

Trains set on new track

—by glen wanamaker

If there was one recent issue that the federal government and the three Maritime governments all badly misunderstood, it was the debate over rail passenger service.

In 1977, Transport Minister Otto Lang and the three Maritime Premiers blithely signed their names to the Atlantic Region Inter-Modal Passenger Study saying in effect "you take the high road, I'll take the low road and let the romantics take what's left of the railroad."

By identifying themselves with the study, the politicians supported the elimination of all but one rail link to Montreal. Bus and air services would be improved with government assistance to take the place of the train.

The report was mauled by the public in hearings two years ago and according to a Canadian Transport Commission (CTC) official, the provinces have been doing "a lot of back-tracking" ever since. The report was also rebutted, though more politely, by the CTC's Preferred Plan for passenger service issued in December of 1978.

Rather than sharp reductions, the Preferred Plan recommends re-shuffling three of the long-distance trains into two, with inter-city trains handling service between major centres in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. The re-alignment, together with the use of different equipment, is designed to save money, encourage increased use through better scheduling and, last, but strangely not forgotten, fulfill the Confederation pacts of 112 years ago.

The Plan rejects most of the arguments contained in the Inter-Modal study, which Peter Dawes of the Research Branch of the CTC's Railway Review Committee says was "hurriedly put together and seemed to be geared to the people who commissioned it." The Commission, he said, "never seriously considered dropping much service."

The Preferred Plan, which is now undergoing public scrutiny before being turned into a Final Plan, does not bring back the good old days of the 1950's and early '60's when the region was served by five and then four trains to Montreal in summer. But it does put some common sense back into the system which the railroads and the politicians seemed so eager to abandon.

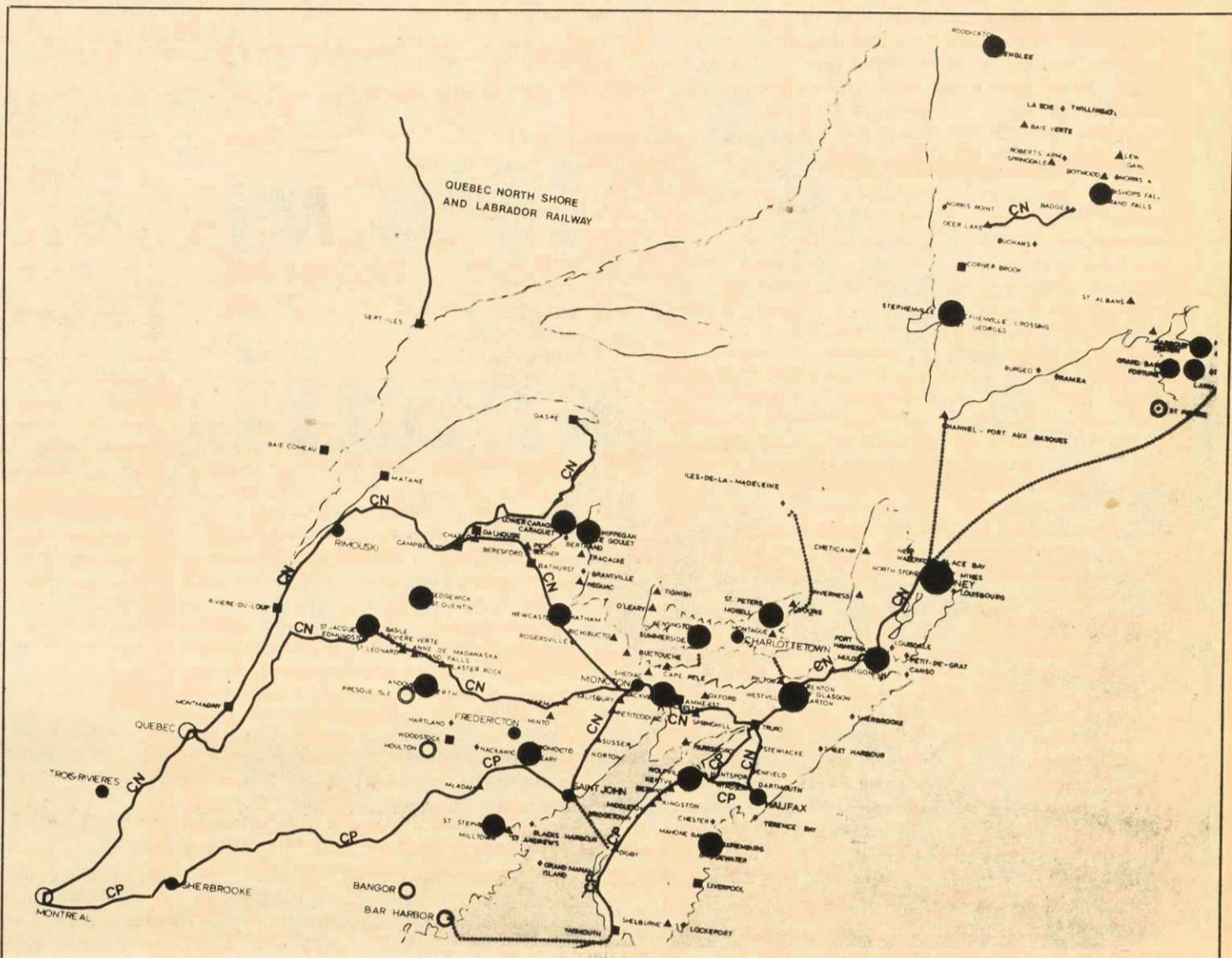
At the same time, however, it has upset the bus companies who say they will run in direct competition with the trains. Instead of luring a portion of the 90 per cent of travellers who use cars for inter-city trips, they say the two services will compete with each other for one small market. John Pearce, Secretary of the Atlantic branch of Transport 2000, a national consumers' group, says it would be unfortunate if this happens, but he says the aim is to produce a coordinated public transport system using both buses and trains.

