The way forward for civil aviation in Europe

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While agreeing with the views of the Commission, which stated that ‘it is firmly convinced that the European aviation industry will re-achieve sustainable growth and profitability only if, in addition to the management task of restructuring carriers which need to be supported by enforcing the Third Package provisions, public authorities work towards a quick solution to the extra burden caused by inadequate diversity of standards, allocation of responsibilities and other rigidities’, the ESC considered that the Commission’s overall response was inadequate to meet the challenge of working in a ‘consumer-driven market’. It believed that, in particular, the Commission and the Member States should work to ensure existing legislation operated to meet their objectives and that the problems of both inadequate airport capacity and air-traffic management systems were addressed vigorously. The ESC believed in particular that: - the Commission should ensure that State aid was limited to reconstruction and to where a public service obligation was established, and did not prejudice the workings of the internal market (see section 3.7); - the Commission should work with the Council on a common external policy on the basis of Article 84 (see section 3.8). With air transport evolving against a background of worldwide competition, the failure to give priority to the framing of an external EU policy would have a harmful effect not only in terms of obtaining and maintaining routes but also in the context of the social sector (emergence of social dumping); - more detailed attention needed to be given to the issue of safety (see section 3.9.); - the Commission should give urgent consideration to the high airport and en route charges. As the Wise Men’s report stated, ‘the European region suffers from extraordinary high user charges’ (see section 3.10.). The charges airports made direct to scheduled European airlines represented 4 to 6% of operating costs, compared with less than 2% in the United States . This relative difference had even more impact on ATC charges where no en-route charge existed for domestic US traffic; - the Commission was equivocal on taxation and financing issues. There should be a clear statement that no extra tax burdens on the industry would be proposed; - the recommendations relating to social issues were too vague: detailed proposals were needed notably on the need to ensure workers could adapt to changing market conditions and also the need to safeguard and harmonise the quality of employment and working conditions in accordance with the principle of social progress enshrined in Articles 2 and 117 of the Treaty. In any event, the issue was treated as almost an afterthought (see section 3.16.). The Economic and Social Committee felt that the liberalisation process had been underway long enough to allow a first report to be drawn up on its social impact, especially its effect on employment and working conditions. This would make it possible to pinpoint any adverse effects and to examine how these could be corrected; - the Commission should take into account that a ‘consumer-driven market’ was more than one in which fares were related to costs. It should also be one in which customers individually were enabled to make properly informed choices based on information at the point of sale including quality of service and performance statistics.