

Political fight brews over bus service cuts

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Buses and election campaigns go hand in hand, but federal politicians can expect an earful when they wheel into the hundreds of towns and cities about to lose their Greyhound service.

The issues facing Canada's smaller communities get big attention during campaigns as party leaders wrestle over votes in the country's many rural ridings with national media in tow.

Transportation links have been the stuff of political speeches dating back to Sir John A. Macdonald, who joined the provinces by rail.

This week's surprising announcement that Greyhound Canada will pull out of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario and review its operations in the rest of Western Canada unless it gets government grants and regulations are relaxed is triggering political concern and a scramble at Transport Canada.

In an interview with The Globe and Mail, Transport Minister John Baird said his top officials are in talks with the provinces and bus industry. He has dismissed Greyhound's call for federal aid as "a shakedown," saying bus regulations have nothing to do with Ottawa.

"I guess they're just throwing the federal government into this equation just because we have a bigger chequebook than the provinces," he said.

However, the government is looking into other options, such as expanding Via Rail's service or finding other bus companies to fill in the gaps.

"I'm very concerned about this though, make no mistake about it," said Mr. Baird, suggesting that federal infrastructure programs may be able to help the situation.

NDP Leader Jack Layton, whose party holds several Northwestern Ontario ridings that would be affected, said Ottawa must play a role.

"They hauled the rail lines out from these communities after they sold off rail service to the private sector; they've seen air service disappear after they sold off Air Canada," he said. "And now buses? The last remaining refuge of the lower-income traveller. . . . What are people supposed to do? Go back to horse and buggy?" The Liberals, who said this week they can't support the Conservatives because the Tories do not believe in government, said Mr. Baird's remarks provide a further example of this.

"You really have to believe that there is a role for the government of Canada," Liberal transport critic Joe Volpe said. "I guess Baird doesn't think so."