

THE AIRLINE LOOKS AT CANADA

An Address By

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Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen:

For the past few years Canadians have subjected Air Canada to a close scrutiny. I am going to turn the tables today and tell you something of how Canada looks to your airline.

For numberless reasons, we at Air Canada have a special viewpoint and we perceive Canada somewhat differently than most Canadians. For one thing we do not see it as an East/West country on a North/South continent. Not at all. We see it as a geographic entity which air travel ties together quite nicely.

Canada has been called a political entity which goes against geography. We see it differently. We see Canada, not as an anomaly but as a logical expression of a distinct identity which owes much to the aircraft.

We think there is a Canadian identity and that Air Canada is part of it. We do not seek endlessly to define it or to work out how it can be recognized; we believe Canadians live an identity which empirically is quite readily recognized. And we base that on our experience of planeloads of Canadians and others.

Those who want me to define Canadian identity will have to wait until I have more time - perhaps when I am retired and can afford the hours, weeks and months of contemplation required! I do not think identities need to be so closely defined. They can simply be lived: for living is the best expression of any identity.

For the moment I am content to say that we believe that Canadians are sufficiently different from non-Canadians to be readily recognized. We believe this distinction is the result of complex historical processes which are still at work. Our unique Canadian viewpoint is the result of the way our country grew and developed and that, in turn, hinged to a great extent upon transportation.

We see transportation as vital to Canada's evolution. In those terms, I can say that railways made Canada a political entity which was economically viable. Being imprisoned on rails, they were not sufficiently flexible to meet all the needs of so scattered a country and the truck and automobile soon became important in our growth. Roads were ideally suited to the task of extending Canada's frontier and with the railways they made it possible to open those areas we have settled: the agricultural parts of Canada.

Indeed the railroads are still the key to otherwise locked in resources just as roads are the key to much of our urban life. But roads and rails are almost immovable. It is costly and time consuming to adapt either to a new pattern of settlement and demography.

The airline adds a new dimension. It is flexible. It can adapt to new patterns with incredible speed. And it can bridge the barriers of wilderness, reducing travel time from days and weeks to hours and minutes.

The direction of flight is of no consequence. The airplane travels as easily into the northland as it does to the cities along the border. For today's aircraft, the mountain barriers and the passes through them are of no great significance. If people wish to have access to a place in Canada, there is an aircraft that takes them into any nook or cranny where the economics justify it.

This is of immense significance to Canada. It has immense social consequences apart from the obvious economic implications.

Speedy air travel provides one great benefit for those of us who live in this vigorous climate. It enables thousands of Canadians to enjoy the sun in Winter. "Now is the Winter of our discontent made sudden Summer", said Richard the Third. He wasn't stepping out of a 1011 into the tropic warmth of the Caribbean, but what else could he have said if he had been doing so?

Sun holidays are fun, but on most routes business trips are the largest single component in any tabulation of travel reasons. We know that our business customers use air travel because it is efficient for them. Efficient in the amount of time it costs them, they do not see air travel as a luxury. To them it is a necessity to maintain economic efficiency.

Businessmen do not travel about for the thrill of it. They travel so they can work out their affairs face to face and come to firm and fast decisions. They know their markets better because they know them at first hand. They travel because it is better for them to be there and adjust their perceptions to the realities of the marketplace.

And adjustments to new realities is vital to Canadian unity.

At one time it was the custom for Canadians to suggest that our country's difficulties arose from geographic obstacles which prevented regions from interacting, which conspired against the flow of trade and commerce and which kept our people apart. It seems to me that many of our troubles have persisted after that has ceased to be the case. We must look deeper for the causes of our discontent.

The airplane has provided the magic by which a Canadian living here in Toronto can visit Vancouver the day he decides to do so. The airline has provided the means by which the regions of Canada are separated by hours rather than by days. Indeed it has brought us to the point where all the world is as easy to visit as our ancestors found the neighbouring village.

If we seem less united than once we were, it is not geography which is to blame.

There is no longer a wide gulf between the regions of Canada. There is but a short flight leg between two neighbouring regions and not much more between any two regions. Yet the gap, though narrow, seems in many cases to be very deep.

We must ask ourselves why this should be so. If travel broadens our understanding of others, why are we not closer to unity, to understanding and forbearance? Part of the answer may lie in how we react to the travel experiences modern aircraft provide.

Let me illustrate this point.

I was thinking the other day that it took Marco Polo three and a half years to go from the Middle East to China. Today anyone can go from Paris to Peking in twenty-eight hours. And that includes two stops. Marco Polo was a merchant banker. Do you think he would have paid the air fare - \$2,998.63 First Class on Air France - to save himself three years, five months and thirty days? Isn't time saved, money earned?

And yet there is another kind of price we pay. When we fly we lose touch with the countryside over which we pass. Marco Polo tells us about the countries between the Middle East and China. He tells of people, plants, animals and climate along the way. He is able to portray a graphic picture of what he saw and felt. In flying we miss all that. We embark in Western European Paris and walk off the plane at Peking, usually unprepared for what we find.

A totally different world encloses us with no gradation of change. We suffer shock. And our world no doubt shocks the Chinese. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn tells us, in such a world we are all members of a minority.

