that for 45 years.

David McMillan is aware that general aviation has its own fish to fry, and that our fish are not necessarily anybody else's fish. He

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has met frequently with IAOPA's main men including Phil Boyer, John Sheehan and Martin Robinson, he has addressed Eurocontrol's general aviation days, and he attended IAOPA's World Assembly in Athens where he spoke about GA's need for access to airspace and for regulators to take account of the fact that GA has no-one to pass its bills on to. During an interview in his office close to Brussels airport we did not address specific issues such as whether the Mode-S imbroglio has his dabs on it – it hasn't – but we established that while he doesn't necessarily feel our pain, he knows where it hurts.

"I'm conscious of the direct link between the levels of equipment that we regulators impose

Below: The headquarters of Eurocontrol, close to the perimeter of Brussels Airport
Right: the flags of the nations in the atrium of the Eurocontrol building



Courtesy Eurocontrol

Above: David McMillan, director general of Eurocontrol since January this year

on people and airspace access issues, and we need to have the right balance between the two," he says. "It doesn't seem to me that it's in anybody's interest to regulate a level, either in terms of airspace classification or equipage, that prevents you guys doing what seem to me to be a very legitimate set of activities. We need to get that balance right, and whenever you think we're not getting that balance right, come and shout about it."

Shouting is something we do fairly well, he



thinks. "GA has actually been quite good in terms of having its voice heard in this building. I certainly don't feel GA is disadvantaged – I've had Martin Robinson in this office a couple of times, I've accepted invitations to attend your events, and with our general aviation open days there is an established framework for getting your views across. But this is not the time to pull back on the resources. These are pivotal times, with the Single European Sky second package and SESAR getting under way. This is a time to make sure your voice really is heard."

The cost of involvement in SESAR is a bone of contention. IAOPA-Europe paid some 400,000 euros to be part of the Joint Undertaking that established the basic building blocks for SESAR during its definition phase. But now, during the development phase, that the bill has risen to a minimum of 250,000 euros a year, it's a game that's too rich for us. Why should cash be a factor in what is essentially a democratic planning process? Are we really not disadvantaged?

"You're not buying your way into membership, I know that," Mr McMillan says. "The SESAR Joint Undertaking has been set up as a joint enterprise bringing people together to make commitments to develop. That gives those people a seat at the table, but it doesn't mean that they are the only people who have influence over the process. SESAR success will come if it's something which people generally buy into, so we in Eurocontrol and the European Commission, as the two founding members, have made provision to give airspace users a free seat at the table, as it were. Obviously that's one seat, and you need to have a coalition of airspace users and make sure that your voice is heard within it."

The concept of calling the tune without paying the piper is one that might be explained in different ways by the organisations and companies that are spending millions of euros to be part of the Joint Undertaking, but we're stuck with it. "The long stop," says Mr McMillan, "which is always open to you, is to come and see me or one of the senior directors. Our doors are open, we will talk to

Below: watching VC10s air-to-air refuelling over the North Sea was a fascinating experience for David McMillan



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Courtesy Eurocontrol



Above: more than 2,000 people work for Eurocontrol, 700 in the headquarters building

you, and we will certainly use the general aviation day as the place to debate what all this means for you."

David McMillan is not an aviator, although he enjoys flying as a passenger and his son is thinking of taking up the noble profession. "I never felt the urge to learn to fly," he says. "I've thought about it – I enjoy being flown, I enjoy being around aviation, and I've always found aviation to be a fascinating business. I have been allowed to fly simulators with rather modest results, and I have taken it no further."

His first exposure to aviation came in 1980 when he was a diplomat in revolution-era Zimbabwe. "I was posted to the office of the governor of Southern Rhodesia, so I was there for the very start of independence," he says. "I sat in the Rufaro Stadium with Bob Marley and the Wailers as the teargas wafted over the crowd from the rioting outside. Then I transformed into the British High Commission, and one of my responsibilities, I discovered,

was to look after air service negotiations. We negotiated with the Zimbabweans to get Air Zimbabwe started back into London, and the big debate then was, well, Central African Airways has access to Heathrow, so why can't we? They ended up going to Gatwick, which remains the situation."

