

# Your Opinion

## Northern Insights: A letter to my unborn granddaughter

Recently, on a trip to Atikokan, Bob Michels of the Atikokan Economic Development Corporation explained the outline of a community re-development process he's about to launch with the Atikokan Future Incentives Corporation. Bob will make the details public in due course. One small component of his process really intrigued me: imagining yourself in the next century, writing a letter to your grandchildren, telling them about how things have changed since 1992, and why.

I really like that idea, and want to thank Bob for his imagination and innovation. I have adopted Bob's idea as the basis for this week's column.

#### Thunder Bay, Ontario  
November 30, 2002

Dear Granddaughter:

Your letter asks whether I ever took a ride on a passenger train. "What was it like?" you ask. "Why don't we have passenger trains anymore?" To answer that question, you have to go back ten years, to 1992 to something that got buried in the headlines after the constitutional referendum of that same year: the release of the report on the Royal Commission on Passenger Transportation. That Commission had been set up in 1989 after the Conservative federal government of the time severely cut back passenger rail services, much to the disgust of voters.

To pacify the electorate, the government gave the Royal commission three years to go around and listen to everyone's complaints. At the time, it was a traditional Canadian political solution—defer real decisions, by creating a Royal Commission to study a problem.

The Commission's recommendations weren't taken very seriously by anyone when they first came out in 1992. Air Canada and Canadian Airlines were both going through temporary financial problems at the time, but by the time the world-wide recession ended in early 1994, the leaner and meaner airlines had worked out deals to not compete on some routes, in effect carving up all foreign and domestic routes, thus acting more like one company. That's why you can't fly to Thunder Bay on Air Canada any more, but you can by Canadian Airlines.

The Royal Commission called for all transportation to be completely market-driven, phasing out all forms of transportation subsidies in no more than 10 years. The Conservative federal government of 1992 was heading into an election, and ignored the Commission's recommendations by giving both airlines enough loan guarantees to make it through the last part of the recession. But the Liberal coalition government that was formed after the 1993 federal election decided to take the Commission's recommendations seriously, and announced the phase out of all subsidies by the year 2000.

That's why you have to pay over \$75 in tolls—a loonie every toll gate—when you drive from your home in southern Ontario to visit us here in Thunder Bay. The gasoline taxes, which steadily went up every year from 1993 to the year 2000—now pay for the rest of the costs.

**NORTHERN  
INSIGHTS**  
by Larry Sanders



I hardly ever drive anywhere any more, since gasoline is over \$2.50 a litre. Even with our highly fuel-efficient car, the cost of driving anywhere is so high, we drive only when we

really want to give ourselves a special treat. Not like the old days, when we jumped in the car and went anywhere, anytime.

Instead, we take the bus, both within the city and to go out of town. We wouldn't mind taking the train if we could to go out of town, but Via Rail routes cut in 1989 on the north shore of Lake Superior were never restored, so we can't. We have to take the bus. Bus fares only went up by 25 per cent, to offset the higher fuel taxes, just like that Royal Commission said they would. But train fares became out of reach for anyone except the very, very wealthy. A one-way fare from Toronto to Vancouver by train was three times the cost of the air fare. Air fares only went up about 50 per cent to offset the costs of running the airports and air traffic control systems, which the airlines had to pay for. The resulting fare difference was so great, passenger trains disappeared altogether by 1999. There's a group on the north shore of Lake Superior that want to get one for a museum, but that's likely the last we'll hear anything about passenger trains.

As you know, the form of transportation that really benefitted from the changes in 1993 was rail freight. The CPR and the CNR stopped paying tax on the diesel fuel they used to run their trains—only fair, since the trains didn't use the roads the diesel taxes were supposed to pay for. That made trucking less competitive for anything but very short haul, specialized loads. The railways prospered, taking over 70 per cent of the medium and long-haul freight business in Canada.

That's another reason we didn't get any passenger trains back when the de-subsidization policy was brought in. The CPR and the CNR wanted to charge VIA Rail so much to use their tracks, train passenger fares became prohibitive.

The Royal Commission's recommendation that "the federal government amend legislation to make rail track access available to all qualified passenger carriers who are willing to pay for what they use and ensure that all such carriers have a right of access to essential infrastructure and are treated equally in the movement of traffic" was ignored by the government, because of political pressure from the CPR and CNR. The railways just didn't want to share their rail beds with any passenger trains.

That, dear granddaughter, is why we don't have passenger trains any more in Canada. Too bad, isn't it? Trains are well accepted as the most environmentally-friendly way of moving anything.

\*But Canadians won't move themselves around by trains—just move their freight, thanks to that Royal commission of 1992.

Your loving grandfather

Larry Sanders

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