I wonder if he would repudiate those members in his party of the government of 1967, when the Liberals introduced action to eliminate passenger train service in Newfoundland.

Mr. Tobin: I did, absolutely.

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VIA RAIL

Mr. Russell MacLellan (Cape Breton—The Sydneys): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Prime Minister. For those Canadians who lost rail passenger service yesterday the prime concern now is: Is rail abandonment going to follow, especially since the president of CN was named the president of VIA Rail and given the job of recommending what routes should be cut thereby enhancing his own argument for rail abandonment?

Will the Prime Minister, knowing the importance of rail freight service in eastern Nova Scotia particularly Cape Breton, unequivocally assure the residents of eastern Nova Scotia that the rail line there will not be abandoned?

Hon. Benoît Bouchard (Minister of Transport): Mr. Speaker, the National Transportation Act gives to the Governor in Council the ability to determine the policy concerning branch line abandonments. We know at the present time that CN and CP have made many requests to the NTA for the abandonment of branch lines.

● (1440)

Those proposals will be considered very carefully. I understand the concerns that my friend has, particularly on the section between Sydney and Halifax. It is something that I will consider once again very carefully, and we will do the best we can to maintain the best freight rail service in the country.

Mr. Dave Dingwall (Cape Breton—East Richmond): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Transport.

Yesterday's announcement on VIA Rail is a plan that will undoubtedly separate Canadians geographically, economically and socially.

I want to ask the minister whether or not he is aware that the termination of the Halifax–Sydney route will negatively affect the tourism industry, that it will deny

Cape Bretoners the opportunity of good health care in Halifax, and that it will prevent students from affordable, reasonable transportation costs to pursue their education?

Will the minister explain to the Canadians in that region why this government persists in treating this area of the country as second–class citizens?

Mr. Bouchard (Roberval): Mr. Speaker, I am surprised that this member can say what he just said, because 85 per cent of Canadians in Nova Scotia, as in any other province in the country, use their cars or the highways to travel in this country.

This line, Sydney–Halifax, has experienced since 1984 a 45 per cent decrease in ridership. We had to maintain a national network, we considered that the lines which were the least used normally, particularly the regional lines, had to be abandoned. What we have done is for the good of the national network.

Mr. John Brewin (Victoria): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Prime Minister.

Yesterday, the Government of British Columbia announced that it is suing the federal government for its breach of its constitutional undertaking by eliminating the last remaining rail service on Vancouver Island.

Was the Cabinet aware that it was riding roughshod over the Government of Canada's solemn undertaking when it destroyed the last remaining passenger service on Vancouver Island? Will the Prime Minister indicate that the government will now agree to abide by the promise made by this Parliament and the Government of Canada to the people of Vancouver Island?

Hon. Doug Lewis (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada): Mr. Speaker, we have reviewed the matter and in the opinion of the government there was no constitutional obligation to maintain such a passenger rail service. We are not aware of any contractual arrangements which might be construed as creating an obligation on the Government of Canada.

Mr. Brewin: Mr. Speaker, I would hesitate to get into a legal argument with the learned and distinguished member.

Let me at least quote from a contract which the Minister of Rails and Canals on behalf of the Government of Canada signed in August of 1883 which provided that contractors will lay out, make, build, construct,