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TRANSPORT

OFF THE RAILS

How Canada killed high-speed train travel, and why we should revive it

BY MONTE PAULSEN

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How Canada fell from leader to laggard in high-speed rail, and why that needs to change

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ON THE MORNING OF DECEMBER 10, 1968, a shiny new locomotive left Toronto's Union Station, pulling a gleaming train packed to its "power dome" with journalists. Just four short years earlier, Japan had rolled out the world's first 200-kilometre-per-hour bullet train, and now scores of reporters were aboard to witness North America's technological response: the TurboTrain, designed by Sikorsky Aircraft, built by Montreal Locomotive Works, and proudly operated by Canadian National.

An hour later, the TurboTrain slammed into a truck.

"The driver of an empty meat truck near Kingston was used to beating trains across a level crossing and tried to outrun the Turbo," recalls John Downing, who reported on the maiden journey to Montreal. "We cut the truck in two, like a hot knife through butter."

The hapless meat man survived. Canada's efforts to develop modern passenger rail service did not. Four decades later, we remain the sole G8 nation without high-speed rail.

Japan's legendary bullet trains now carry 410,000 people a day. France's Train à Grande Vitesse (TGV), launched more than a decade after the Turbo, moves 268,000 passengers daily, at speeds exceeding 300 kilometres per hour. Altogether, high-speed trains dash across almost twenty nations. These include not only powerhouses such as Russia, China, and the United Kingdom, but Finland, Portugal, and Turkey. Many of these countries are spending stimulus funds to expand their networks.

New high-speed rail projects are in the works around the world. Argentina and South Africa are laying track; Iran and Brazil are laying plans; Morocco has landed partners. Saudi Arabia is building a line from Medina to Mecca, and may collaborate with neighbouring states to develop a 1,984-kilometre railway from Kuwait to Oman. There is talk the line could extend to Yemen, which would become the first nation served by high-speed rail but not a functional government.

Even the Americans are spending billions to extend high-speed rail beyond the Boston–Washington corridor. The stimulus bill passed by Congress in February includes $8 billion for new passenger rail projects. California is likely first in line for that money, with construction slated to begin in 2011 on a statewide high-speed network that promises to whisk passengers from San Francisco to Los Angeles in two and a half hours. Also fighting for a cut of the billions are Texas, with its T-Bone Line connecting Dallas to San Antonio and Houston; Florida, with a bullet train that would fly along the shores of the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico; and New York, seeking a link from the Big Apple through Albany to Toronto.

Why are these countries planning and building high-speed rail lines? Because they're a kind of insurance policy for the twenty-first century. High-speed rail ensures that cities remain connected the next time the price of oil rises, and in the event that $150-a-barrel oil returns for good. Because it is so much more fuel efficient, high-speed rail is far, far greener than flying, and in a century of dwindling oil it's also far more economically sustainable — a fact Saudi Arabia seems to grasp, but Canada does not.

Canada possesses both the expertise to build high-speed rail systems — Bombardier is a global leader — and the population to support them, along routes such as the Quebec City–Windsor and Calgary–Edmonton corridors. What it lacks is the political will to act. As a result, Canada is failing to leverage the recent wave of infrastructure spending, let alone nourish its legacy as a nation built on the spine of its railroad.

"We're so far behind the rest of the world," says railway activist Paul Langan, "it's like we can't even see their tail lights anymore."

The Turbo was capable of speeds approaching those of today's fastest passenger trains. In December of 1967, a three-car Turbo set the world record for rail travel on a New

COUNTRIES WITH HIGH-SPEED RAIL

● EXISTING ○ PROPOSED

1964	JAPAN	2007	TAIWAN
1978	ITALY	2008	CHINA
1981	FRANCE	2009	TURKEY
1984	RUSSIA	2009	ARGENTINA
1990	SWEDEN	2010	SOUTH AFRICA
1991	AUSTRIA	2012	SAUDI ARABIA
1991	GERMANY	2013	ISRAEL
1991	SWITZERLAND	2013	MOROCCO
1992	SPAIN	2014	BRAZIL
1996	NETHERLANDS	2019	VIETNAM
1997	BELGIUM	N/D	AUSTRALIA
1998	NORWAY	N/D	MEXICO
1998	PORTUGAL		
2000	UNITED STATES		
2003	UNITED KINGDOM		
2004	SOUTH KOREA		
2006	FINLAND		

