
A National Transportation Policy for Canada

In November 1991 the 19th Canadian Regional Seminar was held in Whitehorse. One of the topics on the agenda was transportation policy. The subject was introduced by Joe Comuzzi. He argued in favour of a National Transportation Policy for Canada. Other speakers included: Jerry Storie, Manitoba, MLA; Tom Thurber, MLA; Derek Blackburn, MP; Ross Young, PEI, MLA; Glenn Tobin, Newfoundland, MHA; and Piers McDonald, Yukon, MLA. The following is an edited version of the discussion.

Joe Comuzzi, MP: We hear a lot of talk about our Constitution and the divisiveness that is causing Canadians to look at other forms of government. Reflect back to the turn of the century and I think you will agree that what brought the east and west together was the railway. Our roads in Canada continue to bear increasingly more automobile and truck traffic. Over 80% of all passenger traffic in Canada still uses our roadway system. Our coastlines are immense. Our inland waterway, the St. Lawrence Seaway, is the finest inland water transportation route in the world. Yet, with all of those advantages, it seems the system is not working very well.

I happen to be one who thinks that transportation is the glue that keeps confederation together.

The viability of passenger rail service has been in question for some time and the future of passenger rail service in Canada is in doubt. Deregulation, especially within the trucking industry has brought chaos to this very vital industry. The airline industry is undergoing severe recession. Both airlines in Canada have had massive personnel cuts and if you have read any of the recent history, not only of the airlines in Canada but those in the United States, you know they are all suffering severe financial losses. Yet we discuss the policies of open skies.

My position and that of some of my colleagues is that any economical hardship faced by the two major airlines reflect particularly on the smaller communities that their feeder airlines serve throughout Canada. I think "open skies" is a real threat to rural areas and smaller communities in Canada. In my view we really need to take a look at transport as a whole and link our systems up in a rational way.

Let me talk about the development of a trans-Canada highway. The present system is in need of a great expansion and maintenance. In the United States their interstate highway program is funded 90% by the federal government. We do not have that funding available to us in Canada. We have to realize that a national transportation system in Canada recognizes the need to have a super highway from coast to coast. I like to refer to it as Interstate No. 1 linking this country. More than 80% of passenger travel in Canada is by automobile and it should be enhanced.

We have the opportunity, if we have a new highway system, to design new bus configurations. Those buses cannot only move a lot of people, which is an environmentally sound way to move people, but can also enhance those areas of transporting people and goods in areas where our rail system is not feasible to operate.

More important, a national highway system will allow Canadians with their families to travel to see other parts of Canada in an economical manner. Look at the price of tickets on the airlines. I do not think there are many families in Canada that can afford the airfare to visit

beautiful areas of their own country which happen to be thousands of miles away.

Our port system is another example of the need for a national transportation program. Let me just cite the storage facilities and the grain handling facilities we have in Prince Rupert and Vancouver where we have the ability to store and to move in excess of 23 million tons of grain a year. We have, in Churchill, the ability to store and move about 5 million tons of grain and other seeds a year. In the Port of Thunder Bay, we have the ability to store, clean, and move in excess of 20 million tons of grain a year. So we have a capacity to export, in this country, almost 48 and possibly 50 million tons of grain a year and yet we, as a government, are thinking of enlarging some of the facilities within this country at the expense of others. I think we need a policy that says, maximize those infrastructure areas we have before we give consideration to expansion.

When we consider transportation in Canada we can no longer look at the jurisdictional issues in isolation. I do not see the federal government developing a transportation policy to the exclusion of the 10 provinces and the territories. In fact, when you start talking about transportation and the moving of goods and people, how could you not include the large urban areas of our country like Montreal, Toronto, Edmonton, Calgary, and Vancouver. We may be good at moving people from Airport A to Airport B, but we have a heck of a time getting them from B to downtown. Sometimes it is easier to get from A to B than it is to get from B to the place you are going to stay that night. So we need a committee that brings together representatives from the large urban centres, from every province and territory and the federal government to develop a policy that will enhance and bring us into the 21st century.

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Jerry Storie (Manitoba): Let me begin by commenting on the importance of the grain handling facilities in this country and my colleagues from Saskatchewan and Alberta I hope will appreciate that for those of us in Manitoba the Port of Churchill is one of the facilities that seems to be on the endangered species list.

