



# Largely empty aircraft and the international passenger arrival caps

International airlines with some 30,000 seats on over 140 flights arrived into Australia in the first week of September.<sup>1</sup> Only about 4,000 of these seats could be offered to passengers while 26,000 (87%) had to remain empty under the tight international passenger arrival caps. It's clear Australians overseas seeking to return home need better help,<sup>2</sup> and the Board of Airline Representatives of Australia (BARA)<sup>3</sup> considers the best way to do so is to increase the arrival caps into the major capital city airports. Additional quarantine capacity for international flights at secondary international airports might not be commercially viable for airlines and hence not help Australians stranded overseas.

## International airline capacity and Australians stranded overseas

BARA notes the stated number of Australians who have registered their intent to return home with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has increased from about 19,000 to 23,000 over the past couple of weeks.<sup>4</sup> This is despite the number of Australians permitted to return home over the same period.

"Far more Australians are seeking to return home than the 19,000 who had registered with DFAT a couple of weeks ago. BARA estimates there are 100,000 Australians who are, or will be, seeking to return home over the coming weeks.

"International airlines are still providing some 30,000 seats into Australia each week, and Australians overseas can still return home through flights from overseas countries to global hubs then onto Australia or get direct flights to Australia from overseas countries including New Zealand, the United States and China.

"Most of this capacity, however, must remain unused and aircraft land in Australia largely empty under the tight international passenger arrival caps. It is obviously frustrating for Australians stranded overseas and international airlines that such a situation continues to prevail. It cannot be expected that international airlines continue indefinitely with such flights on a commercial basis," Barry Abrams, Executive Director of BARA said.

<sup>1</sup> Excludes international flights into Melbourne Airport, which operate with no arriving international passengers.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/national-cabinet-040920>

<sup>3</sup> BARA represents 33 airlines, which provide 90% of all international passenger flights and carry most freight to and from Australia.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-09-02/government-announces-financial-support-for-australians-overseas/12622352>



## Making better use of largely empty aircraft arriving into Australia

There are already tens of thousands of seats available each week to permit a more orderly return home of Australians overseas. So it's not as if we need more international flights, but rather a case of more quarantine capacity, including flexibility in how it's applied and a risk-based approach to managing COVID-19 for international arrivals.

"Australians overseas would benefit the most from a quarantine capacity plan across Australia that allowed international airlines to operate flights with more commercially viable passenger loads. A target average of at least 100 passengers per arriving flight, while still difficult financially, is far better than 30 or less.

"A risk-based approach to mitigating COVID-19, with measures other than mandatory 14 days quarantine for Australians returning from countries with little or no COVID-19, would also free up quarantine capacity for passengers from other countries. It would also provide a path to a more sustainable industry, based on about 150 international flights per week, so that Australia can maintain a minimum level of connectivity with overseas countries until more open international borders and travel can occur.

"Additional quarantine capacity for international flights into secondary international airports might not be commercially viable for airlines and hence not help Australians stranded overseas. While it might be possible for some aircraft types to fly to such airports, it would come with many challenges for international airlines. It would need commercially viable combined inbound and outbound passenger loads plus freight, which may be difficult to obtain. The international airline may also not have existing agreements in place for necessities, including fuel, aircraft servicing and baggage handling, all of which take time to establish," Mr Abrams said.

On 7 August, Australia's National Cabinet agreed to extend limits on international passenger arrivals until 24 October. When first introduced in early July, with little notice given to international airlines, they caused severe disruption for passengers and airlines. With no formal guidance given for the arrangements that would apply post-24 October, the potential for similar problems to re-emerge in late October seems likely.

"BARA and the international airlines are unaware of any firm proposals to increase the number of Australians who can return home in a more orderly manner. International airlines remain willing to engage with governments if asked to do so in supporting better outcomes for Australians overseas," Mr Abrams said. **[ENDS]**