25 YEARS IN THE AVIATION HALL OF DOOM
By Dick Smith AC. Former Chairman CAA and CASA

It's a nightmare. No wonder I have sleepless nights!

A series of articles in this newspaper last year covered how commercial pilots at dozens of Australian airports (Ballina and Bairnsdale are just two examples) are forced to blunder around in cloud attempting to call other aircraft to avoid a collision. It's a 1930s "calling in the blind uncontrolled airspace" system. There isn’t even a radio operator on the ground at these airports to confirm that the aircraft radio is working correctly and give local weather conditions.

After five flights around the world where I closely studied airspace procedures, I found the Australian system was unique and only existed because of Union demarcation issues after controlled airspace was introduced worldwide in the 1940s.

In 1991 the Civil Aviation Authority made a decision to follow proven international practice and introduce controlled airspace at these busy country airports, so aircraft in cloud were directed by controllers and kept apart using a proven safety standard. Airports were also to have local radio operators called Unicoms.

25 years later not one Australian airport has been upgraded to this safer level of service.

Why could this be so I hear you ask?

The answer is resistance to change and a lack of leadership from those entrusted with aviation safety in this country. Airline pilots are psychologically tested to follow existing rules and those that have only flown in the Australian system, oppose change. Many believe only incompetent pilots require controlled airspace and a local radio operator.

So far we have not had an airline accident caused by these 1930s procedures - but we have been close. Here are two examples:

On 16 May 1997 an airline aircraft was on approach to Bundaberg airport in cloud while another aircraft was on the same approach in the same cloud at the same time. Only luck prevented a mid-air collision. The Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB) report showed that one of the professional air crews had used the wrong “calling in the blind" frequency - a simple human error.

On 23 June 2006, a Rex Airlines aircraft was on approach to Orange airport in cloud from the east. At the same time a commercial pilot in a Baron aircraft was approaching in cloud from the west. They were head on. A collision was only prevented when the pilot of one aircraft broke the rules and turned away from the prescribed route.

And there have been fatalities for non-airline aircraft.

As covered in this newspaper last year, on 28 July 2004, a Cheyenne aircraft was on approach to Benalla airport in bad weather. Due to an error of navigation the commercial pilot was many miles from the correct approach resulting in all six on board being killed when the aircraft hit a mountain.
Previously, an alarm had sounded numerous times in the Melbourne Air Traffic Control Centre, however, the controller was not required to inform the pilot as the aircraft was heading towards "calling in the blind uncontrolled airspace".

Such is the resistance to change of attitude of those involved in the ATSB in Canberra, even after these two serious incidents and one fatal accident, not one recommendation was made to even consider introducing controlled airspace at these airports, as per the 1991 policy.

After numerous false starts to update to controlled airspace the then Minister - John Anderson, appointed me to the Aviation Reform Group in early 2002. This group was required to make a recommendation on how the much delayed airspace reforms should go ahead. Other members of the five person group included the Chief of the Airforce, Air Marshal Angus Houston. A unanimous decision was made to move to the North American system called NAS and this was accepted by the coalition government at the time and announced as policy. Angus was particularly supportive of the system because he had flown in the USA during his active service.

Previously, I had a discussion with the Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) Deputy Chairman Dr Paul Scully Power. Paul said, “Dick, you must be involved in the implementation of any airspace changes, otherwise they will never go ahead - the system will resist change in every way”. Paul was right!

The Minister agreed that I would be a member of the Implementation Group however I then received a call from the office of the Chief of the Airforce requesting I come to Canberra for an urgent meeting. The discussions on 8 April at this infamous meeting have already been reported in this newspaper. Suffice to say Angus told me I should not be “hands on” and I therefore should not be involved with the Implementation Group. I was shocked with his request - it came as a complete surprise to me. He had previously said Defence was totally committed and the changes this time would definitely go ahead.

On 22 May a letter arrived from Minister Anderson confirming I would no longer be on the Implementation Group and enclosed the amended Terms of Reference deleting my name.

The rest of course is history. Many millions of dollars were spent in an attempt to introduce NAS and some worthwhile changes were made only to be wound-back in the following years due to a lack of pilot education and the removal of CASA personnel, who understood how the NAS system operated.

Sadly, not one Airport in Australia has been updated to the safer NAS Class E controlled airspace and not one airport has the safer Unicom radio operator to give local weather conditions and confirm the airline radio is actually working. Calling "in the blind do it yourself airspace" will remain until a major airline accident with fatalities brings in the change.

Angus Houston is now Sir Angus and is Chairman of the monopoly air traffic control body, Airservices Australia. He rigidly supports the wound-back airspace and claimed in an article by Paul Kelly in this newspaper that he only ever supported NAS because, at the time, it was government policy.

I despair!