The fact is that the capacity mentioned, about 5 million tons, is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the potential of our Port at Churchill. It is certainly disheartening to see that port being underutilized when the last two national studies of the value of the Port of Churchill indicate that Churchill should be used as the port of exit and in fact many farmers in Manitoba and Saskatchewan could save as much as \$20 a ton by shipping through the Port of Churchill. But I would not

want you to think that Churchill should only be used for the export of grain. The fact is that the CN line that goes to Churchill also supports a lot of communities along the way and is a means of transporting ourselves between communities as well as transporting wheat for export. We certainly feel that the federal government as part of a commitment to a national transportation system should be committing itself to not only maintaining Churchill but expanding its capacity as a national port.

Having said that, we do need some sort of glue to keep the country together and I think that our "Interstate Number One", the Trans-Canada Highway is really a national disgrace. The fact is that it is not even twinned across the country and of course constitutionally provinces are given responsibility for managing the internal transportation system and perhaps that is a flaw in the Constitution. While we are talking about the economic unity portions of the Constitution maybe we should be talking about the requirement to have a national transportation program and certainly it should include a highway system. It is unrealistic, to expect some of the smaller provinces, the less financially secure provinces to commit to the kind of interprovincial transportation network that our country needs.

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Tom Thurber (Alberta): I agree with the comments that we vitally need a Canada-wide transportation policy because it is such a hodge-podge right now. In Alberta, we have probably the largest amount of truck traffic of any province in Canada and yet we find problems when we start to move outside of our borders. I am particularly familiar with the hauling of cattle. If you load up a truckload of cattle to head to Ontario you have to dump a few of them off to get across Saskatchewan and then when you got to Ontario you have to put them on an Ontario truck. This type of thing impedes any kind of unity and progress within that industry. It has been a real hardship that has separated people. People get really upset when they cannot get their trucking done. They cannot come into British Columbia or B.C. trucks cannot come into Alberta and things like this.

The other problem that we have in Alberta and of course it affects Saskatchewan as well and B.C. to a certain extent is the method of payment of the Crow rate benefit and this drastically discriminates against value-added enterprises in the agriculture sector. We have been trying to deal with it as politicians in Alberta for quite some time with a variety of different schemes where we have paid the Crow benefit in a direct cash pay-out. I think we are paying about \$10 a ton right now and we do this in a spirit to try and keep some of the

industry in Alberta as opposed to shipping our cattle and shipping our grain and everything to the east. It becomes very discriminatory and the sooner that we as a country with the co-operation of the federal government can deal with these types of things, a lot of the other stuff will fall in place.

When you are determining your transportation policy I suppose that you are going to have to go back a long ways into some of the other acts. I recall one time, probably 12 or 14 years ago, we had a little shipment of beef ready to go to Japan and the deal with the Japanese was that it had to go out on tender and then be shipped from someplace in Canada. So we assumed in Alberta that certainly it would be Alberta beef and it would go out of the Port of Vancouver because that was a straight line and it has to be the closest place. It ended up that shipment went out of Quebec City because something in the BNA Act said that you shall be subsidized the same rate to go around through the Panama Canal and you can do that cheaper than you can out of the Port of Vancouver. I have not done a lot of research into it to find out what other areas there are that discriminate against one part of the country or the other, but I am sure there are others. I do not know how you dig those all out. But I appreciate what has been said and think we have our work cut out for us to try and make a better country and transportation is certainly one of the key things.



Derek Blackburn, MP: We have heard about the commercial aspects of transportation which are extremely serious. If you consider that roughly 75% of the population of Canada lives within 50 miles of the U.S. border, it is much easier and many would argue more profitable these days to drive south on a short trip than to drive east or west on a long trip. The highway system itself is not that good. The experts have already attested to that.

The point I am getting at is we have a very fractured country of people living in enclaves. We wonder why there is not a sense of patriotism in the country that exists, south of the border—and they have transportation problems, too. We wonder why we do not understand each other. We do not understand our country. We do not know our country. We have not seen it. I travelled very little before I became a parliamentarian. I travelled mainly in Ontario, mainly from where I lived in the south to a couple hundred miles north to fish in the summertime.

I do not know how many Quebeckers, have seen the prairies. I do not know how many prairie people have seen the villages of the Eastern Townships or the

Laurentians and have spoken with our francophone neighbours. I do not know how many people from Vancouver Island have visited Newfoundland. In fact, the only people in this country who consistently travel across it are business people who have to do it on business, and very often their trips are paid for them by their companies as our trips are paid by the taxpayers.

