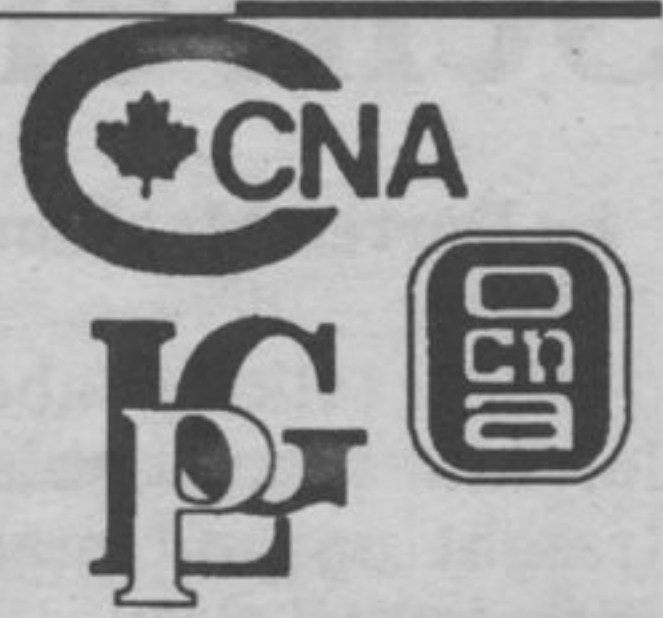


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Let's finally decide and vote on our last chance at unity

A national referendum. Risky? Yes. Divisive? Probably. Necessary? Definitely.

Against tremendous odds and a host of nay sayers (such as me), the national unity show is finally drawing to a close. Sure, just like Three's Company and M*A*S*H, it overran it's initial steam and kept going on little more than fumes for the past couple of years. But like a marathon runner teetering on the edge of total exhaustion with the finish line in sight, poor old Canada has one last chance.

It was interesting to listen to the criticism of the deal around the country after it was announced. Some Quebecers said it didn't go far enough; many westerners said Quebec received too much and that the new senate wasn't powerful enough; women's groups said they had been left out of the process (what—can't they vote?); and, somewhere in the night, the silent majority heaved a sigh of relief and seemed prepared to accept a deal they didn't fully understand but at least held out the possibility of ending this foolishness.

More than anything, the reaction illustrated what an accomplishment the deal really was: the premiers have squared the circle. From what has come out so far, the senate will give smaller provinces a veto in areas of natural resources, which goes a long way toward restraining another federal government from implementing a bonehead policy like the National Energy Program; Quebec is recognized as a distinct society (big deal) and are guaranteed 25 per cent of the seats—right now they have 27 per cent of the population, and there's no reason to think they'll go under that number anytime soon; the economic union is a bit disappointing, but it's a start; self-government won't mean that natives will claim all of Canada, but it should spell the end of the odious Indian Act.

In all, the pact is not the deal-at-any-cost that I was expecting. In fact, all the premiers, including the devilish Clyde Wells, compromised their hard stands for the good of the country. Even Brian Mulroney held firm against Quebec's demands for more powers. Mulroney did something principled? What's next—Audrey MacLaughlin doing something—anything—relevant? Jean Chretien having a clear position on an issue?

So, with this surprising backdrop, the stage is set for Canadians to have the last word. It's time the rest of us had the same opportunity to show that we're not the small-minded people we pretend to be. Who likes the whole deal? Nobody, but there's more good than bad in it. Politicians have to trust the people who voted for them and call a referendum.



Simple air travel is history

I don't get nervous going through the metal detector at the airport departure lounge. It doesn't bother me when the Happyface flight attendant shoehorns me into the dwarf's nook called 18A that is laughably supposed to accommodate my body. I don't sweat it when the recorded announcement tells me how the oxygen mask will fall out of the ceiling "in the event of an emergency". Or where I can find my "flotation device" in case we ditch and I feel like dog paddling across Lake Superior.

I'm a frequent flyer. I can handle all that. I'm such a veteran I've even been known to actually eat the airline meal. Including desert. None of that stuff bothers me. What causes my hands to tremble and tiny whimpers to trickle out of my throat is the part that comes after the passengers have been strapped down, lectured, wined and dined. It's the part that begins when the cabin lights dim and the screen flips down.

The in-flight movie. Now THAT'S terrifying. I've never seen a good movie on an airplane. That's mostly because they seldom offer good movies, of course. The celluloid candy floss that airlines choose is usually so bland and inoffensive it would put Walt Disney's grandmother to sleep. And even when they show a half-decent flick it's been so ruthlessly edited it seldom makes sense.

But what the heck. It's kind of miraculous that we can see any kind of movie at all, streaking along at a couple of hundred miles an hour, 36,000 feet in the air.

What's even more amazing is that airlines have been trying to show movies to their passengers off and on for the past six decades. Away back in 1926, a German airline regaled its airborne clientele on a flight to Berlin by showing an early sci-fi thriller called *The Lost World*. No problem with editing out the bad words—there were no words. It was a silent film. However, *The New York Times* reported that, "To add to the illusion, the plane flew through heavy, low-hanging clouds, making the cabin as dark as a movie house."

We've come a long way in the 66 years since that flight. Nowadays the airlines spend more

than \$400 million a year to keep passengers amused.

And they don't spend all that money on movies. Airlines have tried a number of entertainment packages over the years—most of them duds. A few years ago, people who travelled on Continental Airlines could hear Ella Fitzgerald performing, live, in the aisles. The same airline offered a special treat for its Detroit-to-Cleveland passengers—business lectures on the morning flights; stand-up comics on the afternoon return jaunts.



Arthur Black

The lectures were a crashing (sorry) failure—and even the stand-up comics didn't fair all that well. The turbulence on one comedian's flight was so bad that the pilot left the seat belt sign on for the whole flight. "I had to do my stand-up sitting down" he recalled ruefully.

Right now, most airlines only offer one movie for the whole plane, but that's slated to change soon. British

Airways is leading the way—they already offer individual TV screens for their passengers and a choice of six movie channels. Fly first class and you get to choose from more than 50 movies on video.

And that's only the beginning. Lee Seaman, a leading in-flight entertainment executive, says that soon "airline passengers will have more technology at their fingertips than anyone else. They'll be able to send faxes, receive phone calls, make hotel reservations, from the seat, rent a car, et cetera, et cetera."

Already, technology is creeping like a fungus over the tiny space that passengers get on and airplane. There are controls for the reading light, headset and flight attendant in the arm rest. Most long distance flights now offer cellular telephones embedded in the back of each seat. Pretty soon ordinary passengers are going to look like moon-bound NASA astronauts, surrounded by screens and dials and grids and knobs.

I just hope they leave room for the airsickness bag.

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