RIDERSHIP

PASSENGERS PER DAY

410,000
JAPAN

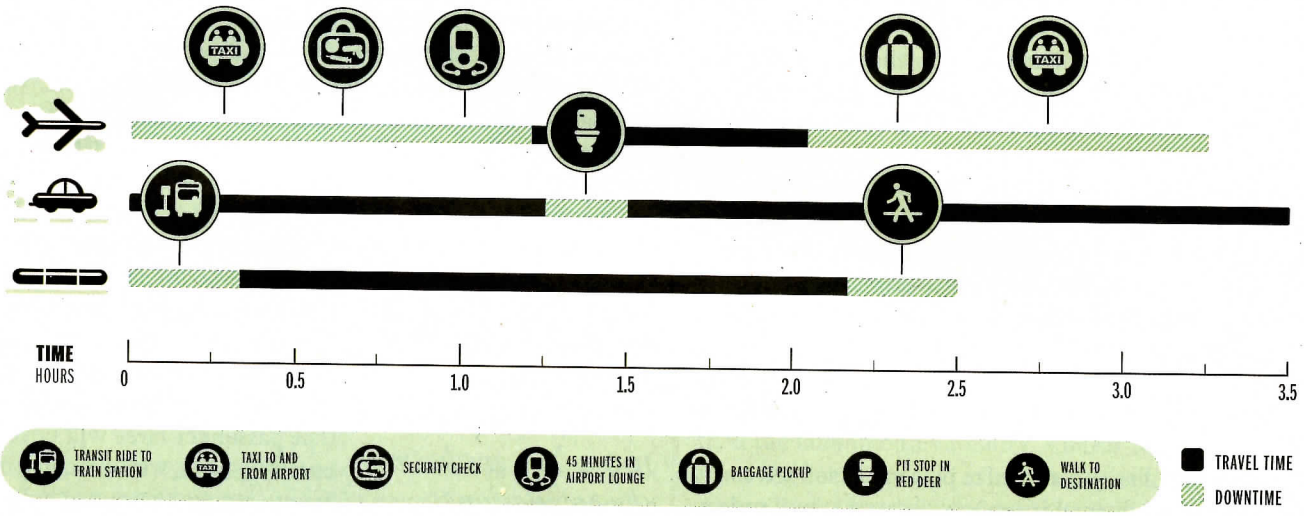
268,000
FRANCE

104,600
SOUTH KOREA

TRAVEL TIME

CALGARY TO EDMONTON

DISTANCE: 300 KM

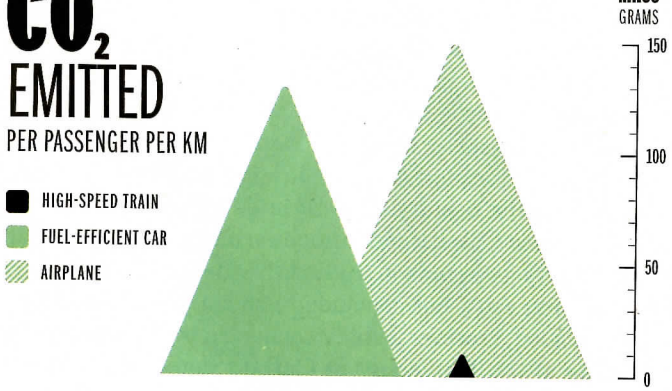


AVERAGE FARE

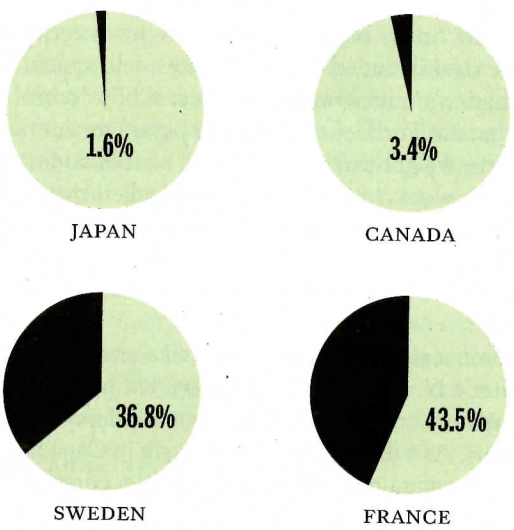
$138–$164 $42–$126 $97–$115

CO_2 EMITTED

PER PASSENGER PER KM



PERCENTAGE OF NATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE BUDGET SPENT ON RAIL



Design by Rachel Tennenhouse and Paul Kim; research by Katie Addleman

Jersey test track, reaching 275 kilometres per hour. At that rate, the trip between downtown Toronto and downtown Montreal would have taken two hours—less than the time it takes to fly, once ground travel to and from the airports is factored in.

