Should Canada Expand Train Travel?

With shifting attitudes to transportation challenges there is renewed interest in assessing rail travel in Canada. From High Frequency Rail to High Speed Rail options Ipsos reviews the need to understand public perceptions.

POINT OF VIEW

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Our Point of View:

Unlike most industrialized countries, road and air are the primary means of travel in Canada. Yet, the experience of traveling on highways or through airports among major metropolitan areas – where more and more Canadians reside – is akin to moving through an endless bottleneck. The congestion of our transportation links reflects the realities of a growing population that has increased by 50 percent since 1975. And amidst this growth there has been diversification – Canadians' attitudes to transportation are shifting. Millennials eschew car ownership, and immigrants arrive in Canada being more familiar with publicly shared transportation networks from their country of origin. Further, among other groups of Canadians there is also a growing concern about our collective carbon footprint.[1]

For these reasons, investing in train travel is being viewed as a viable option by varying levels of government to expand the country's transportation infrastructure.[2] Another appeal of this expansion is to inject more choice and therefore more competition into the transportation industry.

The formation of Confederation is defined in part, by Canada's rail heritage. The inclusion of British Columbia in 1871 was contingent on having railroads to transport freight to and from the west coast.[3] 70 years later, railroads defined how Canadians met one another, and there were 60 million travelers a year on trains during WWII.[4] Today, with fewer than four million passengers annually, train travel captivates few Canadians.

Seen as an exceedingly slow and ineffective travel option, trains have been gradually outpaced by cars and planes. Two glaring shortcomings underscore train travel in Canada: the cross-country rail line bypasses Calgary – the economic driver in Canada's most prosperous province; and the 500km journey between Toronto and Montreal – Canada's two largest metropolitan areas – can be only be completed by train in the same sluggish speed as by car (approximately five hours).

In this Point of View paper, we first present a short review of past and contemporary debates on train travel in Canada. This includes the two commonly held positions on expanding train travel – high speed rail (HSR) and high frequency rail (HFR), primarily along the Windsor-Quebec Corridor. We then present the current position of the Ontario government on train travel, based on the recommendations from the Collenette Report, which was released in May 2017. Finally, we will pose a series of important questions to gauge public opinion that we believe are integral to moving any infrastructure project forward, and help support decision-making with policy-makers and other stakeholders.

[1] http://www.infrastructure.gc.ca/plan/gi-iv-eng.html
[2] https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/where-will-125-billion-in-infrastructure-spendinggo/article28228477/
[3] http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/railway-history/
[4] http://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/are-train-companies-railroading-canadian-communities/

Prevailing Approaches for Rail Expansion in Canada

Over several decades, a collection of studies has unsuccessfully presented the merits of High Speed Rail (HSR) in Canada.[5] Today, Canada remains the only G7 country without it. Other countries have been chugging ahead unfazed by population density or political issues. In just 20 years, China has created the largest high speed rail system in the world, larger, in fact, than all other countries combined.[6] Even landlocked Uzbekistan, with a population similar to Canada's, but with only one-seventh the GDP, has rolled out high speed trains to link its major cities.[7]

Canada's relative bright spot with HSR occurred sporadically from 1968 to 1982 with the Turbo Train, operated by Canadian National Railway Company (CN). The Turbo Train ran between Toronto and Montreal, with a journey time just under four hours. After much fanfare, persistent mechanical issues with train engines derailed the project. In 1977, VIA Rail, a crown corporation, was established and took over operations for the last few years of the Turbo Train's existence. Since then, VIA Rail has seesawed both in popularity and budget cuts by the Canadian government. Today, VIA Rail can be characterized as an anemic passenger rail service. It ferries just 3.97 million passengers annually[8] (or 11,000 passengers daily) along 12,500 km of track and it ispropped up by approximately $300 million in annual government subsidies.[9] Despite the government cash infusion, far more than money is needed to make VIA Rail profitable. The impact of changing demographics may be the catalyst that can sway public opinion on the prospect of expanding train travel.

