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## VIA Rail's once-proud *Canadian*: Death by a thousand CN blows?

Despite twice lengthening its already-excessive trip length and agreeing to cut out one of its three weekly transcontinental runs next summer, VIA Rail Canada's *Canadian* is routinely running hours late all across Canada due to slipshod performance by Canadian National (CN).

"CN's inconsiderate handling and lack of passenger priority is destroying the Canadian public's flagship passenger train," says Éric Boutilier, the founder of the citizens' rail committee, All Aboard Northern Ontario. "*The Canadian* is not just a train for tourists expecting once-in-a-lifetime travel experiences. It's a lifeline to rural Canadians with no other transportation options across Northern Ontario and the Prairies. *The Canadian* also provides a basic service for those whose travel needs can't be met by automobiles, air service or the soon-to-vanish Greyhound buses west of Sudbury."

After reducing *The Canadian* to its off-peak low of two departures weekly from Toronto and Vancouver, and being forced by CN to accept a ridiculously long schedule lengthening, the three domeliners rolling across Canada this morning exemplify the severity of the problem. At 09:00 EDT today, *The Canadians* – VIA #1 westbound and VIA #2 eastbound – were reported as:

- #1 ex-Toronto on Thurs., Oct. 11 – 19 hours, 2 minutes late near Edson, AB
- #2 ex-Vancouver on Fri., Oct. 12 – 4 hours, 55 minutes late near Sioux Lookout, ON
- #1 ex-Toronto on Sat., Oct. 13 – 37 minutes late near Winnipeg, MB \*

\* #1 subsequently lost more time west of Winnipeg

"We share the pain of those who must endure this sort of 'public service,' especially with the winter weather now about to hit the North and the Prairies," says Chris West, the founder of the Southwestern Ontario rail advocacy committee, All Aboard St. Marys. "Southwestern Ontarians haven't had to endure as much due to this kind of treatment of VIA's trains by CN, but it has been bad enough. We, too, have experienced too many delays of several hours due to CN's mistreatment of VIA's passenger trains. It's time for the government to settle this matter once and for all."

Ever since VIA turned its first wheel almost exactly 40 years ago – when it took over the Canadian Pacific (CP) *Canadian* and CN *Super Continental* on the last weekend of October 1978 – Canada's public passenger railway has operated at the discretion of the freight railways. In its early days, CP and CN honourably handled VIA's trains properly, often compensating for the deteriorating, service-worn passenger equipment that the Trudeau government-of-the-day failed to modernize or replace.

Today, CN receives \$10 for every mile a VIA train operates on its tracks, but its service delivery has descended to abysmal levels since the days when it was Crown owned, with some wintertime *Canadians* ultimately arriving nearly two days late at their end terminals. This has mainly been due to a CN operating plan based on monstrously long freight trains that can't fit into the sidings, which largely haven't been extended to hold them. The result is VIA's shorter passenger trains are put into the sidings and frequently wait an hour or more for each opposing freight train.

Transportation analyst and policy adviser Greg Gormick, who is a consultant to both All Aboard citizens' groups, notes that CN's inferior passenger service delivery isn't restricted to VIA. He points to Amtrak's congressionally-mandated host freight railway reports, which consistently rate CN as Amtrak's worst service provider and CP as its best.

<https://media.amtrak.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/CY2017-Report-Card-%E2%80%93-FAQ-%E2%80%93-Route-Details.pdf>

Says Gormick, "It's frustratingly ironic that Amtrak's best and most passenger-friendly host is CP, which had an excellent record in accommodating VIA before the Mulroney government hacked it in half in 1990 and axed most of VIA's trains on CP lines, including the original daily *Canadian* on the CP route through Thunder Bay, Regina, Calgary and Banff. The tragedy is that VIA's reduced system now uses CP for only 4% of its route mileage and CN for 83%."

Both All Aboard groups point out there is a solution available, if only the federal government would act. This is VIA's right to grieve CN's performance before the Canadian Transportation Agency under Section 152.1 of the *Canada Transportation Act*. However, VIA fears retaliation if it requests such a hearing without the full support of the government. As VIA CEO Yves Desjardins-Siciliano recently told *Trains* magazine columnist Bob Johnston, "One has to accept that VIA has a pocket knife in a gunfight with CN."

Therefore, the two affiliated All Aboard citizens' groups will be taking this issue to Minister of Transport Marc Garneau and others in Ottawa for their immediate attention.

"The future of *The Canadian* and all of VIA hinges on action by Ottawa," says Boutilier. "Both rail advocacy groups intend getting clear answers from the Trudeau government before *The Canadian* – a national and international transportation icon for 63 years – is beaten to death."

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