



SATURDAY, JANUARY 23, 2021

Nose Stretchers?

By Greg Gormick

Frank magazine employed an effective and evocative word when reporting on dubious political statements back in its heyday: nose stretchers.

What's a nose stretcher? Think of Pinocchio when he told tall tales. Think of actor Leslie Nielsen in the movie, *Airplane*, whose proboscis grew each time he uttered soothing words to calm the frightened passengers without regard for the facts. Nose stretchers!

Trainloads of nose stretchers have been told about the 2012 axing of the *Northlander* by the publicly-owned Ontario Northland Railway (ONR). Some are thigh-slapping side splitters in railway circles. Here's one from the Ford government's 2018 election promise book:

"Reinstate passenger rail service to the North, at a cost of \$45 million for refurbishment and operating costs."

Advance notice of this "detailed" promise – no doubt fully studied and costed by rail-savvy political advisors – came from Nipissing MPP Vic Fedeli, who told his Facebook fans on November 25, 2017 that his government would "bring back Ontario Northland passenger rail service by the end of our mandate."

Nose stretchers like those are rolling again thanks to typically vicious partisan politics, desperate glances at the ticking election countdown clock and enough feeble attempts to cover political cabooses to fill a railway yard. Here's a classic from the *North Bay Nugget*:

"Fedeli said the infrastructure that supported the service from Toronto to Cochrane has been 'decimated. A lot was lost' by the decision to sell off the Ontario Northland Transportation Commission (ONTC)... Among those assets was the closing of the Ontario Northland office at Union Station in Toronto, and a number of stations along the route were closed and have fallen into disrepair. 'The infrastructure is gone,' he said."



The *Northlander* was launched in 1977 as an innovative Toronto-North Bay-Timmins day train to complement the overnight *Northland* on the Toronto-Kapuskasing run. What kind of train former Minister of Finance Vic Fedeli keeps promising and delaying remains unknown and undelivered. Photo courtesy of A.W. Mooney

Well, not quite. It was Mike Harris' Conservatives who badly wounded the ONR, playing privatization games with it while also slashing the daylights out of public transportation funding across Ontario. It was the Harris government – not the Wynne Liberals – that derailed the ONR, putting it on and off the auction block, stuffing its board with friends and starving it.

As for the former Ontario Finance Minister's claims about missing track, that deserves an award. I'm sure CN will be wondering what tracks the Grits removed from their Toronto-North Bay line. In fact, track has been added at public expense on the south end of the privately-owned CN line for the extension of the provincially-funded GO trains from Richmond Hill to Gormley. And CN has installed smooth-riding welded rail on portions of the Washago-North Bay segment.

When it comes to those "missing" stations, they aren't. They were closed due to a lack of those pesky commodities required to keep them open for business: passengers and passenger trains.

As for a ticket office at Toronto Union Station, it would be interesting to hear how it could be such a vital cog in this politically-wound machine that its absence is holding up the return of the *Northlander*, which Fedeli says won't be like the old one and "will never be the same as it was before. Those days are in the past."

And the alleged rail infrastructure loss has increased from "gone" to "gutted."

"When the Liberals cancelled passenger rail, they really gutted the system right from Union Station to the stations all the way up the line. There were tracks removed as well."

Nose stretcher alert! But I'm impressed by the plethora of strategic railway knowledge the MPP has acquired since the ONTC became his cause du jour. This may be due to the February 2020 ONTC board appointment of a Fedeli childhood friend in Southern Ontario. He collects toy trains and choo choo trinkets. He emailed me his appointment news and a magnanimous offer:

"Glad to have you as my 'shadow' for your objective assessments and opinions."

There's more, but I'll reserve the juiciest morsels for my upcoming book. One involves Fedeli labeling me in the June 5, 2019 edition of *Northern Ontario Business* as a consultant with a "self-serving agenda." This was after he asked on July 27, 2018 if he could host a North Bay launch of the rail plan I was commissioned to produce for All Aboard Northern Ontario, the Temiskaming Municipal Association and the Northeastern Ontario Municipal Association. He even suggested a friendly snapshot to celebrate All Aboard Northern Ontario's acceptance.

The gentleman may have been irked by my release of a December 2018 email from an ONTC vice-president who opposed a relaunch of the *Northlander*, calling it "one of those political minefields that never dies. Vic will ultimately find this out, if he isn't catching on already."

Perhaps he was harbouring a grudge because I declined the party's invitation to serve – for free, of course – as co-chair of its Transportation and Infrastructure Policy Advisory Council in 2016.

Still, you clearly see that rail passenger service in Northeastern Ontario will be back on the rails in ... well, soon. In November, Fedeli told the *Nugget* that his government is "pushing hard" for its return. He pointed to its recent last minute studies and surveys as clear indicators of this.

Since 2019, Fedeli has advised patience, repeating his plea in the *Nugget* just a few weeks ago:

"There are a lot of balls in the air. We want to do it right. We don't want to take any shortcuts."

"Balls" is an interesting word choice. It's not a nose stretcher. Nor is this last nugget from the *Nugget*: "But Fedeli admits there is still no timeline on when [the *Northlander*] will return."



Greg Gormick is a transportation analyst and policy adviser whose clients have included CP, CN, VIA and Metrolinx, and elected officials of four political parties. His forthcoming book is ***Railroaded: The Life, Near-Death and Future of Canada's Passenger Trains.***

<https://wawa-news.com/index.php/2021/01/23/railroaded-nose-stretchers/>