Over the last 40 years, Canada's population has boomed, with growth occurring disproportionately in cities and surrounding communities. With Canada's major metropolitan areas grappling with sprawl and density, there are acute challenges in how to respond to the social and economic needs of its inhabitants.

Affordable housing, quality education, and accessible healthcare are of major importance. Underpinning many of these issues is the need to transport workers to drive these knowledge-economies forward. In Toronto, road congestion characterizes the daily commute, and slows the mobility of business and recreational travelers. Gridlock in Canada's largest city has been assessed to cost the province and municipality billions annually in lost productivity.[10] The problem on the 400 series highways is multifaceted, and largely driven by an unrelenting car culture, poor planning, and government inaction. Fortunately, most debates on congestion relief arrive at not whether to improve train travel, but how. Two prevailing options are to revive high speed rail, and to create dedicated track for high frequency rail.

High Speed Rail (HSR)

The past studies reveal that the most commonly held option to improve train travel in Canada is to invest in HSR, particularly along the Windsor-Quebec corridor. 18 million Canadians (just over half the population) live on this 1,110km stretch. High speed trains travelling at or near 250 km/h[11] would more than halve the current travel time between Toronto and Ottawa or Montreal. The aim of HSR is to appeal to commuters, business types and recreational travelers keen to move quickly, and affordably, between major urban centres. HSR would present an alternative to flying domestically, and is positioned as a travel experience far less disruptive and less costly than the airlines.[12]

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[5] http://www.highspeedrailcanada.com/p/all-canadian-hsr-studies.html
[6] http://www.economist.com/news/china/21714383-and-theres-lot-more-come-it-waste-money-china-has-built-worlds-largest
[7] http://www.travelpulse.com/news/car-rental-and-rail/uzbekistan-launches-high-speed-tashkentsmarkand-rail-line.html
[8] http://www.viarail.ca/sites/all/files/media/pdfs/About_VIA/our-company/annual-reports/2016/2016_Annual%20Report_EN.pdf
[9] http://www.budget.gc.ca/2017/docs/plan/chap-02-en.html
[10] http://www.canadianbusiness.com/economy/the-end-of-gridlock/
[11] The general threshold for HSR is 250 km/h (http://uic.org/highspeed#What-is-High-Speed-Rail), with speeds having been tested at just over 600 km/h in Japan (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/21/japans-maglev-train-notches-up-new-world-speed-record-in-test-run).
[12] According to one survey, carriers in Canada charge an average passenger USD 38.71/100km of distance travelled, compared to carriers in the US who charge an average passenger USD 9.81/100km of distance travelled

High Frequency Rail (HFR)

The counter to HSR is to invest in High Frequency Rail (HFR), an option developed and promoted by VIA Rail. Currently, VIA Rail can only run six daily round trips per day along its busiest routes – between Toronto and Ottawa and Montreal.[13] In comparison, there are 40 return daily trips between both Washington DC and New York, and between Milan and Rome.[14] Although there are some notable differences with these examples (e.g., greater population density in the US example; existence of high speed rail in the Italy example), the fundamental difference in Canada is the lack of dedicated track for passenger train travel.

About 98% of rail in Canada is owned by two freight train operators, CN and Canadian Pacific Railway.[15] Having to regularly cede track space to freight trains, VIA's passenger trains are plagued by reduced speed and regular delays. A dedicated track for passenger trains, notes VIA Rail CEO Sylvian Desjardins-Siciliano, would enable trains to travel at 180km/h and triple the number of daily round trips between Toronto and Ottawa and Montreal (from six to 18). It would also enhance links between emerging bedroom communities and centres of employment, a selling feature of HFR compared to HSR, which would compromise its speed if stops between major cities were offered. The cost for HFR would be significantly less than high speed rail. It would require 600km of new track, and an option to electrify trains. Much of the funding would be generated from private-public partnerships, namely major pension funds.[16]

Compared to HSR, HFR is low-cost to build and aimed at serving the middle class. By contrast, passenger fares for travel by HSR, posits Desjardins-Siciliano, would be as much, if not more, than airfare.[17] Therefore, HSR would only serve those who can afford it, and it would only tie together major urban centres rather than also including smaller cities in between, as HFR promises. Desjardins-Siciliano envisions that over time, HFR passenger volume would increase and turn a profit allowing reinvestment in higher speed rail. In the interim, HFR would offer a better alternative to private cars without competing against airplanes.[18]

Finding the Right Rail Fit for Expansion: A Hybrid Choice for Ontario?

