

Routine Proceedings

point in time, to reverse the decision. It is entirely possible to do that.

Until such time as the tracks are removed—and I realize that as we speak that is happening not too far from this House—and until the equipment is sold there still is an opportunity to reverse the decision of the government and to put VIA Rail back on track, not just in half of the country but in all of the country.

As part of this process, and having been to those rallies in Guelph, Toronto and Thunder Bay, and having seen the thousands of people who came out to show their support, I felt that we had to continue the fight.

Earlier today I wrote to the Right Hon. Prime Minister and to the Minister of Transport. The letter reads as follows:

Dear Sirs:

On January 15, your government's cuts to VIA Rail went into effect.

The cuts were carried out through an Order in Council, circumventing any need for public hearings. When the federal Liberals used that procedure in 1981, your party and ours condemned them—quite rightly—for trampling on Canadians' right to be heard on a vital national matter.

Many Canadians have decided that, hearings or no hearings, they will speak out against the cuts. Rallies across the country attracted thousands; in my home of Thunder Bay alone, over one thousand people turned out to support VIA Rail.

Hundreds of thousands more have sent letters, cards and petitions to my office and those of my New Democrat colleagues. Eighty-nine per cent of Canadians want VIA's service maintained or expanded. The cuts are opposed by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, whose town and city governments speak for 17 million Canadians.

I urge you to consider the effects these cuts will have on remote communities, on seniors and young Canadians, and on the millions of people who cannot afford air fares. I urge you to consider the effects on entire cities that have lost VIA service.

And I urge you to consider this alternative: a moratorium on the cuts, at least until the Royal Commission on a National Passenger System for the 21st Century makes its report. Put VIA back on track now—and do not sell any rolling stock.

Such a moratorium would be consistent with the all-party report of the House of Commons Transport Committee, and would allow the

Royal Commission to truly examine all options. It would provide badly needed public debate on the future of passenger transport.

You have described your desire to ignore the will of the vast number of Canadians as "courage". I respectfully suggest that you have confused courage with conceit. Real courage demands the admission your government may not have all the answers. And democracy demands that Canadians at least have their fair say in the changes that will deeply affect them.

I hope you will find that courage.

The letter is signed by myself as member of Parliament for Thunder Bay—Atikokan.

The government would like to suggest that the outpouring of support for VIA Rail in the final days of its service across Canada, whether it was The Canadian or whether it was the regional services or the commuter services, was nothing more than romanticism, that people were shedding a tear for something that no longer mattered and they were sorry to see it go. That is not what I heard from them.

I heard students telling me about the impact it would have on their ability to keep in touch with their families. These are students attending university or college who would go home for Thanksgiving or Easter, in some cases for the weekend. They will no longer be able to do so because that cheap method of transport will no longer be available.

Seniors who for some reason cannot fly, who do not own their own vehicle and who really do not enjoy travel by bus are without the ability to travel now. Even by the government's own estimates there will be 125,000 people every year who will no longer travel because of the elimination of VIA Rail services.

If you take the price tag of an airplane ticket for a family of four from Thunder Bay to Toronto, you are talking in excess of \$1,500 to \$1,600. For them to go by train will take a little longer, but it is a lot saner kind of trip and it certainly has a lesser impact on their pocket-book.

Let us look, too, at who pays the price, which has been one of the arguments. The argument has been that there are only 7 million people who are using the trains and so many more are using planes. However, studies have shown that the vast majority of people who ride airlines either have their tickets paid for by somebody else—and I include members of Parliament in that group—or are businessmen who write off the total amount on their