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TITLE: Aviation and global warming: a change in the air?

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PUBLICATION: Crikey

PUBLICATION DATE: 21/09/07

LINK: <http://www.tai.org.au/?q=node/9&pubid=1054>

Comments this week by Federal Environment Minister Malcolm Turnbull suggest that the Government is beginning to realise the incompatibility between endless growth in the aviation sector and the prevention of dangerous climate change.

At the launch of a Qantas program for passengers to offset their flights, Mr Turnbull claimed that carbon fees for air flights may be inevitable. Asked if fees to offset carbon emissions from flights could become mandatory, the Minister stated, “I think that’s possible”.

His response stands in stark contrast to previous comments from both sides of politics. In June, Deputy Prime Minister Mark Vaile labelled a report by the Australia Institute calling for a mandatory greenhouse charge on all domestic flights “whacky”, saying an increase in the cost of air travel would “wreck the economy”.

In a similar vein, Labor’s shadow transport spokesperson, Martin Ferguson, derided the idea as “brazen in its simplicity” and claimed that such proposals “would kill the Australian aviation industry”.

Derision was not left to the politicians: Virgin Blue’s Chief Executive attempted to ridicule the report saying “I just don’t fathom what they are on about.”

The fact is recent projections of aviation emissions in Australia to 2050 indicate that, if left unchecked, continued growth of the industry will derail efforts to tackle global warming. This is now well understood in Europe.

Between 2005 and 2050, emissions from aviation are expected to rise by more than 250%. This rate of growth is incompatible with the emission reduction targets that are needed to avoid dangerous climate change.

The science suggests that Australia needs to cut its emissions by 80% by 2050, possibly higher. Yet if the aviation industry continues under business-as-usual conditions, it could consume more than Australia's entire emissions allowance in 2050.

Even if Australia adopts a lower target of 60% reductions by 2050, as the Labor Party has proposed, aviation could still gobble up more than half of Australia's emissions allowance by the middle of the century. These projections point to one conclusion: if nothing is done to curb aviation emissions, we won't be able to meet the targets that are necessary to deal with climate change.

It now appears that this message is reaching the Federal Government. Indeed, the remark by Mr Turnbull that it "is difficult to see a zero-emission aircraft" in the future suggests that the Government has also realised that there is no technological quick fix on the horizon.

Aviation commentators have long argued that improvements in air transport technology will obviate the need for other measures, such as a greenhouse charge, to reduce emissions. For example, in June one regular aviation commentator thought it absurd to suggest that air transport technology will "somehow cease to improve or evolve". Yet such comments are not only out of step with the state of aviation technology, they now also appear out of step with Government thinking.

In many other areas, like electricity generation and land-based transport, technology can offer solutions. For example, we can generate electricity from wind and solar and drive hybrid cars. The same cannot currently be said for aviation.

Further, even if a technological breakthrough does occur, it will take decades to implement because of the need to replace the existing aircraft fleets and supporting infrastructure.

Dealing with aviation emissions therefore means cutting back on the amount we fly. To ensure this occurs, the government should immediately introduce a mandatory \$30 greenhouse charge on flights.

This small charge would not dramatically alter demand for air travel. The intention is merely to flag to travellers and the industry that things must change. More substantive reform would be triggered by the inclusion of the aviation industry in the proposed national emissions trading scheme.

In Europe, governments have already begun to come to terms with the threat posed by continuous growth of aviation. The British Government has introduced a small tax on domestic flights in an attempt to curb demand. Similarly, by 2011 aviation will be included in Europe's emissions trading scheme.

Let's hope that the comments this week by the Federal Environment Minister suggest that here, as in Europe, a change is in the air.