

Supply

One of the disturbing things for people in Atlantic Canada is that once the cuts were announced, there did not seem to be a great deal of rationalization as to why so many cuts took place in Atlantic Canada. Those who are cynical would believe that it is perhaps because Atlantic Canada sent more Liberals to this place than they sent members on your side of the House. Surely to goodness the people of Atlantic Canada deserve a little bit better than lip service from this government.

What the government has done in essence is to tell people in Atlantic Canada repeatedly that we either use the train service or we lose it. The people living in Atlantic Canada did use the train system. The train that goes from Truro to Halifax—and I hope you have the statistics there—was sold out most days. There were many senior citizens, many students, and many individuals who took the train from the industrial Cape Breton area up through the northeast of Nova Scotia to get medical services in Halifax. Many of them were seniors, and many of them are on fixed incomes. These people could not afford to take the plane or could not take the bus because it was too uncomfortable or inconvenient.

Those people rode the rails. They sat in uncomfortable, outdated rail cars. Many times it took eight hours instead of four hours if they were travelling by car to get there. At the same point in time the government came in after telling them to use it or lose it and cancelled the routes. I would like to know the rationale for that.

• (1450)

In Atlantic Canada we have had some of the highest ridership rates anywhere in the country. People in Atlantic Canada use the train system. It is a very necessary part of our transportation infrastructure down there in a multimodal transportation system. That is the first question.

The other question that I want to ask deals specifically with the Halifax maintenance centre. The leaks and purported leaks and reports in the media prior to the cuts being announced in this place indicated that the Halifax maintenance centre was going to be one of the places that was going to be chopped in these cuts. Indeed, at the press conference on the day that the cuts were announced, Mr. Lawless responded to the first question from a member of the press from Halifax. This

was the first question he was asked, so he was not befuddled with other questions and facts at that point.

The first question was: "What is the future of the Halifax maintenance centre?" Immediately Mr. Lawless came back and indicated that the Halifax maintenance centre would be redundant, it would be closed, there would be no work. In the House later that day, the minister responsible and I believe the Prime Minister as well said that was not the case. I have sought assurances since that point in time, and have not been able to get them, that the Halifax maintenance centre will be open for the life of the business plan which is five years, and that there will not be substantial lay-offs six, eight or ten months down the road. I believe that there was a staff member of the minister's office who indicated that that would be the case.

I would like an assurance from the parliamentary secretary that the Halifax maintenance centre is not going to be a political football in the VIA cuts, that the Halifax maintenance centre will remain open, as I have been told by a member of the minister's staff, after the life span of this particular five year plan and that we are not going to face death by slow torture in that particular sector of the rail industry in Atlantic Canada, in Halifax-Dartmouth. We do not want to end up six or eight months down the road with instead of 130 workers maybe 100 workers, and then six months after that with 50 workers and eventually shut down. I hope he can give me the answer.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Paproski): I hope he can do it in a very short time, too.

Mr. Belsher: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my hon. friend opposite for his questions. With respect to the services that he has mentioned that have been discontinued, I have the figures before me. I think they touch on some of the routes that he is talking about.

From Halifax to Sydney, there was 37 per cent occupancy; from Halifax to Port Hawkesbury, 34 per cent; Halifax to Yarmouth, 26 per cent; Halifax to Moncton—Saint John, 31 per cent. Those are the occupancy rates. In other words, well over half the seats were empty.

We must not forget that VIA Rail was created with, I think it was, \$1 back in 1977. It was never given a legislative mandate to work under. It is still struggling under that situation. We have not corrected that deficiency that was created back in 1977, but we are bound