As it is now, adds CTC's Dawes, the bus system in New Brunswick is poor and "we felt we had to replace local functions that had been provided by the Scotian (a long-distance train)".

While railroad watchers are waiting to see what happens to schedules and fares under Via Rail Canada, which has been given responsibility for the passenger rail operations of Canadian National and Canadian Pacific, most are relatively pleased with the Preferred Plan.

Pearce says the Plan reflects a series of trade-offs, such as the loss of sleeping car facilities on some short-haul routes in exchange for quicker service. But he says the CTC's decision that passenger service should be maintained places it among the "good guys".

He praises the Commission for rejecting the argument, used by the Treasury Board



Under the Preferred Plan, the existing Canadian Pacific line from Montreal to Saint John via Maine would become the main long-distance link to the region. It would be extended through Moncton to Halifax with a connection at Truro for Sydney. The Canadian National train through Rimouski and Campbellton would go as far as Moncton, with a connection at Matapedia for the Gaspé. Rail diesel trains would provide inter-city service, probably between Montreal and Mont Joli, and Campbellton and Moncton. Similar service would link Halifax and Saint John, and Sydney and Halifax.

and the provinces, that the system should be drastically reduced because it is now unprofitable. The Plan agrees the service is uneconomic, but it disagrees that it is "incapable" of becoming profitable, and wonders if this is even a valid yardstick.

The Plan similarly dispels the notion that only passenger trains run up deficits, pointing out that highways and airports also received public assistance. Though usually not in the form of direct subsidy payments to road or air operators, tax dollars have been delivered to pay for air infrastructure costs and the operation of highway networks.

Eastern Provincial Airways was an exception though, it said, receiving a direct subsidy of about \$1.7 million a year in recent years. Both EPA and Air Canada have also reported operating losses on their Maritime routes.

The operation of airports, runways and other related services cost the federal government about \$30 million in the three Maritime provinces in 1975-76, and highways produced a net deficit of \$149 million for Nova Scotia and New Brunswick in 1974.

Bus companies pay gas and licensing charges and the Plan says whether or not they pay their "fair share" is a "matter of philosophical speculation". But it says revenues from motor vehicles covered only 47 per cent of the total road costs borne by the governments; the rest was covered by general taxes.

In comparison, the total losses on rail passenger services in the Maritimes in 1977 were \$47.9 million of which \$38.3 million was covered by federal subsidies.

The Plan suggests the railroads have not tried to make the service economical and have expected the long-distance trains to service effectively as inter-city carriers.

"Because of the multiplicity of demands, the long-haul service doesn't per-

form any of its functions well. . . . Yet, in spite of this, the actual distribution of passenger trips reflects a surprising balance between long and short-haul markets. But undoubtedly, (the dual function) contributes to the losses."

If adopted as proposed, most long-distance travel will be carried on the existing CP line through Maine to Saint John, Moncton and on to Halifax. A second train will travel the CN line through Quebec City and Campbellton, ending at Moncton.

Travellers to the Gaspé and Sydney will make connections at Matapedia and Truro respectively, but instead of the conventional trains, rail diesel cars will be used allowing economy of operation and faster service. Inter-city trains also using rail diesel cars will move between Montreal and Mont Joli, Campbellton and Moncton, Halifax and Moncton and Sydney and Halifax. By 1981, Via plans to be using LRC (light, rapid and comfortable) trains.

This system will slightly reduce costs, increase revenues and therefore reduce losses, it says. But besides the strictly economic arguments, the Plan points out that this region's high unemployment, the lower than average per capita income and lower than average rate of car ownership indicate a "greater tendency to use public transport, especially train and bus."

The commissioners also took seriously the many references made in public hearings to the federal government's constitutional obligation to maintain the railroad. They checked the record and concluded the Confederation agreement clearly accepted the demands of the two Maritime provinces: no railroad, no federation.

Via has been asked to implement changes in time for the summer schedule taking effect the end of April. But because the changes will require re-negotiating labour agreements, officials say the romantics and others should not expect new service before the Fall.

Gallup-ing political illiteracy

A Gallup Poll survey of the political knowledge of American youth has produced unsettling results for American educators.

According to the *Manchester Guardian*, significant numbers of the 17- and 18-year olds interviewed could not correctly answer basic political and geographic questions—a result which prompted George Gallup Sr. to speak of "tremendous political illiteracy" among the young.

Some responses:

Question: "In what year did Columbus discover America?" **Answer:** 1942.

Question: "Which were the last two states admitted to the United States?"

Answers: "Florida", "Mexico", and "Canada".

Question: "Where is Angola?" **Answers:** "In Siberia", "In the Philippines".

Question: "Name two agencies through which the United Nations organization carries on its work throughout the world." **Answer:** "CIA and FBI".

One answer may indicate profound wisdom. **Question:** The economy of Russia is described as communistic; that of Sweden, socialistic. How is ours described? The student's answer: "Inflationary."