

Adjournment Debate

people were not using VIA Rail. It was saying that 3 per cent of Canadians travelling from one city to another city were travelling by rail.

Well, Mr. Speaker, you know that you can use figures in many different ways. That 3 per cent represented 6.5 million to seven million people, and it was growing. More and more people were using it every day. We are seeing two to three million people directly disenfranchised as a result of this government's decision.

We have argued all along that what the government should be doing is what they promised to do and what the previous government promised to do. In fact, I have said it before. Seven ministers of transport promised to invest in VIA Rail. They started. They bought some new locomotives but, unfortunately, because they did not go the next step to buy the new passenger equipment, they had to attach the old locomotives to the new locomotives just to provide the heat for the trains behind them. That is not exactly the height of efficiency.

The government also said that there would be no impact on the environment, that shifting that many people from the trains to planes, cars and buses would have a negligible effect. It is obvious that if you add a million more car trips per year to the roads—and those are the government's figures concerning cars which will spew out that much exhaust into the air and contribute to that degree to the degradation of the environment—then there is no way that the government's figures are correct.

We have taken this battle to the courts and to the streets. We will continue it because we recognize that once before train services were cut in this land. That was back in 1982–83. I think, Mr. Speaker, that you were part of a very valiant effort to convince the government of the day to change that decision. Very clearly in 1982 it was wrong to cut VIA by 20 per cent, which is what the Liberals did, just as it was wrong in 1989 to make the decision to cut the system by 50 per cent.

Mr. Speaker, I say to you and to the Government of Canada that a fundamental error has been made. It is an error that will return to haunt government members, particularly in two or three years from now when we will go to the polls and the people of Canada will have an opportunity to pass judgment on the government of the day. As we know, governments tend to be defeated and not elected in this country. The Conservative Party will

join the ranks of the opposition once again to be replaced, I hope, by a party that truly believes in rail passenger services, not one that just says good things about it in opposition but attacks it in government.

I look forward to the response by the hon. parliamentary secretary. He is fighting a losing battle on this one, the political battle, but I wait with interest his comments.

Mr. Ross Belsher (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Transport): Mr. Speaker, I am so glad that the member opposite from Thunder Bay—Atikokan is so concerned about the welfare of the government throughout this situation in which we have found ourselves.

Really, it was a very difficult decision we had to make in terms of trying to bring some fiscal reality back into the system. Back in November when the hon. member opposite raised the issue it was in light of the standing committee's recommendation to the government that it put a moratorium on the changes that had been announced to take place on January 15.

In reflecting on the recommendations which the committee made, it was interesting to note that there was no mention that if the House and the government were to accept the recommendation, how we might continue to pay for the tremendous expenditures that flow out of the federal treasury on behalf of VIA Rail in order to keep VIA Rail afloat. That is what this is all about. Lofty ideas do not require financing—reality does.

In deciding upon this new network, the government had to balance fiscal reality with the actual usage as well as transportation needs. We are trying to build for the future here so that we will have a VIA Rail in the future.

Despite the more than \$5 billion spent on VIA since 1977, subsidies to VIA have continued to rise. They are not going down, they are continuing to rise, even after \$5 billion of expenditure.

In 1988 they reached an unprecedented level of \$644.8 billion. Yet the passenger levels were 20 per cent lower than they were in 1981.

Our decision preserves the historic transcontinental service and service to remote communities solely dependent upon rail for access. It continues to provide a number of daily services in the Quebec–Windsor corridor which generated more than 70 per cent of VIA's 1988 ridership. In other words, we were looking at something that was affordable but we also needed something that