

Open letter on luxury flying emissions

October 2nd 2023

For the attention of:

European Commissioner for Transport, Adina Vălean
National Transport Ministers of the EU, UK, Switzerland, ...
[To be added to based on input from signees]

Just 1% of the global population is responsible for half of all aviation emissions¹.

With this open letter, we demand that you take action to address this social and environmental scandal: ban private jets, ban frequent flyer programmes, and tax frequent flyers.

Climate breakdown is here. From floods in Italy, South Korea and Pakistan to wildfires in Greece, the United States and Australia, the symptoms of a seriously ill planet are proving deadly for life on earth and will continue to accelerate without urgent political action. As a continent with a disproportionate role in historic emissions causing the climate crisis, it is our responsibility to take action.

Flights are taken by relatively few people but produce huge levels of emissions. In 2018 alone, the best estimate for aviation's overall contribution to global heating was 5.9%². Looking at the aviation sector's lifetime so far, it has contributed more to global heating than the entire continent of Africa^{3,4}.

This devastation is being wrought by a small class of rich hypermobile elites, who are incentivised to take luxury flights by frequent flyer programmes, and some of whom splurge their wealth on needless, super-polluting private jets. Fortunately, there are feasible policy solutions to this crisis of greed.

We demand:

1) Ban Private Jets

While most of us have been struggling through a cost of living crisis, private jet sales will likely reach a record high this year⁵. Private jets are an extreme example of the injustice of the aviation sector, in which the financial and personal benefits are privatised to a small number of individuals, while the social, financial and environmental costs are paid by the rest of us.

¹ Goessling, S & Humpe, A (2020): bit.ly/Goessling-Global-Aviation

² Stay Grounded (2020): bit.ly/MoreThanCo2

³ Lee, D S et al. (2021): bit.ly/Aviation-climate-forcing

⁴ Our world in data (2019): bit.ly/3OaShPd

⁵ Possible (2023): bit.ly/Possible-HighFlyers2023

The public outcry to this scandal has been intensifying, with a rising number of protests, petitions, studies and press articles showing that a ban of private jets and excessive flying is growing in popularity. There has also been a proposal to ban private jets in the French Parliament, and a successful ban on private jets at Schiphol Amsterdam airport.

Private jets are up to 30 times more polluting per passenger than scheduled flights and 50 times more than an average train journey⁶. Despite this devastating impact, the fact that private jets are undertaxed and underregulated has caused a boom in the industry, with the global fleet of private jets more than doubling in the last two decades⁷.

Policy-wise, there are a number of possible avenues for banning private jets. For example, national governments could explore the possibility of banning private jets through Air Services Regulations. In the absence of this, local, regional or national governments in the EU could invoke regulation 598/2014 on noise-related operating restrictions at large airports.

2) Ban Frequent Flyer Programmes

Despite attempts by aviation marketers to muddy the waters, the numbers are clear: even with low-cost aviation on the rise, large disparities and inequalities in aeromobility exist between and within nations, along the lines of social class, ethnicity and gender. Globally, 80% of the global population has never set foot on an aeroplane⁸. Despite the fall in relative prices, survey data indicate that the vast majority of low-cost flights are taken by more privileged social classes⁹.

Frequent Flyer Programmes (FFPs) are a central driver behind this injustice, which has resulted in the aviation sector's disastrous contribution to global heating. FFPs incentivise and reward luxury emissions, fuelling aviation's devastating growth to the extent that they were once branded by a Senior Vice President VP of marketing at American Airlines as the "most successful marketing programme in the business".

Not only do FFPs marketing schemes encourage travellers to fly simply for the sake of accumulating air miles, they also increase the cost of living for everyone else due to the transaction fees ensued by airlines selling miles to banks*. Especially during a cost of living crisis, this is unacceptable.

In terms of policy, the process of banning FFPs should involve two stages, with legislation that immediately bans further issuance of miles and elite status points, and more gradually phases out the use of existing miles over several years. A precedent exists for this common sense policy, with domestic FFPs having previously been banned in both Denmark and Norway¹⁰¹¹.

3) Tax Frequent Flyers

⁶ Tom Plaskett, senior VP-marketing, American Airlines, quoted in: Hoffman, K (1984), "An American Evolution". Advertising Age, 10 May 1984, p.M-17. ("All we've done is replace the toasters [of trading stamp programmes] with the most sought after reward today: Travel. And it's become the biggest and most successful marketing programme in the business.")

⁷ Possible (2023): bit.ly/Possible-HighFlyers2023

⁸ CNBC (2017): cnb.cx/3Pm6Xvl

⁹ UK Civil Aviation Authority (2016): <https://bit.ly/CAA-PassengerSurveyReport>

¹⁰ European Competition Authority (2005): bit.ly/ECA-FFP

¹¹ Storm, S (1999): bit.ly/Storm-FFPScandinavia

While Frequent Flyer Programmes incentivise luxury emissions that our planet cannot afford, a Frequent Flyer Levy (FFL) offers an effective policy to reverse this effect.

Broadly, this policy can be implemented in two different ways. The simple option is to enforce a steadily increasing tax on each flight a person takes, while a more proportionate measure is to tax the air miles so that the more miles a person flies the higher the levy is on that particular flight. Rates should be higher for first class tickets not only as a matter of social justice but because first class seats produce up to seven times the emissions of an economy ticket¹².

Progressively taxing environmentally damaging consumption is an increasingly common practice, with research by the European Environment Agency clearly demonstrating that policies such as taxation of emission-intensive cars have resulted in “a steady fall of average CO2 emissions of new passenger cars.”¹³ Applying this principle to air traffic makes political common sense, with a survey on FFL public attitudes in the UK finding them to be perceived as fairer than and preferable to any of the other options for reducing air traffic¹⁴.

One important benefit of the levy is that it raises money from a sector that is criminally undertaxed. This can be used, for example, to make climate-friendly mobility accessible for all, to generate funds for those regions which will suffer economically from a decreasing tourism sector, or to fund the loss and damage fund agreed on at the COP27 UN Climate Change Conference in 2022.

Policymakers have a choice to make. Continue business as usual by incentivising the super rich to destroy our climate or take measures towards a safe, livable planet and a more equal society. We urge you to see common sense.

*Airlines sell miles to banks that issue credit cards. The banks then charge retailers both a transaction fee for the customer’s use of the card and a fee to cover the cost of the miles that are awarded. This system is enforced through a “merchant restraint” clause in a retailer’s contract with a credit card company¹⁵, requiring the retailer to accept any credit card offered for a purchase and prohibiting passing the transaction costs directly on to the customer. Because merchants have to pay the fees, they raise prices on their goods and services to cover the added cost. Similarly, FFP bloat business travel costs because companies’ employees are incentivized to fly unnecessarily or on more expensive convoluted routes in order to gain extra personal “miles” on the company “dime”^{16,17}. The bloated business travel costs get passed on through the supply chain and ripple through the economy.

¹² Carmichael, D (2019): bit.ly/Carmichael-NetZero

¹³ European Environment Agency (2019): bit.ly/EEA-TaxBreaks

¹⁴ 10:10 Climate Action (2019): bit.ly/1010-PublicAttitudes

¹⁵ Levitin, AJ (2008): <https://bit.ly/Levitin-CreditCardMerchantRestrains>

¹⁶ Kearney, TJ (1989): <https://bit.ly/Kearney-FFPsFailure>

¹⁷ Arnesen, DW et al. (2007): <https://bit.ly/Arnesen-EthicsFFPs>