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Plane Stupid: living up to their name

by Philip Baum



For eight days in August the “Camp for Climate Action” was held near London Heathrow. It brought together demonstrators (and those in search of a free party) for a tented protest about the aviation industry’s contribution towards CO² emissions and the development of Heathrow Airport; this includes an increase in flights and the construction of a third runway that will be the death knell of a local village.

There can be no doubt that the causes of the protest are worthy in nature. I live underneath one of Heathrow’s flightpaths and so I and my family are profoundly affected by aircraft noise and pollution (one of my daughter’s suffers from asthma, of which there is a considerable prevalence amongst children in the airport’s environs). I also uphold our inalienable right to peaceful protest and recognise that there comes a time when one almost has a duty to march, chant or amass in order to change the status quo or right a wrong. Granted the impact of global warming, there is no question that this is one issue that has to be maintained at the top of the political agenda.

According to one campaigner, Angie Zelter, “Preventing further Climate Change is the one issue the whole world can and should unite on. So many of the solutions to our single issues campaigns are needed to combat climate change. We have to grasp this opportunity to become true compassionate global citizens and put the millennia of war-fighting and exploitation behind us. We are all one on this fragile planet. Let us engage in the power of nonviolent civil resistance and create the change we need. I hope to be with you on

the 19th August. Love and strength from Angie.” Worthy words, worthy ideals...

However, and it’s a big “however”, we also live in times in which our daily lives are under the threat of another global ill – terrorism. Worse still, practitioners of modern terrorism are no longer restricted to the ranks of those who have been raised in refugee camps or have lost loved ones due to military action; many sympathisers are born in, educated by and often supported by the very States that they wish to target.

Just over a year ago, the so-called “liquid explosive plot” to destroy trans-Atlantic airliners was uncovered by the authorities; many of these flights were to have departed Heathrow Airport and could have, had they been successful, dwarfed the death toll of 11th September 2001. London Heathrow remains one of the truly iconic targets for a terrorist group.

The sheer numbers of those who have been found to be associated with terrorist groups is chilling. Thankfully, both in the

United Kingdom and overseas, the security authorities have managed to identify many of the more coordinated plots and have, to date, prevented a further outrage taking place. In Germany, this September, a plot to use hydrogen peroxide in attacks against the aviation industry was stopped in its tracks. But the plots will continue and one of them, one day, is likely to succeed.

Given, and it is a “given”, that the aviation industry will remain one of the key targets of terrorist action, extraordinary measures are required to safeguard it. For this reason, we are all subjected to a greater degree of surveillance and inspection when we fly than when we do almost anything else.

The threat does not only emanate from genuine, highly trained, well educated terrorist cells. It would seem that there are a frightening number of individual sympathisers, often suffering personality disorders, that are quite prepared to go-it-alone and, without the backing of any organisation, make an attempt to become “martyrs”. On an almost daily basis, I read reports of bizarre behaviour demonstrated by passengers, some of which seriously endanger flight safety.

The police and airport authorities have to maintain a constant state of vigilance to identify the orchestrated terrorists, those who *wish* they were and the idiots who cause panic through their thoughtless action. Idiots like Star Simpson who, close to the sixth anniversary of 11th September, was so devoid of common sense that she approached a terminal building at Boston’s Logan Airport wearing a T-shirt

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that had an electronic circuit board, flashing LED lights and a battery affixed to it. She was also said to be carrying a ball of play dough. She claimed it was art!

Granted the daily challenges that regular visitors to airports pose, the idea of encouraging thousands of non-travellers to an airport, in the height of the summer getaway, was simply irresponsible, whatever the cause. And it wasn't only the activists themselves that welcomed the idea. One of the local Members of Parliament, John McDonnell, said, "We really hope that as many local people as possible will accept our invitation to visit the Camp."

In July this year, in the aftermath of the car bomb attack on Glasgow Airport which exposed the vulnerability of passengers waiting to be processed through terminal security checks, the (British) all party Transport Committee had reached some pertinent conclusions. They said that, "moving passengers more swiftly through to airside will, in itself, reduce the threat" and that "speeding up check-in times and reducing the security queue should be a priority for airports

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and airlines." In other words, the parliamentarians recognised the huge risk of crowds at security sensitive sites.

Of course, when Heathrow's owners tried to prevent the protest taking place, the environmentalist groups involved were quick to accuse them of cowering under the guise of security to protect their own financial stake. Whether or not this is true is irrelevant.

The fact is that no airport, especially the likes of London Heathrow, needs to have large numbers of protestors gathering on their doorstep; protestors

who could just as easily have taken to the streets of central London to "air" their views and gained as much publicity. It was not only a distraction for the police, who are trying to safeguard our way of life from those who despise it, but it also potentially provided a cover for those who might have wished to use a worthy cause to perpetrate an evil act.

One of the groups most closely associated with the Camp, and which has a specific vendetta against the aviation industry, calls itself Plane Stupid. Its activists have carried out a number of high profile airport incursions in recent months. But, by calling on their eco-warriors to engage in action at one of the United Kingdom's most security sensitive sites at the height of the summer, when the security authorities were at their most stretched, its leadership proved to have a remarkably blinkered view of the issues facing the world. CO² emissions have to be tackled, but not at the expense of risking a terrorist atrocity in the process - that would really be plain stupid.



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