Funding the Future

Big business, neoliberalism and the media: an alignment...

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The FT published another article this morning that highlights a hopelessly inappropriate perspective on an issue.

They report:

The head of British Airways' parent company has warned that the speed of planned green charges on airlines would "kill European aviation" and do little to help the environment.

Luis Gallego, chief executive of International Airlines Group, said a host of planned environmental charges that are more onerous for UK carriers would push up fares and cause serious damage to the industry.

They added:P

Carriers have warned that new quotas for green fuels, import charges and moves to add aviation into the Europe-wide emissions trading scheme will cost the industry billions of pounds.

And with the usual bleating and pleading being embedded in the article when it was noted:

Gallego told the FT. "All the European airlines will have a major cost disadvantage to global competitors and this is going to have consequences."

He (or, I suspect, his press release) then, apparently, said:

The industry required a "level playing field, otherwise we're going to kill European aviation, but we're not going to save the planet," he warned.

All of this is, then, another bleating by the boss of a business who realises that he is on an extremely comfortable gravy train that is providing him, his board colleagues and others with an exceptionally comfortable income but which is, at the same time,

destroying our planet and the futures of his children, and those of everyone else.

The fact is that there is not a single airline in the world that can become net zero carbon, and that represents a major failing for an industry whose future has to be seriously in doubt as a consequence, and rightly so. Any industry that is now likely to seriously harm the well-being of maybe billions of people has to question whether it can continue operating. The airline industry is one where we must ask these questions most of all.

Recent research I have seen suggests that around 92% of all air travel is for leisure. Of this total, the vast majority is undertaken by those in the top 20% of the income strata. 50% almost never, if ever, fly because they cannot afford to. The 30% in between might fly once a year. The richer you are, the more likely you are to be a frequent flyer.

The elderly are particular culprits in this matter. Time and again, I hear people around my age talking about where they are going next to fritter away their pensions and to destroy the well-being of their children, although the last point is never noted. The simple fact is that this is a pattern of behaviour that will have to end.

Gallego does not, however, want to face this reality, coming up with the standard right-wing response, which is that it is so unfair that he has to start this process because that denies him his current competitive advantages, and it is better that the world and its ecosystems collapse than he has to compete on an unlevel playing field for a while.

And let me be clear, I doubt that he is competing on an unlevel playing field, except with regard to his ability to generate profits and so attract investment. That is because, if European airlines are required to use particular fuels, these should then become the only fuels available for aircraft at European airports, meaning that non-European competitors will have to use the same products, at the same prices, and so many of the claims made in this article could, in that case, fall apart if the right regulations were put in place.

So what is this article really about? There are three things to note.

The first is the wholly inappropriate use of reference to competition as a way of defending abusive privilege. As a matter of fact, large carriers, like British Airways, are always very keen to prevent competition that might threaten their status and will do all they can to prevent newcomers from having access to market opportunities. Note, for example, the exclusion of many new airlines from the opportunity to fly from London Heathrow, which the larger airlines deliberately engineer by maintaining their control over all the landing slots there.

Secondly, note the supposed appeal to national interest, albeit spread widely across Europe in this case. This victim-playing comes straight from the far-right political

playbook and is no more appropriate when used by a company than it is when seen there.

Thirdly, note the denial of reality. Climate change is happening. Air travel does contribute to it. That travel is undertaken by a tiny proportion of the world’s population, with a massively disproportionate impact upon the rest, but the argument is that this privilege must be maintained at any cost.

Never doubt that neoliberalism is a political cause promoted as heavily by big business as it is by political parties, with both seeking an alliance with the media to create narratives that are harmful to us all. This article is a perfect example.