

Supply

[Translation]

Mr. André Caron (Jonquière, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today to speak to my colleague's motion on railway transportation in Canada. I will deal mainly with the passenger service and will use the Jonquière–Montreal and Senneterre–Montreal lines as an example.

● (1635)

According to some columnists and some comments we hear, when we speak about passenger rail service, we could just as well be speaking about a mode of transportation dating back to the 19th century and the horse and buggy. We must recognize that the passenger rail service is a modern and efficient mode of transportation and one chosen by many countries where passenger service is particularly efficient. Let me just mention Japan, Korea, Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, France and even the United States where the size of the territory is comparable to that of Canada.

It is obvious that passenger service has its problems in Canada. Population density is very low here. But the rail infrastructure is very large in our country. It is the third or fourth in importance in the world. Our history was built around the railroad. The railway companies either in the West or from Quebec towards the Atlantic shaped our history. They played an important role.

We could say that today Canada's rail infrastructure is quite satisfactory and that we are also well equipped in transportation facilities to serve train passengers. But there are problems. Some lines have difficulties. We all know that passenger service is highly subsidized in Canada, but we will come back to that item later on. We also know that the limited number of passengers creates a problem. Railway transportation represents 3 per cent of all passenger transportation in Canada and approximately 12 per cent of all mass transportation. I am not denying that there are serious problems, but before I proceed any further I must make two things perfectly clear.

First of all, I would like everybody to understand that rail is an efficient means of passenger transportation, which has a proven track record.

In Canada, in 1977, the responsibility for passenger service was taken away from CN and CP and given to the newly-created VIA Rail. This was a company created by the government, which decided that, in Canada, passenger service would be the responsibility of this new company. It had no start-up capital and no legislative framework, as it was created by Order in Council. Consequently, its autonomy, power and independence from the government were greatly reduced. The company was simply to manage and market railway transportation in Canada. It should be pointed out that VIA Rail inherited a fleet of locomotives and cars which could fairly be described as inadequate. The system had not been upgraded. Some equipment was old and in need of replacement.

However, VIA Rail got started. It was understood that the government would absorb VIA Rail's debts and its operating costs. Every year, VIA Rail receives a grant to be able to carry out its responsibilities. This grant amounts to around \$300 million a year, but the Department of Transport is planning to make cuts in the years to come. It does not augur well for VIA Rail's future. In the past few years, a royal commission of inquiry on passenger service was set up, which, by the way, cost \$23 million. I understand that it concluded that the market should decide which services should be offered and that user fees should cover the entire cost of these services.

● (1640)

In other words, a line of thought now prevails in Canada that views rail transportation as just another service, not even a public service, but a private enterprise like any other. If the operation does not break even, all it has to do is shut down without public authorities having any responsibility in its closure.

I think that we are facing a crisis. The regions, my region of Saguenay—Lac—Saint-Jean, and Abitibi as well, owe their development in part to the railway. One might say that our attachment is purely motivated by nostalgia, but it is not so. We believe that, combined with other means of transportation, railway service can become efficient and cost-effective in Canada.

Take the Saguenay—Lac—Saint-Jean region for example. We have a passenger line connecting Jonquière to Montreal. There are problems, goodwill problems, although the number of train users has increased substantially these past few years. There are problems because the train is a little bit like a hidden public transit.

First of all, there are only three departures from Jonquière every week. This means that, in order to travel by train, you must have time on your hands or control your own schedule. The timetable is not particularly accommodating. Transfers pose serious problems. Take me for example. If I want to come to Ottawa on the train, I cannot get here in one day. I have to stop in Montreal overnight and take the train for Ottawa the next day.

Travel time needs to be reviewed. The actual transit time between Jonquière and Montreal is about eight hours. That is a long time and it could be made much shorter. There is room for improvement, given the applicable speed charts and the fact that priority could be given to passenger trains over freight trains, unlike at present.

Some technical problems also need to be resolved. I am thinking about ticket reservations. There is no terminal where reservations can be made in Jonquière. Every time you go to buy a ticket, the clerk has to phone Montreal. You could not find a better way to kill the reservation system. As for advertising, there is none. I never saw in my region advertising on passenger rail service fares or schedules. There are major problems.