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The Problem of Country Roads

Address delivered by William Iverach before the Arrow River Farmers' Institute:

This is such a large subject that I can only touch on some of the more prominent questions, the questions that affect us as a people, not only as a municipality but as a province, or indeed as a Canadian nation. The first question I would ask is, What is a good road? And if I asked each Canadian here to tell me what a good road is, I think we should have a variety of ideas, and I think it is on account of that variety of ideas that we have such a variety of roads. I may say I have traveled much of both Canada and the United States, and must say I have never seen a country road in America yet that comes up to my ideal. Nor is my ideal a dream, because I have seen roads built through peat mosses, along hillsides and through much more difficult places than exist here, in a country where the average dry season would be as wet as our wettest.

A good road should be something that a man can go on with a load any day that it is not covered with snow, a highway of which, excepting snow, no weather conditions could materially affect its passability. In the north of Scotland we often went to town with grain when the fields (although all underdrained) would be so wet that you could not possibly, without doing damage, drive a horse through them. We never dreamed of such a thing as the roads not carrying our loads. Getting mired on one of those roads was simply out of the question. That sort of road suited that country and no other sort would. The very difficulties of the situation demanded the best that could be made. And I think right here is our weak spot—the very ease of making our roads has led to the slovenly ways we have fallen into regarding them, just as the ease with which land may be made to produce crops here has led to such a slovenly style of agriculture. Now besides the carrying capacity of our roads, we have the question of grades to consider. It is not much use fitting a road up to carry loads that you cannot haul up the steepest grades. It is estimated that if a horse can draw on a level, say, 1,000, on a rise of one foot to the 100, he can only draw 900; on a rise of one in 40 he can draw 750; on a rise of one in 25, 540; and in 10 he can draw only 250. So, as the strength of a chain is measured by its weakest link, so you must measure the size of the load you put on by what you draw up the steepest hill or through the deepest mudhole.

You next ask, "How, or with what material are you going to build such roads?" Here, with the grading machines which we have, I would grade it up first; then drain it with a ditch on one side, deep enough to ensure perfect drainage. I would make this ditch cross and recross the road by means of cement culverts wherever necessary; and when it came to a point where you could only drain by cutting through private property I would then acquire the right to do so by some means, but I would see that the road was drained. I would then cut a trench eight feet wide right in the center of the road, the depth of which trench would depend on the size of the stones I could get to fill it up with again. I would fill the trench as I have said, with whole unbroken stones as large as I could get or handle conveniently, then I would cover over with broken stone or gravel, making the first coating about six inches deep; the depth could be increased as required, but the question comes, where can you get the material? I feel quite satisfied we have enough material within two miles of all our main roads. Most owners of the stone will only be too glad when the road-makers will come and take them away.

I can fancy another objector saying, "You would never get the farmers to turn out with their teams and take the time to finish up such roads as you suggest." I would never ask a farmer to undertake such work. It is because we are depending on the farmers now that we are paying five times for our roads what they ought to cost us. Could you fancy the G. T. P., when they came to build through our district, sending someone around to tell you where the road was to be built and saying if you wanted it you would have to put so many teams on, and that you

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might just as well keep the cost of building it in the district it was going through? No, they sent their engineers, men who were capable of estimating the cost, over it first. Then they let their work by tender to men who have figured out long ago how they can get most dirt moved for a dollar. And if the G. T. P. can get such men we can get them too, when we offer them enough work to keep a good outfit going for the whole open season—work that is properly specified so that a man knows just exactly what is expected of him. Why did not our council get the farmers to build the bridges over the Assiniboine? They let that to a contractor, to men who knew how. If the G. T. P. depended on the farmers along it to build from Winnipeg to the Rockies, they would have their line in operation about five hundred years from now; and we should have our tickets purchased for another point long before that time. And if that be true of the G. T. P. it is also true of our municipality.

