

Tarmac Transfer Trauma

Recent events at a certain airline (I must get a less wussy legal advisor) at a certain London airport were “enthusiastically” reported by the world’s press, mainly it seems because it is high summer fun to trash anything that people have dubbed their “favourite” anything.

Of course the one thing the media never seems to write much about is itself (except to trash the BBC), so you are forgiven your surprise when I inform you – without bias of course - that the majority of the world’s media have the attention span of a lobotomised goldfish.

Emerging stories demand instant expertise and even more postulations of the reasons for the crises, new development or whatever. In this case we all quickly discovered that a cack-handed attempt to introduce a new signing-on system at a certain airline was the root cause: the effect was the grounding of 500 flights and the ruin of thousands of people’s vacation plans. Well that was what the media said anyway.

Only once in the acres of newsprint this classic silly season story consumed did anyone mention that this – in reality – was the end of a very long wedge. And only ten days after the events did I hear the phrase “tarmac transfer”, two words destined to live forever in the work/life balance lexicon.

It seems that many cabin crew (and pilots to) get married to each other then, in the nature of things, little bouncing bundles of fun arrive. That’s when the problems starts. Mum goes back to work and finds that the work schedules are so weird that junior gets driven to the airport and the loving couple pass the baby from one to the other in the staff car park. This understandably puts quite a strain on the relationship. Imagine being long-haul cabin crew coming off a 12 hour flight from Los Angeles, to find the subject of your affection standing by the family hatchback with the fruit of your union, ready to “pass the parcel” so to speak as they are headed off on their tour of duty to foreign parts: jet-lag and baby-minding don’t appear to be much of a winning combination.

But in these days where people are alleged to be deeply concerned about work-life balance it raises up some interesting issues.

First, are we becoming a race where in pursuit of the pleasures of

consumerism we must have two salaries to pay the mortgage and have three vacations every year? If to support our Mammon-driven lifestyles we have to swop over our kids in an airport car-park, have we gone over a line from which there is no return?

One of my good friends has just quit her job, coming belatedly to the conclusion that “my earnings were being spent on childcare and ready meals” and that didn’t seem all that effective use of my time.” Maybe a lot more of us should think that way. Another friend has recently become a dad for the first time. Living in London, he tells me that he and his wife cannot have a second child as for baby one, the childcare costs already tke up her whole salary. He also adds that for every 15 minutes you are late picking up your son or daughter there is a standing charge of £40: that’s £160 if you are an hour late!

But the airline dispute is probably only the tip of the iceberg. People in trades and professions marry each other. Nurses marry doctors, lady cops marrying male cops (well not always but we won’t go into that). So just how many other professions have these kind of work-life balance pressures?

Is PC Plod, handing over his little treasure in the police station car park? Are female trawler skippers (French and Spanish have them, I know) left waving a tearful goodbye to daddy fisherman, as she clutches her children to her skirts. And let’s not dwell on the fate of lighthouse keepers who fall in love!

What all this clearly points to though is that we maybe have got this need for two incomes a little wrong, and that work-life balance is more about assessing our real-life needs and not about trying to make an unworkable set of schedules fit into some sort of bizarre lifestyle. All this need for both people in a partnership to be fulfilled by work, may well be wrong. Then again, maybe companies should reassess the situation. Come the economic upturn those that have schedules that force employees to the extremes of tarmac transfer trauma and the like will pay dearly as people migrate to other jobs that don’t have such draconian work cultures.

As the phrase goes, “it’s a dirty job but someone has to do it”, well at least until the house is paid for and the little darlings have left. home. Meanwhile it’s pass the parcel in the car park time again.