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Aussies taking S'pore ties 'for granted'

Transport GPC chief reacts to report on open skies talks

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A TRANSPORT official yesterday accused the Australian government of taking its good ties with Singapore for granted over the lucrative trans-Pacific air route.

In a strongly-worded reply to Straits Times queries, Mr Ong Kian Min, chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Transport, said he was 'extremely disappointed' with an Australian newspaper report last week suggesting Singapore Airlines could wait another two years to find out if it could fly the route.

He said: 'If the report turns out to be true, it would reinforce the impression that Australia has no interest nor desire to conclude an open skies agreement with Singapore and that would amount to no less than a breach of faith, if not of trust.

'Australia's tactic of continually delaying progress under various guises shows their lack of commitment on this issue,' he added.

The article, published in The Australian, said that Canberra might wait two years to decide whether to grant SIA's long-standing wish to compete with Qantas on the route, allowing it to fly between Australia and the United States.

The report also suggested that budget Australian carrier Virgin Blue - partly owned by British tycoon Richard Branson - could get to fly the route instead.

Also yesterday, Qantas chief executive Geoff Dixon fired off the latest in a series of broadsides at SIA, saying at a press conference in Sydney that there was no need for anyone to 'manufacture competition' on the route.

SIA has been lobbying to operate the Sydney-Los Angeles market for more than 10 years. Qantas, which has a 75 per cent share of the route, with United Airlines taking the rest, has always objected strongly, arguing that it would lose money and jobs.

In recent years, discussions on the issue and 'positive comments' by Australian leaders have led many to believe that a full 'open skies' agreement would be signed sooner rather than later, Mr Ong said.

'In fact, there will be a loss of significant long-term economic benefits to both countries as long as the open skies agreement remains in limbo,' Mr Ong wrote.

'Only short term narrow parochial interests would be served by such a decision.

'Such behaviour is also completely inconsistent with the Australian openly stated position as a champion of free trade and open competition.'

He also noted that Singapore has 'more than fulfilled' its commitments to Australia, granting rights to Qantas that have enabled it to establish Changi Airport as its largest base outside Australia.

About half the flights that the airline operates to Changi continue on to Europe, while SIA has rights only to fly to Australia and back.

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