

# From sea to sea, the railway pulls Canada together



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Travel  
Thomson News Service

It was the railway, more than anything else, that originally pulled Canada together into a nation from sea to sea.

Isn't it incredible, then, that the Mulroney government is proposing to slash its already inadequate funding of Via Rail? What's more, it is threatening to "privatize" the passenger service, which could be tantamount to killing it.

Granted, the government has piously offered "reasons" that are supposed to make its intention seem sound and businesslike: Only three per cent of inter-city travel in Canada is by train; Via Rail is losing money; the federal government has to take tough measures to cope with its annual deficit of about \$30 billion.

On closer examination, however,

the situation looks much different: Rail service accounts for 30 per cent of travel by common carriers (with airlines at 44 per cent and buses at 26 per cent). Via's losses arise largely because the two freight-carrying railways (whose tracks are used by Via) have allowed their roadbeds to deteriorate. As for the deficit, the government in Ottawa never seems to be short of funds to spend on services that are much less essential than basic transportation.

### BETTER SERVICE

Even with the inadequate financing with which Via has had to operate throughout its 10-year existence, it has demonstrated that it can be effective and successful enough to justify its continued operation.

Standards of service have improved steadily in most areas, although it is always possible to find shortcomings. Via has, for instance, scheduled daylight runs through the Canadian Rockies, making a spectacular journey out of what previously could only be imagined.

And it has organized a highly interesting series of tours and excursions in every part of the country, usually offering close-up views of otherwise inaccessible but scenic

areas of Canada.

On a more prosaic level, the Crown corporation has introduced the concept of travel credits as compensation for late arrivals, and complimentary light meals for coach passengers on its busy Toronto-Montreal route.

Such charges contributed to a notable improvement in Via's 1988 operating results: Ridership rose by almost 10 per cent and passenger revenues by nearly 13 per cent.

### LOOK ABROAD

Those gains may or may not prove that rail service in Canada has a future, although they certainly point in that direction.

But a look at other countries seems to confirm that there is plenty of potential for growth in railway passenger services. In Britain, it is often impossible to find space, so popular are the trains on weekends. Accommodation on South Africa's Blue Train between Pretoria and Cape Town is usually sold out months in advance. In Japan, seats are at a premium on many inter-city express trains.

It can be argued, of course, that Canada is vastly bigger than such countries as those and that our rail service faces correspondingly bigger problems.

### AMTRAK EXPANDS

But the U.S. is pretty big, too. There, Amtrak - the U.S. counterpart of Via, created in 1971 - is operating successfully and profitably from coast to coast. As recently as July 18, it reinstated a daily overnight train service between Washington and Montreal via New York - which was made possible by U.S. government funding of major improvements to the roadbed.

It's sobering to think of the congestion of our overtaxed airports and highways if rail travellers should be dumped upon them.

The existing combination of rail, air and highway may not be totally satisfactory, but it works efficiently on balance and provides options for periods of bad weather, traffic peaks and major disasters.

Rather than abandoning Via Rail, Ottawa ought to give it a long-term mandate. Let the politicians and bureaucrats find other budget areas to cut - there are opportunities galore - and give Via the authority to re-invest in routes and services that are genuinely needed.

### TRAVEL NOTEBOOK

Here are notes on news of current interest to travellers:

-The 1989 U.S. National Hot Air Balloon Championship, which opened yesterday in Baton Rouge,

La., continues until Aug. 13. Winners of the colorful competition will represent the U.S. at the 1991 World Championship of Ballooning in Montreal.

-Air Canada has extended the life of its frequent-flyer program, Aeroplan, by one year to Dec. 31, 1990. The number of free seats allotted to the program has been increased by 30 per cent, while "blackout" periods have been reduced by 50 per cent. As well, points can be redeemed now for certain "Sun Charter" flights to Fort Lauderdale, West Palm Beach, Tampa and Fort Myers, Fla.

-The same airline, beginning Oct. 29 and throughout the winter, will operate up to six charter flights a week between Toronto and Fort Lauderdale, using L-1011 aircraft. The increase, from last winter's once-a-week B-767 flight, is a response to growing interest in Fort Lauderdale and Boca Raton to the north, the company says. Fort Lauderdale is home port for several Caribbean cruise ships.

-For a book of discount coupons valid until Dec. 20, write to "5500 Free," Palm Beach County Convention and Visitors Bureau, 1555 Palm Beach Lakes Blvd., West Palm Beach, Fla. 33401.

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