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Harper Conservatives' deal with U.S. on air charters not a 'trade breakthrough'

OTTAWA - The Harper Conservatives have misled Canadians into thinking that their deal with Washington on Canadian charter flights carrying sports teams within the U.S. was a big trade victory, Liberal Transport Critic Joe Volpe said.

"The U.S. government has lifted its ban on Canadian charter flights flying sports teams to multiple cities within the U.S., but this exemption is only for NHL teams, only for Air Canada and only for the 2009-10 season," said Mr. Volpe.

"Mr. Harper had better explain why he is trying to fool Canadians. How on earth can this be considered a major trade breakthrough? There are dozens of Canadian sports teams and entertainers who are not covered by this agreement."

Mr. Harper returned from a meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama, boasting of success for getting an agreement that allows NHL players flying Air Canada to travel between U.S. cities without having to each time return to Canada first.

The settlement deals with a recently enforced American law that prohibits non-U.S. planes from traveling between U.S. cities, known as cabotage laws. In the agreement with the U.S. Department of Transport, Air Canada must submit monthly reports to the U.S. transport officials, designate an official to monitor compliance and implement security procedures that are comparable to those required for U.S. airline charter flights.

The agreement, which expires in June 2010, does not include any other Canadian sports league teams competing in the U.S. other than the NHL. Meanwhile, the U.S. has said it will continue with its investigation of Air Canada's alleged breaches of cabotage laws during the 2008/09 season.

"The fine print of this agreement makes it clear that Mr. Harper's claims of victory are nothing more than spin," said Mr. Volpe.

"Any teams or entertainers not in the NHL, or not using Air Canada, could find the U.S. government won't let them fly between U.S. cities on Canadian charter flights. That eliminates a pretty big group of Canadians from this agreement - and not just sports teams. Canada has a large entertainment industry that sees acts touring the U.S. a great deal. This agreement does nothing for them.

"It's time we started calling these what they are: veiled protectionist measures. How can the Prime Minister stand up and say 'problem solved' when he has not stood up for all Canadian interests?"

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