

Borrowing Authority

Government in the area of VIA Rail and the environment?

Mr. Blackburn (Brant): Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question.

Mr. Milliken: An unbiased question.

Mr. Blackburn (Brant): Whether it is biased or unbiased, the point is that one of the great issues today is the environment and the negative impact of certain sources of energy on our environment.

We are in the process of attempting to come to grips with acid rain, and it will be extremely costly for our country, the United States and other countries in the world.

At the same time, when it comes to ground transportation, the Conservative Government is doing what it can to reduce the availability of a mode of transportation that is essentially environmentally friendly. I do not have to remind the House that diesel fuel is much less dangerous to the environment than gasoline or jet fuel. Yet the Government is going out of its way to encourage bus companies, trucking companies and airlines to continue to pollute our highways and our air space.

There is a huge infrastructure of rail lines across Canada for the purpose of transportation not only of goods but of people. It is a mode of transportation that should be encouraged, modernized, updated and expanded because its effect on the environment is minimal.

The slogan of the Conservative Government during the last election was "the Party who could manage change". It is changing things all right, and I guess it is managing it, but it is a change from the 1980s back to the 1920s in most respects. It cannot visualize or anticipate what is leading us into the next century. The Conservatives are unable to come to grips with it because of its doctrinaire conservative approach that is more reminiscent of my grandfather's day than mine.

The railroad is not a relic of the past. One need only go to Europe to see that it is a vehicle that is adaptable to change. The environment is certainly a very important consideration in adapting a rail system to the modern era. It is environmentally friendly in the sense that it has a minimal negative impact on the environment.

Mr. Stupich: Madam Speaker, I too am interested in my colleague's remarks about VIA Rail. Petitions have been presented in the House urging the Government to maintain VIA Rail service and improve it. The people who built the Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway on Vancouver Island received tremendous acreage in land and substantial resources from the Government in exchange for building that railroad. They were obliged to continue the passenger service. I expect the same holds true for VIA Rail services all across Canada.

Do the railways have a legal obligation to maintain that service, and did VIA Rail assume that obligation when it was organized? Is there a possibility that citizens who have shown in great numbers that they want that service continued will take to court the railways, VIA Rail or the Government to enforce upon them the original obligation to maintain the passenger and freight service by rail in Canada in all railways that have been built with government assistance?

Mr. Blackburn (Brant): Madam Speaker, the Hon. Member poses a very interesting legal proposition. I am not a lawyer but it might be interesting to hear the Government in Ottawa suggest that if CP, CN, or VIA as one of its chattels, terminated passenger service it would have to give up title to the land that the Government of Canada very graciously gave it in the 19th century as part of the recompense for the outlay and cost of putting the railways through in the first place.

• (1650)

Conservatives and some Liberals would like to argue that the great iron horse went across this country primarily on private initiative and private money. No such thing ever happened. Any Canadian historian worth his salt knows that over 50 per cent of the money which went into the building of the CPR came from the public treasury and not the private treasury. Yet, successive Liberal and Conservative Governments have the unmitigated gall to stand up now when we need the railways and say: "Okay, fine, you can shut them down." In fact, this Government is doing everything it can to close them down, but it does not dare tamper with the lands, with its private vested interest which it got for the purpose of maintaining the railroad as a recompense or as a source of revenue in order to pay back its private debts.