But CN's Turbo never travelled at anywhere near that speed, because the company operated it over the same tracks on which it ran its other trains. Its speed was therefore limited by relatively tight turns, and, as its maiden voyage so graphically illustrated, the need to slow down at road crossings. Instead, the train topped out at around 160 kilometres per hour, and the Toronto-Montreal journey took four long hours. Given that the drive can be done in five, the TurboTrain had little chance of commercial success.

"What's the point of another study?" *asks Paul Langan*

France, by comparison, was at the time following Japan's example. Its TGV lines featured welded rails, wider curves, no road crossings, and continuous fences that prevented trespassing by animals or people, and served as noise barriers in residential areas. Since it launched, the TGV has brought French cities much closer together: the trip from Paris to Lyon—a journey just 70 kilometres shorter than the one between Toronto and Montreal—now takes less than two hours.

Canada's political and business leaders during the '70s responded to the unprofitability of rail travel by making matters worse. Rather than investing in separate tracks to allow for the kind of rapid rail that might have attracted new riders, CN, then a Crown corporation, sought to divest itself of all passenger operations. The decline of passenger service became an election issue in 1974, when Pierre Trudeau's Liberals pledged to create a nationwide carrier similar to Amtrak in the US.

Soon after the Liberals returned to power, CN formed a new division with the bilingual name VIA. In 1976, the Trudeau government, which was hoping to consolidate VIA with the country's other passenger services, promised to furnish the new carrier with a fleet of fast trains. These were of course never purchased, because it was the tracks, not the trains, that presented the real problem.

When VIA finally became a separate Crown corporation in 1978, the deal included stations, routes, and trains. Crucially, the nation's tracks remained under CN's control, which meant that the Turbo—and all other passenger lines—had to defer to the freight carrier's schedule, further adding to high-speed rail's woes. In 1982, VIA finally pulled the underused Turbo from service. Its replacement, Bombardier's conventional, diesel-electric powered LRC ("Light, Rapid, Comfortable"), had been designed to top out at 160 kilometres per hour.

In subsequent decades, passenger rail continued to languish. Even after CN was privatized in 1995, VIA had to pay to use the company's tracks, its trains frequently forced to yield to freight cars. As a result, no passenger train in Canada has been capable of maintaining a schedule that can compete with air or even automotive travel.

In order to fully convey the unusual nature of this made-in-Ottawa relationship, perhaps an analogy is in order: Imagine how efficient automotive travel would be if the federal government owned and operated every passenger vehicle on the Trans-Canada Highway. Then suppose the government handed the Trans-Canada itself to a multinational trucking company, which subsequently decreed that passenger vehicles would have to pull off to the shoulder whenever a truck wished to pass.

As things stand, passenger trains must often come to a standstill on a siding not far from the site of the historic Turbo crash. Riders sit and watch as freight cars laden with everything imaginable—sometimes even meat—lumber past.

Since the Turbo's demise, a parade of proposals to restore high-speed passenger rail to Canada have come forward. The restoration of rapid rail to the corridor between Quebec City and Windsor has been studied (or had a study initiated) at least sixteen times since 1973, most recently with a $3-million review launched in February of 2009, as part of a rapprochement between Quebec premier Jean Charest and Ontario's Dalton McGuinty.

"What's the point of another study?" asks Paul Langan. "It was viable in the 1980s. It was viable in 1995. Like all the previous studies, this one will come back and say, 'Yes, we have the population to support it. Yes, people will ride it. Yes, it will pay for itself.'"

Langan, who lives just off Highway 401 in Cambridge, Ontario, and leads a citizens group called High Speed Rail Canada, says a Quebec City–Windsor line would pay for itself in three ways: First, even modest ridership projections indicate that passenger fares will cover operating costs, with enough left over to recoup the cost of building the railway within a few decades. Second, because the rail line would reduce congestion on the 401 and at airports, it would save millions of hours of passenger downtime, as well as sparing taxpayers the expense of further expanding highway and air infrastructure. And third, because high-speed trains use about one-third the energy of flying—and one-fifth that of driving—such a line would dramatically slash carbon use, just when caps and taxes designed to reduce carbon consumption start to take effect.

"It was viable in the 1980s. It was viable in 1995. Yes, we have the population to support it. Yes, people will ride it. Yes, it will pay for itself."