Although there is a renewed push by government to improve transportation infrastructure, neither of the two major positions on train travel is actively under consideration. Instead, a reduced hybrid option is being tabled whereby HSR would link peripheral cities in southwest Ontario with Toronto.

In May, former federal transport minister, David Collenette released an Ontario High Speed Rail study to the Ontario provincial legislature.[19] It presented a business case for high speed rail between the major metropolitan area of Toronto, with the peripheral cities of Kitchener, London and Windsor. The report appealed to the provincial and federal levels of government, among other stakeholders, for financial and legislative backing. The aim of the high speed rail link is to increase business relations between the municipalities in the region, alleviate congestion on the 401 highway, and reduce the carbon footprint from road travel. On May 19, 2017, Premier Kathleen Wynne and Transportation Minister Steven Del Duca touted the merits of this rail link, having referenced portions of the Collenette Report.[20] The lone commitment coming from their announcement was to invest $15 million in an environmental scan.

Absent from both the HSR and HFR proposals has been a contemporary understanding of public opinion, and it is expected that the Wynne government will devote

[12] (http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/09/06/airline-prices-canada-highest-world_n_11876902.html). Europe outpaces both Canada and the US relative to lower costs to passengers for travel by plane, or by train (http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21721201-americans-are-treated-abysmally-their-airlines-they-should-look-europe-lessons-lack).
[13] http://www.railjournal.com/index.php/north-america/via-rail-seeks-private-sector-partnership-for-toronto-montreal-upgrade.html
[14] Washington-New York is not HSR; Milan-Rome is HSR.
[15] https://www.viarail.ca/sites/all/files/media/pdfs/About_VIA/Backgrounder_HFT_EN_FINAL.pdf
[16] https://www.viarail.ca/sites/all/files/media/pdfs/About_VIA/Backgrounder_HFT_EN_FINAL.pdf
[17] http://www.railjournal.com/index.php/north-america/via-rail-seeks-private-sector-partnership-for-toronto-montreal-upgrade.html
[18] http://www.railjournal.com/index.php/north-america/via-rail-seeks-private-sector-partnership-for-toronto-montreal-upgrade.html
[19] http://www.mto.gov.on.ca/english/publications/high-speed-rail-in-ontario-final-report/introduction.shtml
[20] https://www.thestar.com/news/queenspark/2017/05/19/wynne-is-all-aboard-21b-high-speed-rail-project.html

significant resources from its environmental scan of this hybrid approach to gauge public opinion, information that has otherwise been lacking in previous studies. Where do Ontarians, and other Canadians stand on the issue of investing in rail transportation? What are the concerns/interests of urban and rural residents? Given changing demographics and behaviours – new Ontarians and other Canadians coming from countries with stronger train cultures, millennials are green-conscious and buying fewer cars, baby boomers are retiring and driving shorter distances – what are people's attitudes about transportation, and what might citizens want from passenger train travel?

Within this needed understanding surface other important questions about perceptions on HSR or HFR:

- How do residents feel about the financial, logistical and safety implications associated with HSR or HFR?
- How committed are individuals towards devoting tax dollars to rail travel in place of repairing highways, improving healthcare costs, or subsidizing daycare?
- Will high speed rail be cost-effective, efficient, accessible/reliable and comfortable for travelers?
- How far might issues of nimbyism, pollution (e.g., noise, air, soil), construction time, transforming existing rail lines, and driving attitudes suppress public interest in train travel?
- Do people see investment in rail infrastructure as benefiting the public good (or as tax dollars funding something some Canadians won't use?)
- Is there stronger affinity for high speed rail, or high frequency rail?

