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Canada might delay international-flight smoking ban

JEFF WEINBAUGH THE GAZETTE

Three months ago, the federal government slashed consumer taxes on cigarettes, making it much cheaper for Canadians to smoke and much easier for tobacco companies to sell.

Now the government is considering delaying a smoking ban slated to begin July 1 on Canadian airlines' international flights.

The reason? Ottawa is under pressure from carriers who fear losing smoking passengers on their lucrative routes to the Pacific Rim.

"Nothing is written in stone, not even a formal" of the ban to a later date, said

Dan Holmes, international aviation-policy chief at Transport Canada, in an interview yesterday from his Ottawa office.

There's always a chance the July 1 deadline for compliance will be extended, agreed Grant Maczewicz, the Transport Canada lawyer and director of enforcement and legislation who drafts the legal text of bans. Such bans require approval by the federal cabinet.

If it does delay the ban, Canada will be abandoning its vanguard role as the world's most vocal advocate of smoke-free commercial passenger air flights.

It's a move that worries the International Civil Aviation Organization, the airline-regulating body that has its home in Canada.

"I would definitely be disappointed"

if Canada drops the deadline, said Dr. Claus Gundt-Christiansen, chief of aviation medicine at the Montreal-based International Civil Aviation Organization.

"I understand that airlines are running a business, that money talks," he said yesterday. "But it can't be that money decides everything in life."

In October 1992, after strong prodding by Canada, ICAO called on its 183 member states to work toward a worldwide ban on smoking aboard commercial passenger aircraft by July 1, 1994.

Canada had already begun doing so: It banned smoking on domestic flights (including charter flights) in December 1989, banned smoking in passenger terminals at its three principal airports,

and had wanted to ban smoking on all international flights (excluding charters) by July 1, 1993.

But last year, under pressure from Calgary-based Canadian Airlines International, Ottawa began sliding back on its promise. The then-Tory government extended the international-flight ban deadline to July 1 this year. Now, the Liberal government is being urged to do so again.

"The last government accepted corporate irresponsibility; now the Liberals are being pushed to do the same thing," said Heather Seftin, public-affairs manager of the Ottawa-based Canadian Council on Smoking and Health.

"In both cases, business interests are being put ahead of health interests, and it's happening in the very country that has been a world leader in banning smoking - what does that tell the world?"

For the airlines, the business interest is clear. If they ask passengers to quit, they fear they will lose market share to other airlines on their new lucrative routes to Asia, where the majority of people still smoke. Following the government in April 1993, for example, Canadian Airlines said it stood to lose \$29 million (a \$39 million in revenue if smoking was outlawed on its flights to Japan).

Of Canada's two big carriers, the Pacific Rim routes have traditionally belonged to Canadian Airlines, especially those to Japan and, more recently, to China.

But now Air Canada, with Ottawa's approval, is penetrating those markets too. It started flying to Seoul, South Korea, five days ago, and will begin flying to Osaka, Japan, in September. It is also pushing hard to obtain landing rights in Hong Kong this year.

Air Canada has ban now

Unlike Canadian Airlines, which allows smoking on flights to Japan, Montreal-based Air Canada does not allow smoking on any of its flights, not even to Seoul - even though more than 75 per cent of passengers on that route come from Korea, and for the most part are avid smokers. But with more Asian routes lining up this year, the airline wants to be able to change its mind without Ottawa's nodding.

"The government decision is coming soon, and we would like to see some flexibility to allow us to offer smoking on those particular flights."

Air Canada's public-relations official Nicole Couture-Siward confirmed yesterday. "We want to minimize the risk of revenue loss to foreign carriers." The seven principal competitors flying between Asia and Canada are Japan Airlines, Korean Air, All Nip-

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pon and U.S.-based carriers United, Northwest, Delta and American.

In Ottawa, the anti-ban lobbying is strong. One month ago, the Air Transport Association of Canada, the industry organization known as ATAC that represents the airlines' corporate interests, asked the government to postpone the July 1 deadline, claiming that Canada's strategy of taking the lead among ICAO states to ban smoking had backfired on the country's airlines.

Some countries reluctant

"If the Canadian carriers don't allow smoking, if the passengers are left no choice, they'll simply book on other airlines," ATAC president John Critchton said in an interview.

"I think it's a case of Canadians trying to set an example to the rest of the world, an example for the other ICAO states to follow but unfortunately not enough have come forward."

That claim just isn't true, ICAO maintains. "In fact, the majority of airlines are enforcing some kind of measures against smoking in aircraft," said Curdt-Christiansen.

China, for example, has banned smoking on its national airline's domestic flights since 1983. Since last July, passengers flying between Hong Kong and mainland China have also had to butt out. And, since January, passengers on all international flights lasting less than six hours have also had to butt out.

Other nations and airlines have tried banning smoking; some have changed their minds as they saw business dwindle. For example, for a few months last year, the Scandinavian airline SAS banned smoking on its shorter flights, but stopped when it started losing market shares to European carriers.

In Canada, the tobacco lobby is watching the debate closely. "It's an issue for smokers and airlines, but our general view on prohibitions is pretty well known," said Robert Parker, president of the Canadian Tobacco Manufacturers Council, in Ottawa. "Outright bans are not things that we approve."

It is true that, in the short term at least, smoking bans on aircraft can be dangerous for safety of both passengers and flight crews, especially on long hauls such as those to Asia. Nicotine withdrawal is one symptom. "After 18 hours without a cigarette, smokers go all squirrely - they get frantic," said Jack Soutendam, medical adviser for the Canadian Air Line Pilots Association.

An unpublished report compiled last winter revealed a variety of hazards in the cabin. Passengers and even pilots resist the ban, including:

- Washrooms have caught on fire after smokers lit up in seats and butted out in wastebins.

- Smoke detectors have been plugged with chewing gum so cigarette smoke won't set them off, then fail to ring when a real fire occurs.

- Passengers suffering nicotine withdrawal have become belligerent and insulted or even assaulted flight attendants. Fights have erupted between pilots when one flights up and the other objects.

Officially, Canada wants to cut down on those public-safety risks by setting an example for the world to follow. "Presently, apprehended risks would be diminished if a global ban (on smoking) were in place and enforced," Gilles Duguay, Canada's top representative at ICAO, wrote in his March 22 response to the survey.

'Can't stop breathing'

"A universally enforced ban would quickly re-educate passengers" who now oppose the ban, he wrote.

So why would Canada now be considering going back on its word? ICAO's chief medical officer, a Dane who took over the job only last month, is stumped.

"The issue on aircraft is safety, and you can't say you fly safely if at the end of the flight you've contracted an illness from second-hand smoke," Curdt-Christiansen said.

"A passenger has a right to breathe when he is flying, so it is a reasonable requirement that people not smoke. You know, you can stop smoking, but I can't stop breathing."

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