We have been playing at road-making here now for the past twenty-five years, and where do we stand to-day? Outside of our sand plain, we have not one mile of road that you could haul one load per hour over after a twenty-four hours' rain, without cutting it all to pieces. We have passed through the statute labor stage and pronounced it a failure. We have adopted another style (I was going to say system), and about all that can be said of the present method, if it be fair to use that word, is that it is more expensive. Now, waiting and being without roads is not the worst feature of the situation. Some things we can wait for, but for the last twenty-five years we have been paying for roads as well as waiting, and with any of our present or past methods of road-building we shall be no further advanced in another fifty years than we are now. By that time most of us won't have much interest in roads; but what shall we have done? We shall have spent enough money to have built the roads that we never had the privilege of using; we shall have left no roads to our successors, because they were not built with the money exacted from us for the building of them. Our money is being misspent—I don't mean this to be interpreted as a charge of dishonesty—our taxes are too high for the benefits received; in fact, I know of an instance in this municipality where a quarter section is taxed within five cents of as much as a half in a neighboring municipality, both owned by the one man and both close enough together to be farmed from one homestead. Such an exorbitant rate of taxation tends to keep people away from the land. Look at the train loads of new settlers coming into our country. Where are they going? I don't think we have had a man buy land in our township and move on to it to make a home from the virgin soil for the last five years; and in the meantime we have lost some of our best families, and their houses are to-day vacant, the complaints of some of them being that they never could get out from spring till fall.

But you ask, "How are you going to improve the roads without raising the taxes which are already too high?" By turning over a new leaf all around; by changing some of our present laws and making new ones; by having our Governments, both provincial and federal, come to our aid and in the first place set a standard that a road must come up to, and then pay a certain proportion of the cost just as they do in education and other matters.

All main roads should be the property of and be built by the Dominion Government, and such roads maintained by the municipality in a state of the very highest efficiency. If our Governments see fit to subsidize railways because they are the arteries of commerce, our country roads are the veins through which that commerce is collected and distributed.

Another reason why the Dominion Government should build the main roads is that we may

not always be at peace with our neighbors. And what is the use of our Government maintaining an army year in and year out in time of peace, if they can't transport both it and its supplies to any inhabited part of the country on shortest notice? We hear a good deal from time to time about increased estimates for the militia, but never a word for a road to move them over. The Romans were wiser in that respect two thousand years ago than we are yet. They realized that the success and indeed the maintenance of their empire depended on their roads, so they built to stay built, and their roads are still in use. Then with all the assistance we could get from our Governments, I would have the borrowing power of the municipalities extended far beyond what they now are. Why should the Government limit the borrowing power of municipalities? The Government in taking this stand assumes that they are wiser, more honest and more capable than the men who compose our councils. And right here I would like to ask you, how do the men we have placed at the head of our councils for the last number of years compare with the men we have sent to Parliament? I think you will agree with me that for integrity and administrative ability, in fact for anything except making useless, long-winded speeches that serve no purpose only to kill time and prolong the sessions, the men at the head of the councils have the balance quite strongly in their favor. I would then locate the main roads, subject to Government approval. I would make this proviso so that if any portion of the rate-payers had, or thought they had, reason to complain of the location, they would have a court of appeal where they could get an outside decision from some source that would be free from local considerations. I would then borrow the necessary funds, all that is necessary at present, and when more is needed, get it, without submitting by-laws to the electors, leave that power always with the council, and let the electors always remember that they have it. Our taxes at present would pay interest on a better system of roads than anything I have seen in America; and there are lots of people willing to lend money on those bonds. Then why not take it and build?

Private debts are a bad thing up to a certain point only. May I ask you, are you worth more or less to-day because at some period in your life you saw fit to go in debt? I am sure you are richer; but you might have left this world at a critical period and left a bad estate for someone else to administrate. In that case it might be worse for your successors that you went in debt, because your business and mine stops with us; but the business of a municipality, like the brook, "goes on forever." A hundred years is a long life, but it is not a large part of the life of a nation: So if it took a hundred years to pay for our roads, would it not be better to have them and let the road help to pay for itself? We are paying for them now and paying more than we should be paying, by borrowing and building. Under the one system we should be using the roads while we were paying for them, and under the other in fifty years we shall have paid for them twice over, and at the end of that time we shall have no roads to use other than we have now.

But you ask, "By what means are you going to get the Government's assistance?" By simply letting the Government know what we want. The day has passed away when countries such as ours are governed from Ottawa and Winnipeg. Who got the Manitoba Grain Act into working shape? Did the idea originate in Ottawa? No, it was born in somebody's head and matured in the grain growers' conventions. When our local Government wants to amend the Municipal Act they will consult the municipal conventions. The Government does not want to find themselves on one side and public opinion on the other. We are fast approaching the time when our Houses of Parliament will simply be places in which to boil down legislation that is handed in to them from such meetings as this.