Later Mr McMillan decided the diplomat's life was too peripatetic for stable family life and swapped jobs with Giles Paxman, brother of the more famous Jeremy, finding himself in the Department of the Environment in Whitehall dealing with international shipping. When he was posted to Washington an aviation brief was added, and he'd hardly been away from it since. "Aviation has been a thread in all my time in transport," he says. "Of all the transport modes I find aviation the most interesting, the most global, in a sense the easiest to understand, and when you see aviation in action, there's something exciting and fascinating about getting metal into the sky."

After his Washington stint he was secretary to RUCATSE, the inquiry into runway capacity in south east England, and (with other transport jobs in between) he privatised NATS and served as director general of civil aviation in the UK. "I had a lot of exposure to the military side," he says. "I remember particularly being taken up one day on one of the VC10s and sitting over the North Sea watching air-to-air refuelling, a fascinating experience. As UK director general I did get much more exposure to general aviation – I wouldn't take it as my specialist subject in Mastermind but I acquired a broad understanding. We encouraged the CAA to do a study of general aviation to establish the importance of the sector, and it became very clear if it hadn't been before that it's a very significant sector, a major part of aviation."

In the beginning

Eurocontrol was established in 1963 with the initial aim of harmonising upper airspace across Europe. Participation was voluntary, and progress was slow. "Governments have a responsibility under the Chicago Convention to provide for ATC in their airspace, and that's not something that they can step out of and they take it very seriously," says Mr McMillan. "The primary duty of every government is to ensure

the security and safety of its people. Air traffic management is about providing services to civil and military users and making sure that you can defend your airspace and territory. Put those things together and you'll see why governments tend to be cautious. In my view it's disappointing that they've been quite as cautious as they have been over the years, but we are making progress, especially now as we are backed by the EC's ability to mandate things, and thus we can make step changes. We can direct that things be done – I haven't had to yet, but it's a useful tool."

He has made changes to the organisation in his nine months at the helm, mostly aimed at making it quicker on its feet and more open in its attitudes. "I came to an organisation which I thought needed to evolve, so I've spent a lot of energy on improving and managing internal governance, coming up with ideas on how we can make the Provisional Council (the body through which member states are represented at Eurocontrol) more effective, how we can have management supervisory boards for some of our activities so that we are more



Courtesy Eurocontrol

commercially focussed, and enhancing the role of the Air Navigation Services Board, where the ANSPs and airspace users come together." It seems clear Mr McMillan's experience at NATS left him with the feeling that ANSPs had insufficient clout at Eurocontrol, and he has moved quickly to elevate their status.

He goes on: "I've been trying to cut down the number of directors to make us a leaner

and more focussed organisation, and what with pushing through some reforms in the way we manage ourselves, that's taken up the bulk of my time. The two words I've been pushing since I came here are 'partnership' and 'transparency'. Eurocontrol is a fantastic organisation – the more I see of the people, the more I am impressed about the depths of the technical knowledge and the range of



Courtesy Eurocontrol

Above: Eurocontrol's Central Flow Management Unit operations room
Left: Eurocontrol's Upper Area Control Centre in Maastricht

specialisms, but even an organisation as gifted as this only really delivers when it operates in partnership with other people. We need to implicate others in our agenda, and I think we needed to do better on that. It's great to be a leader, but it's not good to be 'the' leader; it's better to be one of the leading organisations in Europe driving this forward."

The need to juggle countless stakeholders with sometimes inimical standpoints calls on his diplomatic skills. "A lot of what I do is managing this organisation's interfaces with other people – with states, governments, regulators, ANSPs, with airspace users and the military, with the EC and EASA, FAA, ICAO and so on. There's a heavy external representation part of the job and I could spend all of my time doing that. I don't, but it takes up about a third of my time, maybe more.

"Given that the EC has the ability to be a legislator, it's very important that that legislation is well informed and well crafted, and properly consulted upon. In the UK, consultation is a legislative requirement, and long before I came to Eurocontrol, that was the way Eurocontrol operated as well. It may be we could do better, but we have a very extensive range of consultation processes, people come in from all over the place to participate, and that includes representatives of general aviation. It may not be perfect, but it works."