I think it is an extremely important problem. I do not have the solutions. We do subsidize transportation in this country and yet people are simply not moving. They cannot afford it, even in good times they cannot afford it. But it is something we have to correct, otherwise we are going to continue to be fractured into regions and not understanding what Canadianism is all about.

I do not know how many Canadians spend their holidays going to the beach or to the summer cottage, but I would venture to say a very small proportion of them have seen the west coast or the east coast. It is a major sociological problem. It is a major political problem when a country like ours is in a period of crisis.

I have just two other very brief points here. I heard, in conversation a couple of weeks ago, that you can actually put tractor trailers on rails and they can be converted very easily. I hope they get on with that job, particularly in the Montreal-Toronto-southwestern Ontario corridor so that our highways can be used more for vehicular traffic. And, secondly, there are the super-fast trains. You know we say we have not got the population in the Quebec City-Windsor corridor but the French started their rapid trains from Paris to Lyon, and Lyon is not a huge city, it may have a couple of million. Look at Montreal and Toronto—those two alone—surely we could have rapid transit that would include Ottawa, Quebec City, and Windsor that would certainly facilitate travel. I am speaking now of mainly commercial travel in those two areas.



Ross Young (Prince Edward Island): the most important thing about a national transportation policy is that it ties in directly with our constitutional problem and the problem that we face in Canada today.

Do you remember 124 years ago the biggest reason we became a nation was because of the will of a central

government and the idea that a national rail line would help tie us together from coast to coast. In order for us to have that same feeling today as a nation we need that same will in the central government.

We do not have a rail line anymore in P.E.I. The truck industry has taken over which has led to another problem which has been talked about, the inter-provincial barriers. Even in the Maritimes which is not a big area, it is hard to be competitive because of the regulation policies that each province has, different weights and measures and so on.

In order for us to think as Canadians we have to start thinking again of east and west. In Ontario they produce certain products that we cannot buy in the Maritimes but we can buy it in Boston. I refer to grocery items or specialty items. In Prince Edward Island when we drive to Ontario or Quebec or anywhere else, we would like to drive on good highways which would take us up through New Brunswick, in through Quebec into Ontario but unfortunately our highways have deteriorated so such that the route through the United States is much easier and also along the way we can buy American products because they are much cheaper. So we are constantly thinking of our neighbours down south because of transportation.

A Maritimer will go and outfit his children for school because it is cheaper to drive down to the States and cheaper to buy his clothes down in the States, therefore he can outfit his whole family.

The only sense of pride I think that as Canadians we feel right now is when we take on the Russians in a hockey game or we compete in the Olympics. They sing *O Canada* and we feel proud of that, but gone is the pride in our links from coast to coast and at a time when constitutional reform is at the forefront, I think transportation policy plays a major role in us starting to think about our country east to west and not trading it north to south.



Glenn Tobin (Newfoundland and Labrador): I have been privileged to attend First Ministers' Conferences and Premiers' Conferences and on many occasions the same issue was raised by the premiers and others. It was all fine for discussion but we have never seem to be able to see any action whatsoever. I think usually when the meetings are adjourned the fate of Newfoundlanders who have to travel and the cost that imposes upon Newfoundlanders when you look at the truck traffic that has to pay their way to come across, that is not particular to other centres that you can drive to, so we are either part of the system or we are not and in our case we are not

part of the system. The Trans-Canada Highway, the national transportation system, does not benefit Newfoundland the same way as it does the people who live in Halifax or New Brunswick or Quebec or Ontario. We do not receive the same benefits in my opinion from the federal government nor have we ever received those benefits in the past as it relates to the shortcomings of the transportation system in our province. I hear my friends from Ottawa talk about how people from the prairies travel to Atlantic Canada. In our province, which is Newfoundland and Labrador, it is cheaper for us to watch a hockey game in Toronto or Winnipeg than it is to go to Labrador. Have we seen Canada? Most Newfoundlanders have not seen their own province and cannot afford to see their own province, under the present structure of the transportation system and the cost of airfares. If you have a good seat sale, you can go to Europe cheaper than you can go to Labrador City. If you want to talk about the system of transportation and how it is now working, I believe Newfoundland is one area that we can talk about. I do not want to prolong the issue but I just want to say that when our forefathers came to Newfoundland, hundreds of years ago, they came by boat and today, in Newfoundland, we still have to depend on Marine Atlantic for a system of transportation to the vessels, for supplies, transportation and, in many cases, some of these communities can receive road access—not from the provincial government coffers because we do not have it and probably never will, but the federal government has a role to play in that as well.

