A Points System to Take Responsibility for Climatic Impacts of Flying

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As a teen-aged farm boy from Ontario, my first jet flight was an expansive experience. Suspended above earth, my mind and spirit wandered and wondered, unfettered by time and space, as we drifted across landscapes. This vantage point was a big hop from a tractor seat.

However, unknown to me then, the cost of slipping up to the sky in a jet is environmentally toxic. Its climatic impact, per passenger-hour is 6 to 47 times higher than that of cars.

Given associated greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, non-carbon emissions and other climate forcing impacts, passenger air travel accounts for at least 3.5% of global warming, more than the 3% of global emissions for the whole continent of Africa. In Canada, the expense of burning jet fuel is our second biggest transportation cost.

As you might guess, flights are not distributed evenly across the population. In fact, "frequent flyers representing just 1% of the world's population caused half of aviation's carbon emissions in 2018." Furthermore, in 2018, only 11% of the globe's 7.9 billion people travelled by air. It's worth sitting back on our haunches, preferably on the ground, to reflect about who benefits from all the subsidies to airline companies to keep such a small proportion of entitled folks looking down.

!n 2019, there were 163 million air passengers in Canada or roughly 4.2 flights per passenger in Canada, in a pre-Covid peak, recognizing that even then, more than half of Canadians did not fly. To redress the climatic impact of flights we could develop a market of Loyalty to Earth and Air Points (LEAPs), starting at 1,000 LEAPs allocated to each of four flights, i.e. 4,000 LEAPs per Canadian per year.

LEAPs could be sold by Canadians, choosing not to fly, to anyone (Canadian or international citizen) who decides to take-off in Canada. More frequent flyers should pay their portion of the tab, whether personally or through their companies as an employee benefit. Some Canadians might use 2,000 LEAPs and sell 2,000 LEAPs, understanding they have until the end of the year to sell their LEAPs.

To be fair, opportunities for low-income Canadians, who may not have access to electronic transactions, should be available for them to sell their allocated LEAPs at current rates, in post offices.

As the points system matures, it would be calibrated to per passenger climatic impacts. A base of LEAPs would be required for each time a plane takes-off (the highest energy use per flight), with an additional allocation of LEAPs based on the number of kilometres flown, thereafter, in that flight. Passengers in their private jets would be obligated to buy the number of LEAPs concomitant with their per passenger climatic impact before being granted permission to take-off.

With further refinement, Transport Canada could wind down the allocation of LEAPs to each Canadian every year by linking to the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), which Canada agreed to keep in the Paris Agreement.

Airline companies argue that they are ramping up the use of sustainable aviation fuels (SAFs). The holy grail for SAFs is green ammonia, produced from water and air using renewable energy. So far SAFs are more aspirational than actual, but to drive innovation, flights which emit fewer GHGs could require correspondingly fewer LEAPs. Similarly, flights of airlines could require more LEAPs based on their actual record of meeting climate targets. To date, only one of 50 air industry targets have been achieved.

Although a Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation is designed to reduce or offset airline GHGs, it is important to note that international flights were not included in each country's NDCs in the Paris Agreement. A Canadian points system, not adopted by other countries, could become eligible for border carbon adjustments in our trade agreements with other countries.

Beyond individual action, Canadians need a system that will tangibly assign financial costs to the increasing climatic impacts of flying so that those who choose to fly, pay their bill.

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