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Cannon primed but won't fire

Transport Minister yet to implement new advertising rules for airline ticket prices

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The new fuel surcharges adopted by Canadian airlines last month have not only riled consumer groups, politicians and passengers, they have sharpened the focus on why a bit of legislation that passed last summer, which would force airlines to advertise the full price of a ticket, has not been enacted.

Michael Pepper, the head of the Travel Industry Council of Ontario, says he has a very simple answer why: "The Minister of Transport."

Mr. Pepper and others claim there has been a distinct lack of interest on the part of Lawrence Cannon, the federal Transport Minister, to implement the new advertising rules, which, among other things, would force carriers to include all fees, charges and taxes in the advertised price of a ticket.

The new fuel surcharges, which are not currently included in the advertised prices, are just the latest affront to consumers, Mr. Pepper claims. "Fuel is a cost of running an airplane. It should be included in the price of a ticket," he said.

When Bill C-11 received royal assent last June, no date was set for when the new rules would come into effect, allowing Mr. Cannon time to coordinate efforts between the federal government, which regulates airline advertisements, and the provinces, which regulate those of travel agents and tour operators.

Mr. Cannon says that "informal meetings" have taken place with the airlines and the provinces, but that he "was unable to attain an industry consensus on how to handle airfare advertising."

The Minister was expected to appear before a parliamentary committee today to detail what actions have been taken on implementing the section pertaining to airline advertisements, which has been stuck in a political purgatory for nearly a year.

But Mr. Cannon opted instead to send a four-page letter to the committee detailing the bill's history and his predecessor's efforts to date. "It would be foolish to propose federal regulations in the absence of a consensus," he said in his letter.

But that excuse doesn't fly with his critics in Ottawa, who have been pressing the Minister for a month for answers, as reported by the Financial Post.

"It is a ridiculous piece of literature," said Joe Volpe, the Liberal transport critic, about the Minister's letter. "He's had our patience for more than a month ... This is clearly an indication that the government has neither the willpower nor the energy to address this issue."

Brian Masse, the NDP transport critic, said he will join Mr. Volpe in calling for the Minister to implement an immediate course of action on the issue.

"We're approaching this as a consumer rights issue," he said. "Obviously, the airline industry is going to have to respond to rising fuel costs, but consumers should be aware of that to make educated decisions on whether they are going to fly with a particular carrier or choose another form of transportation."

The airlines say they don't object to the new law, so long as it would apply equally to both domestic and international carriers, travel agents and tour operators.

"If everyone is doing the exact same thing, we're fine with it," said Richard Bartrem, WestJet spokesman. Air Canada and Air Transat have said the same.

There is, however, a certain level of disorder in the industry. Ontario and Quebec legislated travel agents and tour operators in their provinces to disclose the full price of airfare and packages in advertisements, while those operating in other provinces and the airlines face no such requirements.

The Association of Canadian Travel Agencies argues the scales are weighted in favour of the airlines and is urging the swift implementation of the new regulations. "Our members in regulated provinces already have to advertise the real price. If airlines and other provinces don't, it's not a level playing field," said Christiane Theberge, chief executive of ACTA.

Mr. Cannon said in his letter he will continue to meet with the provinces and the industry stakeholders "to find practical measures to make airfares more transparent."

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