

Address by the Honourable Joe Volpe, P.C., M.P.
High Speed Rail Canada Toronto Symposium
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Thank you for inviting me to share in the experience of growing the support for High Speed Passenger Rail (HSR) in Canada. My compliments go to Paul Langan and his group for creating a forum wherein the merits of the project can develop and generate informed public debate.

My contribution, such as it is, will briefly touch on four themes. They are not new - so please bear with me - the topic has been the subject of numerous studies since I've been in elected office; studies, regrettably circulated among limited audiences and regurgitated for the public in terms of COST (always selectively and poorly defined, in my view, and consequently), always prohibitive. You know the outcome.

From my perspective as a federal legislator, I have come to frame HSR in the context of (1) Economic Development/Industrial Strategy; (2) Environmental: Global Warming, Energy Sustainability; (3) National Unity, and (4) Collective National Ambition. Nothing new here, some might observe, except the absence of political will necessary to transcend these and other themes and lead to action.

Today, a deep rooted economic crisis may spark calls for political engagement that crosses partisan, parochial approaches and taps into the transformative and forward-looking, national-interest solutions to nation building.

Governments by definition need to address issues of Economic Development. In good times there is greater reliance on "independent" market forces. In less auspicious moments, or depending on ideological persuasion, there is more direct involvement, which we call industrial strategy. Not surprisingly, given the nature of our geography, governments have made political/jurisdictional and financial investments in "Gateways" to Canada: the Pacific Gateway, The Atlantic Gateway and the Central Gateway stimulus to connect these two. An HSR project, beginning in the Quebec City – Windsor corridor, enhances that concept.

While various local and regional transit projects attempt to deal with people-moving issues intra-city, there has been little or no investment on an integrated rail transportation network to move people inter-city. Why not? We have invested billions of dollars in building and maintaining airports and road systems; yet, we continue to ignore not only the travel service potential of HSR but also its economic impact.

Even as other countries forge ahead, Canada lags far behind many OECD countries in its investment, no – its preparedness to invest, in HSR. In part, this is due to the fact that investors are dissuaded by building a system for which a return requires “prohibitively patient money”. But, from a public policy perspective, one must consider the industries and the thousands of jobs associated with increased demand for steel products, tool and die makers, civil engineering, computer/IT technologists, energy providers, concrete manufacturers, building tradesmen etc. Think of the underutilized manufacturing capacity and its untapped skills and talents; of the academic and R&D resources available to supply chain enterprises during and after construction demand; of the architectural and commercial stimuli inherent in the stations to be built and so on.

These are messages reluctantly and too infrequently offered for discussion, yet, they are the staple diet of debate in Europe, Asia....China, India, and Russia. Are we any less capable?

Why should we be more content with modes of transportation that exclude HSR as a component of a multi-model system, especially in corridors like the Calgary - Edmonton and the Quebec City – Windsor, home to 50% of Canadians and where the population density equals, if not surpasses, that that of some of the European and Asian countries where HSR has become the “norm”? If USA President Obama could see merit in linking future American HSR networks to Montreal and Vancouver should we display inferior vision, as yet another project strengthening North-South ties is proposed by our neighbours?

From a National Unity perspective, an HSR project in the Quebec-Windsor corridor would represent the first (and biggest) large-scale project since the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway that involves two of Canada’s most populous provinces. At a time when unity seems to be under constant strains and stresses is there a more positive, more productive, more long-term proposal that engages Quebec and Ontario in co-operative economic, environmental and social plan? Imagine the Bloc Quebecois supporting an economic enterprise that draws Quebec, Trois Rivieres and Montreal closer and more tightly to Kingston, Toronto, Kitchener-Waterloo, London, Windsor etc. Well, they do!! It’s an opportunity to get out of the piece meal, one-off approach to economic development they don’t want to miss. Do we?

Forums like this one, which aim to bring together stakeholders, industry interests, environmental interests, and other advocacy groups, will form the basis for framing the political discussion concerning how to allocate resources for common goals and interests.

Surely that will include the environmental impacts associated with developing, maintaining and servicing an HSR system inter-connected with intra-city transit networks. Such impacts need to receive the dollars and cents valuation they merit in this investment. I am not merely referring to the carbon footprint, GHG emissions relative to other passenger modes available - it is not my intention, **today**, to weigh the advantages of the one relative to the others. I am, however, drawing attention to the required development for alternative energy source investments for such a system – thus making them more economically viable at the outset. Think in terms of a trans-Canadian corridor and power grid that requires investments in new environmentally sustainable technologies and the leadership that would accrue to us in the Western Hemisphere in the 21st century as a result.

Others have. They researched; they planned and they are implementing projects to utilize an underserved mode – passenger rail – to develop a transportation nexus to the next generation of economic and social development. Spain comes to mind, as do others, including our own Founding Fathers.

140 years ago, they aimed to create a great nation in the vast territory we call Canada. With a population then barely the size of the one currently resident in the 416 area code of the GTA, they nonetheless determined to build a link from Vancouver to Halifax! Their challenge: to seek solutions and to narrate opportunity.

Some scoffed at what they called “naive ambition” or worse, “costly arrogance”. But no-one accused those Founding Fathers of lacking political will. We know the outcome; we enjoy the results of their entrepreneurialism. We’ve been riding the coat tails of their collective ambition and vision for 140 years.

Are we any less capable today? Will we galvanize a vision and develop our own “contemporary coat tails”? My friends, you have a duty to help shape the resolve of legislators. We legislators have an obligation to set the path. I think we’re both up to the task.

Thank you