

LAA AGM 2018. MOTION 1

Supporting statement by Tracey Curtis-Taylor. Mem No 035363

I am very grateful to Stewart Jackson for proposing and to Tim Wheeler for seconding the motion before you. The 2016 AGM resolution was hugely distressing for me; I have struggled with the consequences for the past two years. I do hope that Members will now agree that wrong was done in their name and will take the opportunity to put it right for the sake of the Association's good name. It is tempting to write many pages, but I'll confine myself to a brief statement. I am happy to explain more fully and answer any questions put in good faith by Members before or at the 2018 AGM.

Since 2005 I have been proud to be a member of the LAA, with its declared objective of 'making dreams fly'. I was thrilled to receive the Woodhams Award in 2014, the first woman aviator to be so honoured; and correspondingly devastated two years later not only to be the first recipient to have the award rescinded but also to be publicly condemned for bringing the Association into disrepute. Manipulation, muddle-headedness and misogyny seem all to have been factors.

No sooner had the Woodhams Award been made in 2014 than I became the object of sustained abuse through the PPrune social media forum, initiated by a sub-contractor on my 2014 African flight who had left the team early with a personal grievance. The story was spread that I had contrived to deceive the LAA Awards Committee, the aviation community and the broadcasting media by making fraudulent claims that I had flown my Stearman across Africa, following Lady Mary Heath's historic route, entirely on my own. Such a claim would have been nonsense had I made it.

The object of that and my later flights was to commemorate the historic achievements of the female pioneers, promoting not my achievements but theirs in order to inspire the coming generation of women aviators. It would have been impossible to undertake these filmed expeditions without extensive technical support, as I have repeatedly explained; various people accompanied me in the Stearman for most of the legs of my flights. I did once inadvertently speak of flying 'solo' at a damp, grey Herne Bay in September 2014 when a flying display I was scheduled to give was cancelled at the last minute because of the weather, and I had to make a short impromptu speech to a crowd of disappointed people. As soon as I finished I realised I'd omitted to credit my colleagues, but it was too late to get the film edited.

Because it is all the evidence there is, anyone seeking to persuade you that I'm a liar will direct you to the YouTube clip of this one speech, as opposed to numerous occasions on which I make clear my gratitude to the crews that supported me.

Having requested the information this year from the LAA, I now know that from early 2016 the Board received a succession of emails demanding my public disgrace. The sources were evidently the same as those of the ongoing PPrune campaign; some of them joined our Association. A long-standing member, who has since told me he got his information from PPrune, was eventually persuaded to front a hostile motion for the AGM; it was submitted to the Board on 19 September, only just in time to be considered for the agenda. That day the Royal Navy Royal Marines Charity received emails from the same sources, complaining that I should not be the guest speaker at a Navy fund-raising event, because I was about to be disgraced by a LAA motion that was to be presented at the AGM and was 'expected to pass easily'. I learned of this from the Marines Charity a few days later.

As I now know from the Minutes of the LAA Board, the draft motion included references to the company that sponsored my Africa flight that the Board was advised were libellous. However, the Chairman — not the Secretary — took it upon himself to rewrite it forthwith. This was permissible but not mandatory under the LAA Articles; I would question whether it was appropriate in respect of a motion that was an overt personal attack on a Member.

Such a motion was hardly typical of our AGM, perhaps unique; but it was put on the agenda and sent out without accompanying explanation. I was away on a speaking tour of schools in China for three weeks before the AGM; but having become aware of the motion I wrote a statement, asking that it be circulated to members with the agenda; it wasn't. Hard copy was available only on the day of the meeting, by which time proxy voting on an unprecedented scale ensured the passage of the motion regardless of the overwhelming opposition of those who actually attended and heard the arguments.

It is evident from recent study of the redacted proxy voting forms — supplied at my request — that some members were puzzled by the motion to strip me of the Woodhams Award, but it seems likely that most assumed that it was one of a list of proposals endorsed by the Chairman and Board for which they would vote en bloc. An unusually large number of proxy ballots was returned — it is my understanding that at most AGMs there are more members present than there are proxies — including several on which the only vote cast was for the motion and a few on which the stamped date of receipt was earlier than the date on which they were officially circulated.

Such oddities can doubtless be explained; but both at the AGM and within the Board unease and embarrassment were expressed both at the way in which a very personal motion had been passed, and the misogynistic, out-of-touch image of the LAA thereby projected. I don't think that the resignation of the Secretary shortly afterwards was coincidental. And while the LAA Board made no formal admission that anything was less than perfect, its discomfort with what had happened is apparent from changes made soon after the 2016 AGM to the rules on motions, so that in future six weeks' notice would be required.

I will say no more. You will, I hope, agree with me that righting a wrong and putting this dismal affair behind us is in the Association's best interests; if you do not, so be it. Whether or not you choose to believe me, I do assure you that my Stearman flights were and are less about me personally than about celebrating the past achievements of female aviators and promoting the future of women in the skies. I trust that Members see this objective as being in accord with the high ideals of the Light Aircraft Association to which we all belong.

ENDS