

Oral Questions

Will he recognize the motion that has been put and accepted by the transport committee that a moratorium should be put on the cuts that he proposes to VIA Rail? With respect to the cuts to VIA Rail, will the government at least listen to its own members if it will not listen to us?

Hon. Benoît Bouchard (Minister of Transport): Mr. Speaker, parliamentary reform has been done in a way that members can express their views to the government. I think that is what the transport committee did yesterday. Unfortunately it is a sad way to express their views, using the transport committee as a place to play political football. If new views have to be presented, they should have been presented to the ministers yesterday.

I looked carefully at the report. Nothing is new in that report. The per passenger kilometre cost for air, considering international flights, is absolutely wrong. I challenge my friend to contest figures which have been presented by my department. For that reason I repeat what I have already said. We will not have any moratorium on VIA Rail.

Mr. Brian Tobin (Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte): Mr. Speaker, the fact of the matter is that the provincial governments of Canada are here today to discuss the economy, including the premiers of the major provinces of Canada. They are saying that they agree with the report of an all-party standing committee in its request for a moratorium on VIA Rail cuts. The mayors of all the major cities are saying that they agree. The disenfranchised millions of Canadians who are losing VIA Rail service are saying they agree.

My question to the Minister of Transport is straightforward. Given that a standing committee, operating in the spirit of reform, has said it is not convinced by the government's environmental assessment, is not convinced by the government's numbers with respect to the deficit and is not convinced that VIA Rail can survive at all if these cuts go ahead, why will this government in the spirit of conciliation it promised when it came to power not listen to Parliament and members from all parties, declare a moratorium and give VIA Rail a chance?

Hon. Benoît Bouchard (Minister of Transport): Mr. Speaker, I met the same mayors my colleague met this week. This morning I heard the Premier of Ontario say that he was in full support of the report tabled yesterday,

and I have respect for the Premier of Ontario. Neither the mayors nor the premier this morning could say that they were ready to put up \$100 million for a moratorium.

The committee does not say that we should have a moratorium of such and such a length. It could be open to three or four years. For three years it would cost over \$500 million. Once again, when I asked the question of the mayors of Ottawa, Toronto and Montreal this week "are you ready to put money into VIA Rail", there was total silence in the room.

When I heard the Premier of Ontario this morning, he did not say that he was ready to put the money in. If I may, I would like to say what was said after the cuts the Liberals made in 1981, by one of the Liberal members:

"No one wants his or her favourite program reduced or eliminated. The government's deficit will be reduced through the elimination of highly unprofitable services and unfortunately will hurt the travel facilities of a few. But what else in the end is to be done?" I quote the Liberal member for Etobicoke North in 1981. That is the same rationale today. We do not have the money. We will not have the money. We will not have any moratorium.

Mr. Tobin: Mr. Speaker, the cuts of 1981 were restored in 1984 by the member for Winnipeg South Centre who was then Minister of Transport.

My question to the Minister of Transport goes to the heart of this government's credibility. On the same day that this minister opposite, the Minister of Transport, announced the VIA Rail cuts, the same minister announced the Royal Commission on Transportation in Canada. The minister and the Prime Minister have said they have confidence in the members of this royal commission, have confidence in their integrity and in their ability to do a job, and will listen to their advice.

How can the minister expect Canadians to believe that he has that kind of confidence if he is going to destroy, gut, terminate, assassinate VIA Rail first and ask for advice on the decision later?

If the minister believes in what he says, he should accept the recommendation of an all-party committee, listen to Canadians, give the royal commission a chance to do its job and put an end to this bare-faced hypocrisy on VIA Rail.