When you talk about a transportation system, I think we can also look at the need for a national shipbuilding policy that would complement or supplement our transportation system. Because when you look at a place like Newfoundland and they have Marine Atlantic, the province or anyone else and P.E.I. and others, you see that most of the ferries that are used are constructed in Europe or some other place for half the cost of getting it done in Canada. But at the same time our own Canadians are not working in our shipyards. They are not paying to the federal and provincial coffers the way others are.



Piers McDonald (Yukon): I have been fortunate enough to attend a number of Ministers of Transportation meetings over the four years that I spent in that job and one comment that struck me was made by a minister a number of years ago when we were first talking about a national transportation policy. This subject arose around the time that there were proposed cuts being made to VIA Rail and he likened the country to a spinning wheel,

essentially saying that there are some very powerful forces in our country that would naturally pull the regions apart, different cultures, different history, different languages all create different identities in each of the regions.

Every time we cut the spokes, the spokes could be VIA Rail in this particular case, in the communications field could be CBC, even when we talk about free trade itself we must understand that despite the gains we might be making by taking those policy decisions whether it is cost-cutting, balancing our budgets or whether it is seeking our easy economic opportunities that seem available to us, we are cutting those things that bind this country together.

There are some serious problems and we certainly cannot overlook them. We talked about split jurisdiction in respect of regulations and that is a problem that has plagued transportation ministers and communications ministers for years because of competing policies, competing regional-economic policies. They are something that we cannot sniff at. These are things that are, in some cases, driving our regional economies. And to reach out and to adopt national policies sometimes means compromising what could be of very real benefit to our own economies. We have to consider market forces as well. The transportation industry is itself run by a conglomeration of businesses and each one of those operates, like other businesses, according to profit and loss. They have a very narrow agenda. We have to talk seriously about funding. These improvements to our national transportation system cost a tremendous amount of money and, if we are going to get serious about improving our infrastructure, we are going to have to understand that we have to drop some things from the agenda. This is a very difficult decision. This cannot just simply be another line item in the budget. In our budget, albeit probably the smallest in the country, we spend an enormous amount of money on transportation, out of necessity, and we cannot change that because of our policy with respect to binding our territory together. But we have to understand that if we regard this as just being another subject for discussion and do not really pay close attention to what it ultimately means in respect of the Canadian cultural identity then I think, ultimately, we are blowing in the wind because we are not going to be making the gains we want.



Joe Comuzzi, MP: I do not know what the procedure is at the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conferences but just recently I attended a meeting of the Canada-U.S. Interparliamentary Group committee and we made recommendations at that meeting in respect of the salmon fishing on the west coast. We made recommendations in respect of the control of lamprey on the Great Lakes water system and we made recommendations with respect to zebra mussel. We took those respective recommendations back to the Senate and the House in the United States and the Parliament of Canada and I think we made some headway.

I do not know what the procedure is here but it seems to me that if I was to wrap up a consensus of opinion, it is that we do need a national transportation policy. I wonder whether it would not be wise to make a recommendation from this parliamentary Conference, that we recommend in the strongest terms that a national transportation committee be structured immediately with representation from the federal government, each provincial government and territory and embracing the large urban areas. It is so vital to the future of Canada that a meeting should be convened at the earliest possible time to discuss those issues that we consider to be of vital importance to the unity and the continued unity of Canada.

I think that would summarize what we have been trying to say here today and that perhaps could be something very constructive that we could come out of this parliamentary conference.

I think we could agree on that because as someone mentioned before we can start doing business internationally we have to start being able to do business on a level playing field domestically and with these barriers that we keep putting up interprovincial trade is not operative any more. You cannot have truckers stopping between Manitoba and Ontario and measuring how much gas they have. It is not sensible. So we have got to open up the barriers between the provinces not only on the aspect of free trade between the provinces but free transportation between the provinces, eliminating all of the barriers with respect to transportation. That could perhaps be the first item and the first step in the large wall that will have to be built with respect to transportation problems in our country. ♦