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# Strange Bedfellows

By Greg Gormick

Conservative MPP Vic Fedeli has dug himself into a pit with endless promises to restore Ontario Northland Railway (ONR) passenger service “before the next election.” He’s now appealing for help from Liberal Speaker of the House of Commons Anthony Rota. Politics, passenger trains, and ill-advised promises make strange bedfellows.

The good news is MP Rota has offered to assist the former Ontario Minister of Finance, although he did refrain from agreeing to provide the funding required to give Fedeli his requested “Get Out of Jail – Go Free” Monopoly card. But isn’t it heartwarming to hear Fedeli suggest that North Bay boys from different political clubs play nice with their choo choos?

In fact, Rota can help Fedeli, his government, and the lamentable ONR out of the pit they’ve dug for themselves by adopting my quick and easy solution: Restore the Northlander by axing a dying VIA train in Southern Ontario. This would release its two locomotives and four Light, Rapid and Comfortable (LRC) cars for a new train from Toronto to North Bay and Timmins. Actually, South Porcupine with a bus connection to the downtown Timmins station that’s now a bus depot. That’s because some provincial boneheads long ago ripped up the tracks to this historic and conveniently-located station.

As much as it pains me to say this, there is no longer any point in maintaining VIA’s rump service on its North Main Line from Toronto to Sarnia via Kitchener, Stratford, and London. It was once a thriving CN service linking Toronto and Chicago, but that time is long past.

When I was under contract to VIA in 2010, we had a plan to reboot this service using ex-VIA Budd rail diesel cars rebuilt by an innovative firm in Moncton. There would have been six trains in each direction, coordinated with improved GO Toronto-Guelph commuter service. The two publicly-funded railways would have shared the infrastructure upgrading costs to benefit both agencies and all passengers under this thrifty plan.



**A NEW NORTHLANDER:** Existing equipment from a VIA train in Southwestern Ontario that should be axed and additional cars from VIA's large mothballed fleet could and should be used to relaunch Toronto-North Bay-Timmins rail passenger service immediately, says Greg Gormick. Photo by Ray Farand

At the last minute, I was told to halt the speech, press release and backgrounders I was writing for respected and experienced VIA President Paul Côté to unveil at a Kitchener business breakfast. The next thing I knew, Paul had been “retired” and replaced by a Conservative duo: One an unemployed railway exec and the other a lawyer with ties to the Harper and Mulroney governments.

What followed is too lengthy and complex to repeat here, but it sure wasn't good, especially the VIA service cuts on this and other routes in 2012. In the midst of this mess, provincially-funded GO suddenly expanded west from Georgetown to Kitchener for purely political reasons and immediately chewed into VIA's ridership. GO's subsidized tickets were half the price of VIA's subsidized tickets. Passengers voted with their feet and their wallets, shifting to the slower GO trains, even though they paled by comparison with VIA's trains.

Constant politically-motivated tinkering with the GO service has destroyed VIA's ridership. So has the new van service funded by the Fordies on the London-Sarnia route segment.

There is but one VIA train left on this once bustling route. It heads west to Sarnia at dinnertime, soldiering on with few passengers and high costs, returning to Toronto at the crack of dawn and making many “rolling stops,” where it blows through towns without stopping because no one gets on or off.

So, axe this sad little VIA train and transfer it to a useful Toronto-North Bay-Timmins service. A second identical trainset, plus a baggage car for each of them, can easily be obtained from VIA, which is using only two-thirds of its LRCs on its reduced Quebec-Windsor Corridor. You'd have two new Northlanders and, just as Fedeli has mused, they'd be nothing like the clapped-out, 54-year-old former GO commuter equipment previously used on the Northlander.

Mind you, this would only be a stopgap measure until Ford Nation releases its definitive northern rail passenger plan. We've been told they have one ... and then they don't have one, but are working on it ... or do have one and don't want to let All Aboard Northern Ontario founder Eric Boutilier see it under his pending Freedom of Information request.

Northeastern Ontario requires some urgent action to reconnect its towns with each other and Toronto by rail. ONR bus service has dwindled. When it does run, it is too often a virus carrier. Nor has air service returned, which never met the needs of the numerous points along the rail lines that are way off the air service grid.

In the end, a system approach is required to produce a comprehensive and affordable northern rail solution, not just a single train on an isolated route that doesn't connect with any others. Coordination with the subsidized ONR buses – not a repeat of the bus competition that existed for most of the Northlander's life – needs to be addressed squarely.

With Rota's help, I'm certain my emergency action plan will succeed and help to – using an already overused political buzz phrase – “build back better” as we grapple with the needs of a post-pandemic world.

And there's a bonus in my plan for Fedeli, who recently said he won't be “rushed” into any solutions and he expects the train to be different from the flea-bitten Northlander of old: “I see it as a modern-looking service, not unlike transportation in Southern Ontario.”

Vic's in luck. Not only does my Northlander replacement look like a Southern Ontarian train, it is a Southern Ontarian train!

You're welcome.



**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***.

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