

THINKING (ABOUT) BIG

BY

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In a strikingly unimaginative way, the Canadian Transportation Agency recently ruled for disabled air passenger equality. By compelling the Canadian air carriers to a one-person one-seat pricing policy for the disabled and the clinically obese, the Agency squandered a perfect opportunity to spearhead a social benefit much bigger than free passage for a caregiver.

I have no truck with the disabled being given equal opportunity to necessities of modern life, even at the economic disadvantage of corporate Canada. Such is what a civilized people do for those among it already bearing a burden. But with all due respect to the large and expanding part of the population that may feel personally attacked, obesity is a different story.

Canadians are too fat. It's an over-documented epidemic of elevated incidence of diabetes, heart disease, and so on. Corpulence is mainstream and in only very rare instances is obesity disabling and without non-medical remedy. Generally, we are too fat because we overeat and under-exercise. Obese people obviously have inadequate

incentive to get fit. Appeals to *individual* health consciousness and vanity are apparently inadequate incentive for too many people to lose weight.

Frankly, this part of the ruling is actually counter-discriminatory: what about people on the receiving end of an overflowing seat-mate or tall people whose knees greet their chin on every flight? It's even unfair to those heavier than the second deviation of normal body mass index because of the signal it sends: "You're OK, you're normal." Well, in this particular respect, "You're not." But I can't imagine the CTA believes that the airlines are in any position to determine that a person is fat due to a congenital physical disability not from over-eating or inertness.

Part of the problem is that those most able to influence society unintentionally support obesity. Change that and you can change the Canadian fitness level. My idea—that the CTA could have begun implementing—is to place the responsibility for fitness squarely on the shoulders of Corporate Canada. It's where the CTA could have been a leader.

Air travel is just how we travel over distance now. And the fact is that when you remove administration overheads and service, there are two critical drivers of the massive fuel cost: distance and weight. Distances aren't changing soon. But it's not the same story with weight. Why else do you suppose baggage restrictions are becoming more restrictive?

Why the CTA and air carriers are so important to this scheme is clear when you understand that air travel is most heavily used by business travelers. That makes corporate travel budgets a significant portion of the cost of doing business. Organizations work hard to reign in this expense. Now imagine the possibilities and potential for real change to the health of the nation if the cost to fly were based on weight—like other cargo.

Every seat on an airplane would cost a fixed basic amount. Maybe \$300.00 would provide a seat for the first 120 pounds of person. Above that would be a variable per pound-mile charge by routing for weight exceeding the 120-pound threshold. For example, assume a \$5 per pound-mile charge for a "Hospitality" class seat between Ottawa and Vancouver. A 160-pound person would pay \$300 plus $\$5 \times 40$, or \$500; a 300-pound person would pay \$300 plus $\$5 \times 180 = \$1,200$. (The seat would, of course, fit.) Different seats might have a different per pound-mile charge (e.g., a 10% premium for a bulkhead; maybe double the pound-mile surcharge for business/first class.

Under this plan, everybody wins and the system is equitable. All passengers pay a base amount and larger people pay proportionally more for the extra space they occupy and the extra fuel required to get them from A to B. Everybody pays the same premium for preferential seating and service. And with appropriate documentation a disabled person's companion, wheelchair, or other genuine need could still ride free. Nobody could claim unjust discrimination.

At least this part of corporate travel cost management gets simple: stay home or send smaller people. Help chubby employees who must travel to lose weight. Now that's a well-rounded incentive for weight loss: get the human resource in higher performance condition as well as reduce inflated travel expenses—even *before* factoring in group insurance premium reductions and so on. Following the trickle-down flow of incentive, employees would likely experience new *career* (i.e., personal economic) pressure: be smart, capable, *and* fit—or lose assignments to smarter, more experienced, and slimmer peers. The system incents fitness, driven by the unrelenting, pure force of capitalism.

Think about the broader national benefits. A healthy country with reduced incidence of diabetes, stroke, heart attack, and other diseases will make fewer demands on the public health care system. It's a well-known fact (or a pleasingly logical sounding

fallacy) that the health-care system is unnecessarily weighed down by chronic care needs due to complications from obesity. Reducing that massive cost could even ease the tax burden. Since most of these business travelers are baby-boomers just now reaching their prime decaying years, the timing couldn't be better.

Finally, there's a huge psychological benefit to the nation. While the quality of Air Canada's service would probably remain dubious, transparent competitive pricing among all carriers is easier to monitor and feel good about. Maybe the industry could actually be kept from preying on customers and each other. Besides, Air Canada would finally be doing something positive and valuable for others.

But sadly, in typical bureaucratic fashion, the CTA blew the opportunity by focusing on the immediate, obvious, and noisy problem rather than the bigger opportunity. We needed them to think past the armrests. I guess it was easier to put on the headphones, look up at the personal entertainment screen, and recline the seat into somebody else's lap.

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