

Dáil Éireann - Volume 577 - 12 December, 2003

Aer Lingus Bill 2003: Second Stage (Resumed)

Mr. J. Breen: I am delighted to speak on this Bill. Any plans by the Minister to sell part of Aer Lingus must be considered carefully and must be looked at in terms of what is best for this island as a whole, not what is best for Aer Lingus as a corporate entity. From a County Clare point of view, they must be looked at in the context of Shannon Airport and the surrounding area.

Shannon is ideally located as the gateway to the west of Ireland and the local infrastructure is improving. Hopefully the Ennis bypass will start in 2004 and, with a rail link to the airport, it will be an even more inviting destination for tourists and business people. Aer Lingus has been a very successful public enterprise over the years and has benefited from the bilateral agreement, with transatlantic flights becoming the bread and butter of Shannon. There has been a significant knock-on impact on tourism development in the west of Ireland as a whole.

Unfortunately, the recent rescheduling of flights to Dublin and the lack of a service to mainland Europe from Shannon has had a negative impact on the economy of the region. The establishment of a new board of management for the three airports gives no guarantee to Shannon or Cork and, in light of this Bill, I question Aer Lingus's commitment to the airport, the west and the mid-west.

If a private company or another airline got its hands on part of Aer Lingus could Shannon kiss Aer Lingus goodbye in the interests of profit margins? That would be to the detriment of the local economy and the development of further tourism and business initiatives. Will Shannon Airport suffer the same fate as Cork Airport given that Aer Lingus discontinued domestic flights to Cork? This cannot be allowed to happen in an area with good prospects for economic growth.

Aer Lingus may be a small carrier but its brand is

synonymous with Ireland. A vibrant national airline is needed and Aer Lingus should remain as an independent carrier within the State structure and should not be sold off piecemeal to private industry. If this is the Minister's intention, he should outline his proposal and give assurances to Shannon and Cork Airports that their viability as tourist destinations will be safeguarded in any deal.

We in Clare are concerned about Shannon Airport and I hope the Minister will guarantee that the new board will be good for the airport. I encourage the Minister to ensure Shannon Airport is safeguarded in his proposals. He is from the west and will be aware of what the people think of the airport. It is an engine for growth in the area and, without a bilateral agreement, it will be in dire straits. I seek an assurance from the Minister