Amidst greater gridlock and unabating population growth, there is a need to gauge how good investment in rail will be received by its prospective users, and the public who will bear at least some of its costs. The emotional connection to driving, and road transportation in general, remains strong, despite the excessive traffic congestion, costs and safety issues drivers face. At play is the prevailing poor perception of rail travel, as it currently exists in Canada, and the connotation that it is a more accepted means of travel in densely populated Europe, and east Asia, than in North America.

Getting Rail Expansion Right: Understanding Public Attitudes Through Consultation and Behavioural Science

Public consultations and behavioural science are two ideal options to uncover the central question to understand public opinion on rail expansion: To what extent is the public interested in increasing their use of rail as a viable transportation option?

Consultations serve to engage with stakeholders directly with the objectives of increasing awareness, collecting insight and building trust on an issue. Behavioural science serves to uncover barriers to engagement on an issue and supports the development of recommendations, or interventions to counter such barriers.

Consultations: Increase Awareness, Collect Insight and Build Trust

Within our public affairs division, Ipsos has developed a consultations service aimed at gathering authentic input from stakeholders that is deliberative, engaging and candid. Using in-person and online tools and strategies, we offer a full spectrum of activities in our consultations work. We are particularly well-versed in "big tent" type consultations, which are ideal to gather stakeholder input on rail expansion. Our consultations practice has engaged with individuals in all regions of Canada, collated upwards of 50,000 data points, and conducted online consultation activities for several years. Some of our recent consultations experience using in-person and online engagement, including an award-winning project on transportation with the City of Toronto, has been with the following clients:

- City of Toronto – Uber and Taxi Public Consultation
- Department of National Defence – Review of the Department of National Defence
- Canadian Heritage – Understanding Canadian Content in a Digital World
- Shared Services Canada – Information Technology and Infrastructure Plan and 2016-2017 Update

Each of these clients had unique needs and varied stakeholder groups to reach. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies, in-person and online engagement, and implementation in a range of markets intersected most of these projects.

In addition to data collection through stakeholder input, engagement offers multiple paths for individual contributions. From the client perspective, it is also an opportunity to augment stakeholders' knowledge about a given issue (rather than simply asking questions), and to also engage directly with their stakeholders and ultimately build trust and mutual understanding. Many of our clients have found in-person stakeholder engagement activities invaluable to augmenting their understanding of an issue. Given the complexity of rail expansion, and the breadth of stakeholders who will be impacted by such an infrastructure project, our experienced consultants offer an enriching research experience. We support our clients to build awareness and trust, and provide sound evidence to inform good decision-making benefiting the public good.

In a given consultation, we would recruit thought leaders, commuters, and other stakeholders to attend a half-day session to discuss issues surrounding the central question, To what extent is the public interested in increasing their use of rail as a viable transportation option? At-table moderators would facilitate and record participants' input and present back to plenary. The main objective would be to add nuance and inclusiveness to the discussion given multiple perspectives in the room. Complementing this process, we could use our keypad technology to gauge participants' position by voting on varying issues. The voting would serve to illuminate discussion in plenary and offer clients unique insights from their stakeholders.

Behavioural Science: Pinpoint Barriers, Propose Interventions

In line with our consultations work is our emerging behavioural science focus. Canadians possess a strong emotional connection to car travel, and potentially a commensurate poor emotional connection to rail travel. Understanding some of the root causes of these emotions—motivations, abilities, physical context, and social context, are important, yet overlooked drivers in understanding how people feel or make decisions. Some of the questions or statements we may pose to participants as it relates to behavioural economics include:

- What are the incentives/disincentives to HSR/HFR travel for short/long distances?
- What emotions surface when you think of HSR/HFR travel?
- How well do you know when, where and how to find out information on HSR/HFR?
- Most people like me think that HSR/HFR travel is a needed transportation option
- I can readily access a train station

As it relates to transportation, Canadians possess a strong emotional connection to car travel as compared to train travel. Understanding some of the root causes of these emotions – motivations, abilities, physical context, and social context – are essential to understanding how the rail industry may re-position itself to lure more passengers on its trains. We possess the expertise and analytical abilities to provide recommendations that will enable our clients to devise strategies and gain market share within the transportation sector.

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