

Supply

In this context, the future of CN North America will be determined by what is best for the rail industry but also for Canadian shippers and the Canadian people.

[English]

Mr. John Duncan (North Island—Powell River, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to participate in debate on the opposition day motion concerning the inaction and lack of transparency of the government with respect to the potential restructuring of Canada's railways.

I look upon this as an opportunity to speak about the vision, history, and fabric of this great nation. It is difficult not to be nostalgic and perhaps a bit sentimental when one speaks of a symbol of our heritage, a simple yet binding line of steel that forged the country and tied a fledgling nation together over 125 years ago.

What child of our generation can forget running to a window to watch the train or the haunting late night blast of its steam whistle belching clouds of smoke? The steam, coal and smoke may be gone, replaced by diesel turbines and electric motors, but the memory lives on. Or, does it? And if it does, for how long?

• (1320)

In preparing for this speech I could not help but recall two formative pieces of Canadian literary work, *The National Dream* and *The Last Spike*. Pierre Berton's comprehensive works on CP Rail and the line of steel that brought my home province of British Columbia into Confederation are enduring. It is hard to forget the concluding paragraphs of Berton's work as the last spike is driven at Craigellachie and the tiny engine rolls through the mountains, down the escarpment to the Fraser Valley meadows, off to the blue Pacific and on into history. This is the legend, the lore, and what brought the country together.

Nothing is static. While one can reminisce about the past, its simplicity and fragile beauty, a country marches on and not always as it should. Change is not always improvement. Motion is not always progress. Simple men sometimes lack the vision of our forefathers and choices are not always the right ones.

We are here today to question and debate where we are going as a country not in all dimensions but in one fundamental basic dimension: rail travel, be it CN, CP or VIA Rail. We are here to question our vision, our progress and our choices.

Despite what the current administration thinks sometimes money cannot buy vision. It cannot, as in this instance, buy decisiveness in our rail policy for the country. The fact remains that the government has shown complete disregard for a rail policy for Canada.

As in the 1860s times have changed. The solutions we used to forge rail policy in the 1960s and 1970s are not compatible with today's problems, including the movement of freight and

people. While an enlightened rail policy could forge new dynamics in transportation in Canada, the current government holds any mention of vision or change in contempt. Worn out political hacks at CN headquarters in Montreal work in secret. Their vision parallels that of the Bloc's motion of unrealistic \$7 billion to \$10 billion rail corridors bordering the St. Lawrence River. These are monuments to the greed and largesse of better days, not sensible alternatives to the inertia that really grips these people.

This is not 1860. Government and the public sector are not masters of all. There is no bottomless pit of inflated dollars for high speed rail corridors. The torch has been passed and the notion that the government or the public sector can do it better does not pass the litmus test of the 1990s. So-called privateers like the Bombardiers who like to innovate as long as government dollars are there are not solutions but drains, and no more so than in rail policy.

The Reform Party promotes a vision that promotes privatization and spinoff of federal transport operations into private hands. The Reform Party supports the Bloc's motion condemning the government's shoddy if not non-existent rail policies. Who knows what the future holds for CN or CP Rail?

The Reform Party supports CP's recent offer to purchase CN's eastern operations. How has the transport minister reacted? It has been with scorn, hesitation and indecisiveness. Is this a rail policy? What is he waiting for, a better offer? No, he is content with the status quo. In many ways this attitude is as dispensable as the steam whistle and the clouds of smoke. If the minister is devoid of solutions or visions why not open the process to public review and scrutiny?

• (1325)

A ribbon of steel from east to west has become an ever decreasing concentric circle where we end up meeting ourselves. We are going nowhere. Let us look at VIA Rail, the sinkhole of inefficiency. It is one of the biggest money losing, overbureaucratized entities in Canadian transportation. This is not because of rank and file VIA Rail employees. No, it takes a special public service background and mentality to run a railroad into the ground and make six-figure salaries while doing it.

Without question putting VIA Rail in private hands would cut costs, revitalize the corporation and its people, and allow it to return many passenger routes that have been abandoned or are in danger of being cut. It does not take any vision to keep cutting and make a few dollars, but in the case of VIA it does take a special touch to cut and still lose money.

If VIA were to be turned over to private entrepreneurs marginal routes could once again be viable, but not as long as VIA is publicly owned. Complacency and debt endure forever. VIA Rail has exhibited no marketing strategy, business plan or a scintilla of vision in its current operation.