ANY discussion on air fares inevitably centres upon two issues: the need to bring fares down, and the possibility of differential fares. The former, for transport propulsion, jet and propeller, should be differently priced.

On the first of these issues there is universal agreement—though there are varying opinions as to the timing and extent of fare-reductions. On the second issue, that of the fare-differential, there is no agreement.

There are two distinct arguments for the fare-differential. Some airlines want one because they fear that their propeller flights, piston or turboprop, will otherwise lose traffic to the more attractive jets. This is the short-term, "sour-grapes" argument for the differential, and it is a vulnerable one, as will be discussed in a moment. Then there is the long-term argument, which is simply this: a fare differential is the means by which the air transport industry can relax its obligatory obsession with "quality-competition." Before enlarging upon this it is appropriate to examine the separate short-term argument.

It is really this which has aroused the controversy. Why, the jet airlines demand, should we be obliged to charge higher prices for jets—which we have invested so much—just to protect the slow turboprop—a type which no manufacturer has yet dared to produce, and should command higher fares. This has been attacked as an argument to price the jets out of the market, and countered on the grounds that it would be folly to charge the public less than they would willingly pay for them, if given a choice.

Some airlines shrilly demand a jet-surcharge. Others discreetly seek a propeller-discount; and in support of their case they argue as follows: "We do not say that our turboprop or piston aircraft are any poorer in operation than jets—if we strongly believe that they will be on the shorter sectors. But we are prepared to have a go at operating them at lower fares, on the economic principle that it is better to operate useful airliners on a small-scale basis than it is to have them standing idle, or selling the equipment over to others, or sell them at a loss.

This is the gerr of a reasonable argument, and it brings us to the point at which the long-term implications of a differential can be considered.

There is now sufficient evidence to support the view that the airlines are heading for a severe financial crisis. The I.C.A.O. air transport committee's study and the report on the U.S. airlines prepared by the U.S. Civil Aeronautics Board, both confirm that the technical advances such as area rule, turbofan conversion-kits, super-compression of the engine, and has created conditions in which aeronautical technology becomes preoccupied more with improved performance than with improved cost. And, of course, it can be priced, lack of noise, low internal noise, lack of vibration, smoother flight, and novelty: this has been discussed ad nauseam. But the cause of the crisis needs to be restated, in order to show that the fare-differential is, in the long term, the means by which similar future crises can be avoided.

The I.C.A.O. report states that about 15 per cent. of the passengers wanting to fly Jet aircraft, unaccompanied by performance. You do not have to fly at 600 m.p.h., or even 300 m.p.h., to attract custom from rail, road and sea.

J. M. R.