And that must give us pause for thought.

Consider this: The English speaking people are a majority on the West part of the Island of Montreal, a minority in the City and Province; a majority in Canada and North America and a minority in the Western Hemisphere and the world itself. A minority in a world no part of which is more than one or two days away from any other part.

Yes, we all have a lot to learn.

Travel alone does not broaden the mind. It can only do so if it is undertaken by a mind wanting to broaden out and grasp the importance of what is seen and felt while travelling. It is so in the world and it is so within Canada.

In a world in which we are all members of a minority, surely we must rethink many of our ideas for when we speak of minorities, we speak of ourselves.

But air travel can help us to understand ourselves - a first step in understanding others.

How does it do so? In many ways, one important contribution is possible for us to explore our heritage and enlarge our feeling for our origins. We are all products of our past. Our parents moulded and shaped us and in turn their parents moulded and shaped them. In our children we can find aspects of their grandparents and if we look into ourselves, we

find our own grandparents and perhaps generations before that as well.

If we would fully understand this powerful force that works within us, we must know and understand something of the world our predecessors know. Thousands and thousands of Canadians in search of understanding come every year to Air Canada and ask us to fly them back to the land of their roots.

In doing so they seek to restore important elements which might otherwise wither away or which they can only fully understand when they have seen the sources. Every year we help people to take that momentous journey. Such travel experiences help them to become more firm in their individual sense of identity. And in being firm in their identity, they reinforce Canada's identity which is a tapestry of many such identities harmoniously blended to form a pattern of many colours, of great depths and complexities.

Thus we glimpse elements of a Canadian identity. It is hard to define because it is not a fixed, definable unity, but a marvelous blend of many unities. A blend of individuals, families and groups: a people's identity. It encompasses group and regional loyalties which in total are Canadian loyalties.

And we at Air Canada are brought face to face with this wonderfully varied and yet cohesive identity as our aircraft carry Canadians, good, loyal Canadians across the seas to explore their origins, to renew their understanding of their heritage and hence of themselves.

We see that encompassing identity in the travellers who use our services to go back to the part of Canada where the rest of their family lives. They go for weddings, christenings, birthdays and funerals: they go to visit the sick or because someone they hold dear needs their help and counsel. Mobility is one of the factors that makes Canada efficient, and air travel is one of the factors that makes mobility bearable.

Surely this linkage between relatives and friends is a powerful stabilizing force. It has to be. And it is a powerful reinforcement for individuals in sustaining their distinction, their separate identities.

Yes, air travel does have a powerful impact upon Canada. And I have just been speaking from Air Canada's perspective. If you think of the vital lifelines to remote communities provided by regional and local service carriers, you will, I am sure agree with me, that Canada has been altered irreversibly by the technology of flight.

And because we are part of that alteration, we at Air Canada see and feel the changes, we see and feel the regional differences and we grieve when they divide our friends from one another.

There are more divisions in Canada than linguistic ones. There are economic and perceptual differences as well. It is all very well for a single reporter to spend a few days in the Western Plain and tell us in Montreal, "What the West feels...." Air Canada lives in both places and we feel what both feel.

We know that across Canada there is a majority who believe that Canadians can live together. We know that majority believes that everyone must make allowances for the differences that we all experience.

We at Air Canada know our public well. We know and recognize Canadian identities.

We know why people fly. We know the ties between people are made stronger and the gulf between regions is made narrower because of us. It is our everlasting regret that we cannot close those gaps completely. But we know we cannot and, like all Canadians, we must learn to live with some differences of opinion and outlook.

We can live with differences of opinion but we cannot survive if ill-will governs our actions and outlook. There is ill-will in Canada on both sides of many of the questions the country must resolve.

Ill-will is noisy. Ill-will is news. Ill-will attracts attention out of all proportion to its numbers. It is a minority which cannot be allowed to decide the future of our country.

We know that Canadian unity flows from different identities woven from a wide inheritance of splendours we all share.

We know that the Canadian future depends upon the determination of an assembly of minorities. Minorities which even in the aggregate are still a minority in the larger hemispheres.

But in one respect we at Air Canada believe there is a majority in Canada. It is the majority of Canadian men and women who believe that Canada says something important about how diversity can be a strength; about a humane and considerate unity which respects the heritage of each and all - about a Canadian identity which is being lived by most of our people.

Yes, we can live with differences of opinion. We have been doing so for many years and Canada has grown and flourished.

The next few years will not be easy for Canadians. We at Air Canada have had our difficulties with disagreements among our staff and now we seem to be faced with some prospective disagreements among our shareholders. But we think that disagreements are natural. We would not be the first company to prosper while shareholders work out their differences.

And Canada can survive and prosper while we Canadians are working out any differences we may have.

This is a time for Canadians to concentrate on areas of agreement and mutual interests while the greatest of all therapists, time, does its work.

Perhaps with the passage of time, the mists will clear away and pathways will emerge which we can follow agreeably and productively for all of us.

Meantime air travel will continue to make it possible for Canadians to know each other better, to know themselves better and to broaden and enlarge their understanding and horizons. Canadian identities will become more firmly fixed and felt. And Canada can become that which it has the potential to be.