



THE WIND OF CHANGE AT TRANSPORT CANADA

With the appointment on January 8 of a new Minister of Transport, the Honourable Omar Alghabra, Member of Parliament for Mississauga Centre, will we finally have the champion air transport in Canada so desperately needs?

Known to be in the Prime Minister's close circle, will the new Minister have the influence and the time needed to reset the course at Transport Canada before the next general election, an election that many predict could be on the agenda this spring.

We hope that Minister Alghabra will help us meet the challenges imposed on our industry for the past year. That he will address national testing, quarantine issues, and safe corridors, all key elements for the recovery of commercial aviation in Canada.

The Minister's announcement on January 31 not to impose hotel quarantine rules for air travelers returning home until logistics were finalized was met with much relief by the air transport industry.

Unfortunately, the inspiration of a viable and original solution will not come from the Prime Minister's Office. The Supplementary Mandate Letter to the new Minister of Transport issued on January 15 avoided committing to finding much needed solutions for helping the air transport industry and was very vague as to the expected achievements with respect to air travel in general.

"Recognizing the unique impact of COVID-19 on the Canadian air travel network, work with the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, the Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry and the Minister of Economic Development and Official Languages, and with the support of the Special Representative for the Prairies, on measures for the air travel sector that: ensure Canadians get refunds for air travel cancelled due to the pandemic, promote Canada's green and innovative aerospace sector, sustain regional air infrastructure, support regional economic development and enable growth in other key sectors such as tourism".

Absent from the government's statement of intent was urgently needed decisive action regarding an aid package, passenger testing and the lifting of quarantines. Unfortunately, just the opposite is happening as each new restriction further hampers recovery efforts by industry and adds further layers to overcome with already reduced resources.

Industry is not asking for a handout or a bail-out. ATAC would support an aid program which could include loans, debt forgiveness, subsidies, but also reduction of fees imposed on our industry, that would enforce strict conditions. These could include passenger reimbursements, and temporary dividend payout and executive bonus payment limits, or perhaps carbon emission reduction goals.

More than 130 communities in Canada rely entirely on regional air travel for their socio-economic survival. Members of Parliament who represent Canada's regions have long been pushing for government involvement in the national government caucus, but their grievances and attempts to help preserve air service have so far failed to lead to government action. We hope that the Minister will be able to convince his colleagues in Cabinet of the unquestionable necessity to act now.

Canada's air transport industry is composed of a variety of operator types, ranging from air taxi operators, regional, national and international carriers, all connected but with very different needs. Consequently, an air sector specific government aid package must include programs tailored to the different types of operators and avoid at all cost a one-size-fits-all approach. Not to be neglected either is the high cost of maintaining professional proficiency of maintenance engineers and pilots. These costs will increase significantly as this COVID imposed down time is prolonged and will affect the availability of a highly skilled workforce once the recovery occurs.

Minister Alghabra must convince Cabinet to act quickly to stabilize all sectors of Canada's commercial aviation, and thus prevent insolvency and further job losses, which may be irreparable if left unchecked.

However desperately needed a government aid package might be, it would be of limited help if severe air travel restrictions are not lifted as quickly as possible.

Air travel worldwide will undoubtedly change as a result of this pandemic. Canada's air transport community is eager to work under the Minister's leadership not only to survive in the short term and ensure that the industry can play its necessary and vital role in driving a national post-pandemic economic recovery, but also to remain competitive on the international scene and continue to be an efficient and reliable mode of transport for Canadians.