Stunted growth

On June 27th this year there were 34,476 movements in European skies, an all-time record. Delays are substantially down on the turn of the century despite the traffic increase, but Eurocontrol's aim is to handle up to 50,000 movements daily by 2020, at an average of 37,500 per day, with an average delay of one minute or less, and that calls for a 35 percent increase in capacity. Economic conditions may give them a breather as they race to increase capacity, but Mr McMillan does not believe we have come to a brick wall in the sky. "In the last four months the average rate of growth has been just a squeeze over

Right: "I think we're seeing firm orders for about 100 VLJs a year in Europe"

one percent," he says. "Last year at the same time it was about five percent. It's very dependent on the price of fuel. Looking at what's already in the flight planning system towards the end of the year, we are getting near to the situation where we might actually see a decline in air traffic levels compared to the previous year. We think next year is likely to see a continuing contraction in growth. Given the price of fuel and the fact that European economies are less robust than they were, and put that together with a market which I suspect in some areas is rapidly reaching maturity, and I think you could expect to see a levelling off.

"You've got to think, is this a hiccup or is this a long-term structural change? At the moment there's nothing that's led us to believe that this is a once-and-for-all redirection in aviation. Since the Second World War the rate of growth has, with hiccups, been broadly constant, and at the moment we expect that that is the way we're going. It makes it hard to predict whether we'll need to make a particular investment in two years time or three years time, but it seems pretty clear that we need to prepare for the levels of growth that we were predicting when the SESAR programme was put together. Having said that, you can't afford to assume that things will go that way, so we're carrying on the studies, and we're watching things very closely."

One growth anomaly may be very light jets, for which Eurocontrol is doing some serious forward planning. "I think we're seeing firm



orders for about 100 VLJs a year in Europe," says Mr McMillan. "At a rough average of three flights per day per aircraft, that is not an insignificant amount of growth. It's also growth which we think will be concentrated in the core corridor, England down to northern Italy – it's not happening in an area where there's a lot of spare airspace. These aircraft will be flying at roughly the same flight levels as commercial aircraft but they don't necessarily have the same operational characteristics – they fly a bit slower, typically, so it's an issue to be addressed. We will be holding another workshop on VLJs in Budapest where we'll try

to get the potential operators and the ANSPs together, and run realistic simulations on how these aircraft would impact on the system."

Green skies

Mr McMillan has also moved to elevate the environment up the agenda. "Eurocontrol has two roles on the environment," he says. "The first is to educate, because there's a lot of ill-informed comment about the environmental performance of the air traffic system. One thing we have here is a huge amount of data about how the system really does operate, so I think one of our key duties is to get that information



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out there, to explain to people what the impacts really are.

"The second duty is to make the system as effective as it can be. Nine times out of ten, economic efficiency is absolutely inextricably tied to environmental performance. There are always trade-offs between emissions and noise and so on, but the economic efficiency argument runs very well with environmental performance. Our priority number one is safety, followed by economic efficiency. I'm increasingly arguing that we should put environmental performance up there, too, because sometimes you do have choices between things that are broadly of the same level of economic efficiency, but which have different environmental impacts.

Right: one wall is dominated by a huge weather map with thunderstorm activity prominent



Courtesy Eurocontrol

"Despite the global discussions, a lot of what we do is still focussed on local noise around airports, local air quality and how we manage that. There's a lot to be done on the en route side, and making TMAs more efficient to cut down on emissions generally, but those two things are key to air traffic management."

For GA, there has never been a more critical time. "The air traffic management bit of the European aviation scene is really at a turning point," Mr McMillan says. "We've got Single

European Sky package II out from the Commission, we've got a lot of changes being undertaken in the way Eurocontrol manages itself, we've got the EC and Eurocontrol coming closer together in terms of planning the way things will happen in future, we've got the SESAR Joint Undertaking really up and running, so there's a lot of activity.

"The issue which GA has, I think, in terms of representing itself, is that it's quite a big sector but it also has quite distinct sections

within it, and that's something you need to do something about. Yes, you're an important sector of the industry, but if you want to be heard effectively you need to do what the big boys do, and come together. We don't see British Airways in this building – Willie Walsh has come in to see me because I know him, but not particularly to come and lobby – they lobby through the AEA and through IATA. That is the model to study." ■

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