

April 29, 2016

To The Editor,

It is ironic that as Scott McCartney was portraying the privatized Canadian air traffic control system as the model to emulate in the United States (April 27, 2016 – [“The Air-Traffic System U.S. Airlines Wish They Had”](#)), the chairman of the FAA’s advisory committee on modernization, Richard Anderson of Delta, was painting a different and far brighter picture of NextGen, our nation’s air traffic modernization program. McCartney correctly notes that NavCanada (Canada’s air traffic control provider) has unveiled a few features that have yet to be deployed here. However, he misses the larger point. The ability to repeatedly manage incredibly complex airspace safely, in multiple locations no less, without being required to give preference to certain users happens in only one place in the world – the United States.

First some facts. McCartney is technically correct that NavCanada is the next largest system after the FAA’s - but it is second by quite a distance. U.S. controllers manage four times the airspace and track over seven times as many flight hours as their Canadian counterparts. And there is no airspace in the world more complex than that found in the northeast corridor of the United States. That our system is managed with ever increasing and unprecedented levels of safety confirms there is hardly a crisis that requires imposition of a foreign model. In a major address at the Aero Club of Washington, Mr. Anderson reminds us that most delays are not related to the air traffic control system but are “self-inflicted” by airlines themselves. In other words, travelers are hostage to the schedule and operating rhythms of airlines. Some airlines are clearly more efficient than others and scapegoating the air traffic system is notably convenient for some.

Anderson also correctly observes that in Washington D.C. it is popular sport to find fault. Let’s face it, no government agency ever got more money by telling Congress all is well. But the fact is the U.S. air traffic control system is the largest, most complex yet safest and most innovative system in the world. More can be done, so the FAA’s modernization advisory committee pushes the agency toward real solutions, bringing new technology and procedures on line faster to provide the framework for airline operations to improve, regardless of weather conditions. As Anderson observed, one of the constraints is the airlines themselves, and their reluctance to more fully equip with existing and emerging technologies is a large reason for much of the “drag” touted by many of the airlines themselves.

And beyond rhetoric typically present in Washington policy debates, let’s be careful what we wish for. Rural America and smaller communities increasingly rely on private aviation to

compensate for the retreat of airlines from their communities. While corporatizing air traffic control may sound ideologically attractive to some, it's also a *disincentive* for airlines to pursue modernization and operating efficiency and instead rely on cost shifting and exclusion of other aviation users from what they see as their airports and airways.

Sincerely,

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Tom Hendricks is the President & CEO of the National Air Transportation Association, representing more than 2,300 aviation businesses in the US. Prior to joining NATA, he served for nearly three decades as an active and reserve US military pilot and was a captain at a major US international airline for 23 years. He also previously led regulatory and technical efforts at Airlines for America (A4A).