Despite his strong case for reviving high-speed rail along the Turbo's old route, however, Langan points to Alberta as a more likely location for Canada's first high-speed line of the twenty-first century. Interest in developing a TGV-type route between Calgary and Edmonton dates back to the '70s. The Alberta government studied the idea in the mid-'80s and again in 1995, but concluded that ridership was insufficient. In 2004, however, a study conducted by the Van Horne Institute at the University of Calgary determined that a

300-kilometre line from Calgary to Edmonton would not only repay the system's capital cost within thirty years, but would return as much as $6.1 billion in economic growth, provided the travel time was two hours or less.

A consortium called Alberta High-Speed Rail has emerged to back the new line. President Bill Cruickshanks, a former banker, insists that the VIA-CN relationship be reversed in Alberta. His company would own and operate the trains; the province would build and lease the tracks. "There should be a level playing field," he says. "If you want to start an airline or a bus company, you don't have to build an airport or a highway. We take the attitude that if government is going to build infrastructure for one industry, it should do so for the other."

Upon receiving the 2004 study, the province of Alberta launched its own investigation to verify the report's ridership projections. The province has yet to release the results of that study, which was completed in 2007. Complains Cruickshanks, "It's been sitting on a shelf for more than a year and a half now."

The Alberta delay is one of many examples of what rail historian Christopher Greenlaw calls Canada's "insincere flirtation" with high-speed rail. While purporting to support these projects, provincial and federal governments have repeatedly wound up stalling them. The pièce de résistance of flirtation was served by Prime Minister Chrétien, who, according to an interview with the late Jean Pelletier, left office with a deal sitting on the table that would have restored high-speed to the Ontario–Quebec corridor. Pelletier told *La Presse* that upon departing as Chrétien's long-time chief of staff, he passed up senate and embassy postings to become chairman of VIA Rail. Chrétien was set to approve a $3-billion high-speed rail plan, according to Pelletier, but left office before doing so. Said Pelletier, "I came within a hair of having it."

The Turbo was a gambit to revive interest in passenger rail in an era when policy wonks were questioning whether passenger rail was economically viable, and when ordinary Canadians were infatuated with airplanes and automobiles. Forty years later, the experts are seeing signs that air and auto travel are no longer sustainable, but Canadians have yet to fall back in love with passenger rail.

How could they? There's nothing here to love. The Turbo has been all but erased from Canadian history. Railway museums have preserved hundreds of icons of Canadian rail legend, but not the Turbo. "They were all demolished. There are none left," Langan says. Likewise, the legendary Montreal Locomotive Works, which built the TurboTrain, was reduced to a mountain of rubble in 2004.

Yet the vision that founded this nation still inspires: running over dedicated tracks, a TGV-type train could roll into Vancouver less than twenty-four hours after leaving Halifax. "We're missing a John A. Macdonald, a visionary who could work through the problems," Langan says. "Our recent governments don't have vision. They're only worried about getting a majority in the next government. And they appear structurally unable to consider the needs of the nation ten or twenty years from now."

There are a few positive signs. First, the call for major stimulus projects persists: David Dodge, former governor of the Bank of Canada, recently told the *Globe and Mail* that now would be a good time to start making long-term infrastructure investments—ones with what he called "a tail" to them. In addition, an all-party committee is advocating that the federal government proceed with a link for the Central provinces; the contract to study the Quebec City–Windsor line was finally awarded in February of this year. And Alberta, though its economy is slumping, is sitting on one of the best fiscal situations in the world, and faces a pressing need to diversify its economy for the twenty-first century.

It may be, though, that none of these lines is the best option for high-speed rail in Canada. As was the case in Macdonald's time, the Americans are talking about extending their rail lines into this country. Amtrak has explored the creation of a link that could carry passengers from Seattle to Vancouver in about an hour, for example. And should New Yorkers succeed in building a high-speed line from the Big Apple to the Big Smoke, President Barack Obama will have done more to improve Canada's passenger rail service than any prime minister in memory.

Unlike Macdonald's nationalistic CPR, the rail lines of the twenty-first century will need to reach across borders and draw city states closer together in order to succeed. The simple truth is that Montreal may have more to gain by establishing a connection with New York City, while Toronto may prefer a quick link to Chicago. So instead of studying a Quebec City–Windsor line for the umpteenth time, it may be time to get serious about a Montreal to Minneapolis corridor, a Toronto to Miami train, or a Vancouver to Los Angeles line.

Debating the routes is but a parlour game, for now. The underlying question remains: will Canada and the US follow Europe's lead and prepare for a post-oil era, or will Canadian leaders continue behaving like that fateful meat man, convinced they can outrun the future one more time?

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