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The Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Atkins

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30th August 2007

Dear Secretary of State

RE: Security & Baggage Management at Manchester Airport

I have just revisited Manchester Airport – exactly a year since I last did so – to inspect the security procedures and the baggage management. A year ago, we were in the middle of alarming terrorist scares and the British public were long-suffering but understanding of the necessity for very tight procedures. I wrote to your predecessor at the some length to make a number of salient points but was very disappointed at his apparent lack of interest. I am puzzled still at a number of anomalies.

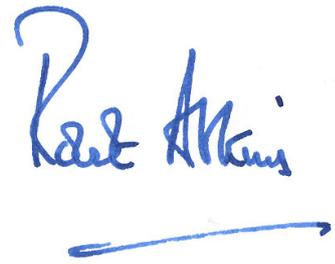
- 1) Why are we still requiring the removal of shoes – especially women’s and children’s flip-flops - and why on such an inconsistent basis? Terminal 2 requires all shoes to be removed but in Terminal 3 only one passenger in seven is asked to do so. I was informed that the discrepancy is for DFT quota reasons!
- 2) Why do belts suddenly have to be removed? Has something changed to cause this?
- 3) I went to inspect the IRIS immigration process, designed as I understand it, to speed up passenger transit. Not only was the office closed at 11.30 a.m. (Opening Hours 6.00 a.m. – 2.00 p.m!) but, when we found the official concerned at the IRIS point in the Arrivals Hall, he informed me that because of staff shortages, there was no time to process and manage further passenger involvement or use. What sort of crazy logic is that – to not provide the staff to solve the very problem that is causing staff pressure in the first place!
- 4) I was concerned to learn that Manchester Airport has no direct management control over the baggage handling process. As you may know, both EU and HMG require competition in the provision of baggage services – which I support strongly. But it cannot be right that MAG can “only stand and stare” at the good, bad or indifferent handling by the airlines and/or the baggage handling provider. A clearer recipe for buck-passing would be hard to find. Surely DfT must ensure that there is executive responsibility by the airport for the transit of baggage so, at the very least, there is a direct line of contact for the passenger. The MAG officials accompanying me were in some despair at the intransigence of your Department over this issue.

What makes all the foregoing very difficult to comprehend is the total inconsistency, not only between EU member states, most of whose airports operate without the restrictions that exist in the UK, but even between airports in this country. One US airline captain told me that “this country was simply the worst in which he had to operate” in terms of inconsistent administration, baffling bureaucracy and long-winded, unnecessary procedures.

It is little wonder that public understanding and toleration is wearing thin. They are ignoring the advice or are simply unaware of it. They appreciate the security reasons for knives, scissors – even liquids – but they are beginning to believe that what is not necessary on the continent demonstrates that it is equally unnecessary in the UK. That way lies potential disaster. You must sort out this chaotic state of affairs.

Yours sincerely

Robert Atkins



The Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Atkins MEP.