

Canadian Nation Building

June 2, 2008

The Department of Transport is one of the few remaining super ministries of government. It requires an acceptance of an “end game”, the commitment to invest in its attainment, and the perseverance to see the investment through to the completion of the many singular projects that make up the entire puzzle. In short, of necessity, as a department it must attract people who recognize the need for and development of an “industrial strategy” in the national interest. That means it invariably reflects an activist government or illustrates why a government must be prepared to intervene in the marketplace.

From the very beginning, Canadians and their leaders have viewed transportation as the infrastructure for the growth and survival of our country. Our railroads were (and remain) integral to the health and development of our transportation networks and system that have been the genesis of Confederation and to create a competitive “empire” in size and economic worth to the neighbour immediately to the south.

Nothing has changed, but the intensity of the activity and the ambition. Railroads, then roads, shipping, and waterways opened the interior for the development of land and natural resources and for the building of communities, cities, and societies.

Today, we have started to talk of “gateways”: Pacific, Atlantic, and Great Lakes. The Liberal Government under the Right Honourable Paul Martin hoped to build public support for huge investments in building the necessary infrastructure to move goods to the emerging markets of Asia and the more established, rich consumer markets of Europe and America. Equally important, were the concomitant economic and political capital allotted to ensuring that the necessary collateral “industrial” investments also met the test – so that Canada would become the incubator, the laboratory for the scientific, technological and innovative inputs associated with building those gateways. At the very base of all of this is the academic research and development ground work that provides nascent and expanding industries with the human resources talent to meet the challenges of a consumer (from elsewhere) driven economy.

Case in point is the auto sector which main producers choose Canada for assembly over other jurisdictions because the complete “transport infrastructure” exists here as in no other place. But we risk losing this advantage through neglect and inability to note the correlation with other factors “niched” off to other departments. For instance, recently the Minister of Transport (responsible for auto emissions standards), set “targets” for the industry to reflect similar initiatives in the US. Unfortunately, while the American regulations were accompanied by a \$40 billion investment in research and development for the next 12 years, Canadians and the manufacturing sector were left with the solace of “doing the right thing” and no help from its own government. As a result, the research and development will be done in the United States, sucking our engineering capacity south with it. What else will follow?

Recently, some 1500 usable boxcars were being dismantled in Thunder Bay and another 1500 in Winnipeg, to be sold for scrap to markets in Russia and Brazil for 5 cents a kg. Meanwhile, Asian consumers complain that Canadian suppliers of agricultural products and other commodities have trouble meeting delivery deadlines. Our NAFTA partners – primarily the USA – complain of the security driven congestion and lack of access routes at our border crossings.

The Canada Border Services Agency and local politicians seem to have more sway on the future of Canadian economic development than the Minister of Transport is able to weigh on the government philosophy. So it contents itself with some micro transport issues, important nonetheless, and worthy of the support the official opposition gives them – like C-23, C-8, C-3, and C-7. All of these were part of an omnibus Transport Bill in the Martin government.

Even on “micro” transportation issues like rail and auto safety, (the Transport Committee has been involved in an in-depth study on rail safety due to the unacceptable number of rail accidents), subsequent progress is slow. Last November, I introduced, C-481, entitled *An Act to amend the Motor Vehicle Safety Act (Electronic Stability Control)* to enhance a vehicle’s stability and prevent loss of control and roll-overs in all driving conditions. No reaction from the Minister yet.

Are there any new initiatives from this government for a transportation strategy? Not in the area of intra city or inter city transport! Aside from the cancellation of mass transit programs in cities like Ottawa, dragging its heels in Mississauga, re-confirming projects in Toronto already announced by the previous Liberal government, there are precious few initiatives, or vision, for a transportation strategy. For example, the perennial Quebec-Windsor “fast train” concept has now received more funds for feasibility studies funds than would have been required to actually build it when I first came to Parliament in 1988. In the area of ports, marine and air, the focus is on governance models and security - essentially “status quo” measures – rather than on economic growth and development.

Until the Department of Transport and its Minister are given due sway in Cabinet, Canada will seem to be the land of missed opportunity.

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