
International Affairs

All Aboard? The Future of Transportation in Western Canada

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For generations, Canadian students have learned the traditional story of Confederation, whereby various regions, notably Prince Edward Island (PEI) and British Columbia, joined Canada on the condition that they be provided a transportation connection to the rest of the country. In the case of PEI, this connection was to be provided in the form of regular ferry services, while BC was promised a transcontinental railway. As the country grew and our population spread, vast swathes of Canada were joined together by this ribbon of iron and steel and this physical connection facilitated the creation of a common identity among far-flung peoples. To be Canadian meant many things, one of which consisted of being connected to our fellow citizens. As transportation technology has progressed, the ways in which Canadians travel has inevitably changed as well. In Western Canada, however, these changes have been deep and drastic; in many ways, Westerners are less connected to their fellow Canadians—and to each other—than they were before. The consequences have been unfortunate, and it is beyond time for this reality to change.

Until relatively recently, Westerners could choose one of several modes of intercity travel. In the post-war period, the railways were joined by airlines, by bus services, and by automobiles driving on the new highway system. Beginning in 1981 however, these options began to shrink (Clugston, 1982). In that year, the federal government announced drastic cuts to VIA Rail services—cuts which were most strongly felt in the western provinces and which had devastating economic impacts for many areas. Western rail service fluctuated through the decade and was all but decimated in the 1989-1990 federal budget, when Calgary and Regina were abandoned by the national rail service (CBC Archives, 2019). In less than a decade, most of Western Canada's largest cities, and the small towns in-between, were robbed of their vital rail services, while Canadians in the Quebec City-Windsor corridor were furnished with new trains and reinforced routes (Clugston, 1982). At the time, these service cuts were met with protest and caused adverse economic effects, but Westerners—with their typical resilience—turned to other means of travel.

This situation changed again in 2018 when Greyhound, arguably the most significant bus service provider in the region, announced the cancellation of all its services effective October 31 of that year (The Canadian Press, 2018). The cancellation of this service—justified due to rising costs and increased air travel—affected nearly two million customers and deprived countless remote communities of their only intercity transit connection. This unfortunate situation has left many people with few cost-effective alternatives, and even more families with no options at all.

Canadians know that domestic air travel, due to taxes, fees, and the duopoly market structure, is among the most expensive in the world (Siekierska, 2017). As for driving, our inclement weather makes automobile travel over vast distances impractical and unsafe for many, assuming one even has access to a car. In this way, it's an understatement to say that the state of intercity travel in Western Canada is less than desirable. Over the past several decades, the system has become more inefficient, inaccessible, and also more environmentally harmful; both flying and driving are highly carbon-intensive and do not contribute to Canada's greenhouse gas reduction goals. As we look forward to a low-carbon, globalized world, we need to transform intercity travel and there are several ways in which this can be achieved for Westerners.

Firstly, we must begin to rethink the ways in which Western Canada's large cities are connected to each other. The most prescient examples are Calgary and

Edmonton. The corridor that connects these two cities is the second most densely populated region in Canada, after the Quebec City-Windsor corridor, and has often been discussed as an attractive and viable region in which to implement high-speed rail service (TEMS, Inc., 2008). Despite this, the region still lacks a coordinated inter-city transit plan—an astonishing oversight given that the Government of Alberta itself has projected that annual passenger travel between Calgary and Edmonton will exceed 150 million trips by 2051 (TEMS, Inc., 2008).

As such, the region is a prime candidate for transportation alternatives and is an ideal place in which to think outside the box. Not only do current and future levels of traffic make the corridor one of the country's busiest routes both by air and automobile, but the region is situated in a single province, the terrain is relatively uncomplicated, and there is low-population density between the major cities. Indeed, certain groups have already begun to propose innovative transit solutions for the Calgary-Edmonton corridor, even daring to move beyond conventional rail alternatives. A recent proposal includes the TransPod project—a high-speed tube system that could decrease travel times between Calgary and Edmonton to approximately 30 minutes (Frey, 2020). Unfortunately, despite preliminary interest from the provincial government, the project lacks the resources to undertake a full study and to proceed with implementation.

Moving beyond the corridor in question, others have also begun proposing the re-establishment of certain rail routes to smaller destinations, particularly those frequented by tourists. The most recent example of this has been the proposal to re-establish the once-popular Calgary-Banff rail line—an idea that has been lauded as both economically and environmentally attractive (Canada Infrastructure Bank, 2020). In the realm of bus services, the British Columbian Government recently established BC Bus North to provide much-needed bus service in remote regions that suffered from the exit of Greyhound buses. While the initiative is still in its trial stages, initial results have been promising and those served by the route have indicated its importance to their lives (The Canadian Press, 2020). It is realistic to assume that a comparable service would be similarly received in other remote regions of Western Canada if those governments were to show similar concern for their far-flung residents; such options must be explored when analysing the future of western Canadian travel.

Taken together, it is clear that there is both a potential and an appetite among western Canadians to move beyond the decades-long reliance on automobile travel. The current transportation system in the region has been the victim of active destruction at worst, and benign neglect at best. Whether to provide more affordable options, to provide necessary links between our communities, or to provide more environmentally friendly travel alternatives, change is imperative. To facilitate this change, governments need to step-up and listen to citizens, entrepreneurs and

investors by providing the necessary support. As in the past, when it championed the construction of railways and the establishment of air travel, the government will be a necessary partner in executing this much needed and capital-intensive travel revitalization.

Not only will such investments benefit Western Canadian communities and economies, but they also directly align with the need to rapidly decarbonize our lives for a carbon-neutral future. We must reimagine travel for the 21st century and Western Canada is the ideal place for innovation to take place. With the proper supports from all levels of government, Westerners can—and should—place themselves at the forefront of these developments.

References

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