

Qantas loses public trust on safety record

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QANTAS is heading into negotiations with British Airways amid new evidence that public faith in the airline's safety record has taken a hit and that some Australians no longer view the airline as safe.

Two serious in-flight safety scares at the airline, increased media attention on lesser incidents and a spate of delays and cancellations appear to have left passengers worried that the airline's safety standards have dropped.

A survey by Labor pollsters UMR Research shows two-thirds of Australians still believe Qantas is a safe airline to fly, but 63 per cent say safety standards have become worse over the past few years.

The online survey of 1000 people conducted between August and late November shows women, younger Australians and Victorians are more worried about Qantas safety.

Nine out of 10 Australians believe Qantas maintenance should be done in Australia, rather than overseas. The survey also raises a worrying note for the airline's new maintenance joint venture with Malaysia Airlines in Kuala Lumpur, with almost three-quarters of respondents believing the quality of work done in Malaysia is lower than in Australia.

The survey comes as Transport Minister Anthony Albanese yesterday called for Qantas to remain an Australian-owned airline for security reasons.

"There are national security issues, particularly for an island continent located on the globe where Australia is, for having a national airline," he said.

The recent unrest in Thailand, which saw the Bangkok international airport shut down for a week, was a case in point, he said.

"When Australians were having difficulty departing from Thailand, I was able to pick up the phone to the chief executive of Qantas, Alan Joyce, and make the request that extra flights be put on."

The UMR survey found 73 per cent of men believed Qantas was a safe airline compared with just 63 per cent of women.

And 16 per cent of women and 17 per cent of people under 30 viewed the airline as unsafe.

Sixteen per cent of people in Victoria, which was the centre of a maintenance union wage campaign which included claims of safety problems with offshore maintenance earlier this year, thought Qantas unsafe but this dropped to 7 per cent for people over 70. High-income earners were less worried about Qantas safety, with 74 per cent of people earning more than \$80,000 a year considering it safe and just 10 per cent saying it wasn't.

The poll was taken in three tranches, with the first done in the month after an exploding oxygen cylinder blew a hole in the side of a Qantas jumbo jet and prompted an emergency descent near Manila and the others conducted in September and November. The airline suffered a second accident in early October when an Airbus A330 twice pitched nose-down off the coast of Western Australia, seriously injuring 14 people.

Investigations into both incidents are continuing but have initially centred on possible manufacturing problems beyond the airline's control.

Qantas has also vigorously defended its safety record and says the number of aircraft forced to turn back because of maintenance problems had not risen despite the media coverage. It said the Qantas Group's rate of 98 turnbacks for 350,000 flights (including Jetstar) compared favourably with other airlines.

Chairman Leigh Clifford told the recent annual meeting that safety remained the airline's No1 priority.

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