

It deals with the fur trading empires of the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company.

We went into great lengths and heard a very fine history about how people crossed our country at that time by canoe, portage and so on.

The reason I say that is that we have not changed in our spirit, we have not changed in our determination, and we have not changed in our thought. What these fur traders were doing, what we are trying to do today, and what the government is trying to break down is the effort to unify our country, to maintain the east-west structure of our country, and that requires a passenger rail service from coast to coast.

I think Mr. Macdonald did that some 100-odd years ago because he wanted to do away with the natural pull of the north-south influence. He was trying to create an east-west influence throughout our country to make the people in British Columbia as Canadian as the people in Newfoundland.

The government is trying to disintegrate that by disuniting this country, by taking away one of the fundamental modes of transportation that we as Canadians have come to expect as part of our heritage.

Mr. Iain Angus (Thunder Bay—Atikokan): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to participate today in the opposition motion which reads:

That this House condemns the government for its obstinate failure to respond to the continuing public demands of the Canadian people for the maintenance of high quality national passenger rail services.

I want to say at the outset that this is not a new issue for New Democrats. We have been fighting this issue ever since VIA Rail was created.

• (1710)

In fact, I think it is safe to say that my good friend, the member for Regina—Lumsden, was fighting for rail passenger service even before it came away from CN and CP and into the hands of the Crown corporation.

We did not start fighting for it just this summer. We did not start just after the budget earlier this spring when the reference levels were announced. We did not start fighting for VIA Rail just when the government decided not to purchase the new rolling stock, the transcontinental passenger rolling stock a few years ago. Nor did we start fighting for VIA just when this government came

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into power, when it announced great things for VIA Rail, great studies, task forces, or what have you. We did not start fighting for VIA Rail just when the previous Liberal government decided to cut 20 per cent of the system.

We have been in the fight for a long time because we, as New Democrats, recognize that VIA Rail plays a number of extremely important roles in the economy and the life of this great nation. It is important to Canadians from all parts of the country who see it as their only real option for transportation into and out of their communities. We see it as an economic tool to allow people to live in those smaller communities and commute to the larger. Although I realize that VIA Rail is not designed as a commuter service, it does provide it in a number of sectors. We recognize it as the only safe means of travel that we have in this country, particularly for our elderly and infirm.

When I was in Cape Breton this fall I learned about the tens of thousands of people who go from Cape Breton to Halifax on the train in order to go to the hospital to receive medical care. The road is not an option for them.

New Democrats also see it as an important environmental and energy question. It is an environmental issue because we recognize that in spite of what the government is saying—and every knowledgeable person in this country knows that what the government is saying about the environmental impact is bunk—rail passenger service is one of the most environmentally friendly forms of moving people long distances. It is also the most energy efficient form of moving people long distances.

We also recognize the historical importance of rail passenger service. How many of us had parents who came to this land as immigrants, who arrived by boat in Halifax and were taken by train to Quebec, to southern Ontario, to northern Ontario, to Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia and then on to the territories? All of us have stories about how those people moved at least into the interior by rail.

We also recognize the importance of rail passenger service in terms of an east-west link, an opportunity to see this vast and magnificent land. We recognize the value to tourism. Six hundred million foreign dollars a year come into this country, not for VIA Rail tickets but spent by VIA Rail passengers who come from other lands. This is extremely crucial in Atlantic Canada,