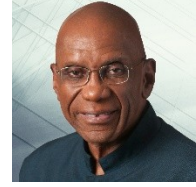# **Economic Letter March 2021**

Are Planes as Covid-safe as the Airlines Say?

The headline is borrowed from an article by Michael Skapinker in the *Financial Times* of February 15. Skapinker reported on a Harvard University study, published last October, which showed that modern airplanes' high efficiency air filters remove virtually 100 percent of viruses and bacteria from the air they recirculate.

The result is cleaner air than in your supermarket. Contaminants from a sneeze on a plane are flushed away in two to five minutes; in a retail space they might linger for up to six hours, according to the study. Skapinker notes that the study was funded by airlines, aircraft manufacturers and airport operators. However, the authors of the report deny that the results were affected by the funding.

A search for reports of on-board transmission of Covid-19 unearthed only a few examples of "proven in-flight transmission". Evidence so far suggests that you are very unlikely to catch Covid on a plane if everyone is wearing a mask and social distancing is being observed.

However, we cannot be so confident about "proximity to infected people at the airport, in immigration queues or getting on and off the plane". Skapinker did an informal survey of his colleagues, and found that in Europe and the US, the processes for boarding and leaving aircraft, and passport control arrangements, exposed passengers to serious risk of infection. He concludes "Sitting on a plane probably presents few dangers of infection. It's what happens before and after that are the real problems."

The lesson for our Government, tourist and airport authorities, hoteliers, and everyone in the travel industry is the need for universally applied protocols and procedures for all aspects of travel. We know from the bitter experiences of the past 12 months that the Covid-19 virus will take advantage of every loophole in the arrangements for suppression and control. Coordinated efforts to close the gaps in the chain are an urgent necessity.