THE CARIBAVIA AIRLINE ALLIANCE INITIATIVE

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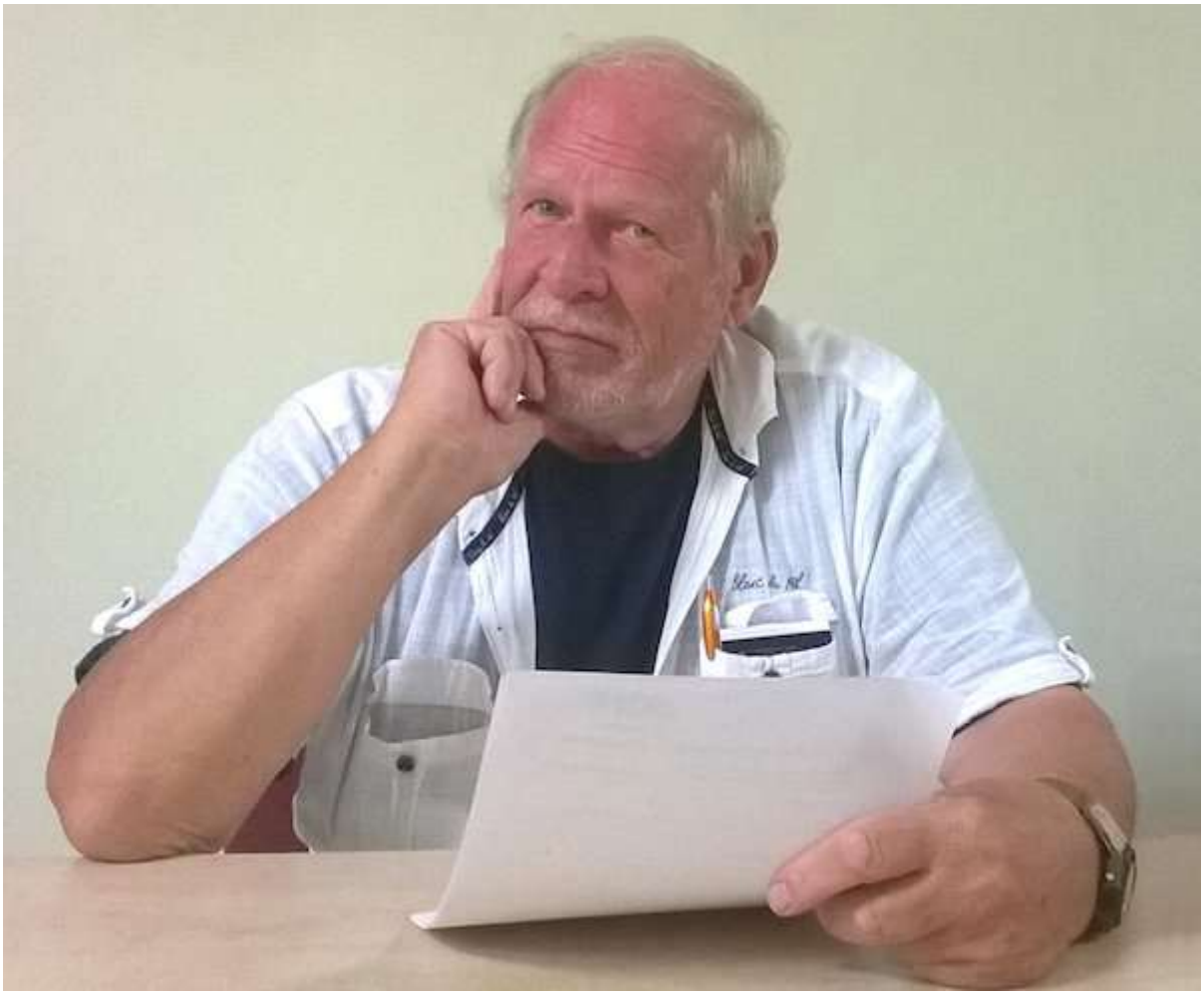
by Cdr. Bud Slabbaert

CARICOM is no closer to solving regional air transportation issues. Another summit of government leaders done; another failure. It does not make a lick of sense to bring illiterates together in a summit to discuss the writings of Shakespeare. And one cannot expect to make a marathon runner out of a patient who is limping around on crutches.

The right way to find solutions and make true progress in the region is by involving airline/aviation professionals in a summit. The formula for success may be to bring three true government or political leaders together in one meeting, who are not only willing, but also are able to provide support and help to drive an initiative. Then bring into the discussion room, the existing regional air carriers who are already successful in their own way, regardless of size, yet are limited in growth and expanding their services, but need support to do so. Investors needed? Serious investors are becoming interested if a risk-adverse financial institution is part of a development initiative, before

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the investors themselves become part of it.



Creating a new airline was not mentioned here and it was not the purpose either. Mind that the words funding, financing or subsidies were not mentioned either. So, what is it all about then? Action and not just words.

Creating an air transportation alliance is what the initiative is aiming for. It may have the characteristics of a PPP-Airline (Private Public Partnership) but isn't an airline per se. It should result in jointly getting geopolitical hurdles out of the way. It should result in giving the existing airlines, regardless of their current size or capacities, the oxygen they need to breath and flourish. If you want plants to grow and blossom, don't fertilize them with currencies. Give them water and sunlight and take them out of the pot they are in, so that their roots have more space in the earth environment to find nourishment.

Here you have the formula for solving the regional Caribbean air transportation issues. Call it the CARIBAVIA initiative, not to do me a favor, it is just that the name makes sense. Call it the CARIBAVIA Alliance, again because the word makes sense. Of course, I'm personally very biased as to where and when this discussion for the initiative will take place, the CARIBAVIA conference in June.

The essence of the above is that, admit it, politicians do not know how to run an airline and what the aviation environment is in which such operation runs. Airline/Aviation professionals do. But they are not really keen on what politics are all about. A financial institution may have some analysts that understand some of both, but more from the economic point of view.

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Doesn’t it make sense to put the three together in a room, close the door and throw the key away? When the “jury” deliberated and came to a unanimous conclusion, then let them exit their confinement, and make a public announcement of the outcome. That conclusion be better a concrete decision on what path to follow and the credible intention to make it work. Outlined in steps and who is going to do what.

It should be mentioned what some of the benefits of an airline alliance are. Less competing with each other but giving each other more chance to grow. Coordination of route planning. Coordination of fares, ticketing, baggage checking. Mind, that it is not about airfares going up but rather getting them down through increased effectiveness. Furthermore. Shared expertise. Shared crew training within the region. Shared maintenance services. Sharing airport facilities or services. Joint negotiation strength for acquiring ‘other’ aviation services (e.g aviation fuel or needed spared parts). One frequent-flyer program. Joint promotions. Last but absolutely not least, helping each other out when needed.

Everyone knows that compromises have to be made when getting into a partner relationship. Not to mention the private ones, we know about. But the most important thing is to get along with one’s partner and stick together as one. All of the above sounds so simple, doesn’t it? Then why not keep it simple and do it?

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