

## Slow-speed Liberals boarding high-speed train

Has Michael Ignatieff found a platform?

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For many months, the Liberals, the party with an empty department-store window, have been flirting with the idea of high-speed rail.

The flirting, it seems, has now turned to serious engagement. With blessings from Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff, Joe Volpe, the party's transportation critic, has been out beating the fast-rail drums. High-speed rail will be Canada's largest-scale project since the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway, Mr. Volpe says.

Rail-industry officials have been called into Iggy's office for input and advice. They are almost certain, judging from their discussions, that the bullet trains will be in the Grit platform for an election that may be only a month or two away.

Mr. Ignatieff's inner sanctum isn't confirming or denying. The party is sticking to a strategy of holding off on major announcements until an election campaign is under way. That might work so long as an election is around the corner. But if the polling date is pushed back, how long can the party putter along in a policy void?

Meanwhile, another of Mr. Ignatieff's grand putative schemes, the development of a national power grid, appears to have been pushed down the priority list. High-speed rail (HSR) would be expensive enough without coupling it with another prodigious enterprise.

Liberals see the HSR benefits as outweighing the cost. They say Canada is falling behind, becoming the only industrialized country without high-speed rail. HSR is big not only in Europe; it is also hot in Japan, Russia, South Africa and Argentina, to name just a few countries. In the United States, President Barack Obama is making a big HSR pitch – and he is talking of transborder links with Canada.

Priority No. 1 in a Liberal plan would be the long-talked-about line from Quebec to Windsor, an area of high population density. A Calgary-Edmonton line, which also has been studied ad infinitum, is on the list too, even though the Alberta government is cool to the idea. And Mr. Volpe says Ottawa has to get serious with Washington on transborder, silver-bullet corridors.

Liberal proponents see a high-speed plan as scoring high on many policy fronts: jobs, economic development, the environment, national unity, consumer convenience. On construction alone, never mind the spinoffs, Mr. Volpe estimates that 270,000 jobs will be created over a 10-year period. On the environment, he talks of taking planes out of the sky, cars off the road, carbon emissions out of the air. On national unity, he asks, who can think of a better way to engage Quebec and Ontario in a co-operative economic, environmental and social plan? Even the Bloc Québécois supports the Windsor-Quebec project.

Then there are the downsides. With the country already taking on a major budget deficit, how can this be an appropriate time for such an extravagant enterprise? Even the rail lobby, while enthusiastic about HSR, has given Iggy's office data from Europe and Asia showing the lack of profitability of such ventures.

There are other questions. Would HSR really reduce car and jet traffic enough to have a significant environmental impact? Does Alberta have the population density to support it? What do you do with Via Rail? HSR would replace some of its busiest routes. How could it survive?

The best way of selling the rail project, some argue, is as a vehicle to help integrate a North American economy that is plagued by a thickening border and other trading woes. Put the plan in the context of links to Boston, New York, Seattle and Los Angeles, and high speed sounds far more enticing. That said, the Obama plans are only in the exploratory stage and they involve higher speed, not the superfast electric trains in Europe and elsewhere.

The Conservative government was initially cold to high-speed rail, but it now sees some merit in it. Yet another study involving the feds, Ontario and Quebec is under way. Some feel that it's possible the Tories might upend Grit plans by coming forward with a mild endorsement of HSR themselves. That's doubtful. More likely they will condemn a Liberal scheme as a giant, money-sucking boondoggle.

Mr. Ignatieff doesn't see it that way. He believes the country has been thinking too small. Time, he says, to rekindle some of the nation-building spirit of old. Time, he says, to get with the new century.

He needs something for the department-store window. In the post-carbon era, new trains might look good in there – especially if you don't look at the price tag.