

OPINION



Truck blockades present a compelling argument for moving more goods by rail

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The deranged carnival parade – or “Freedom Convoy” as some have called it – has finally rolled out of Ottawa and away from the Detroit-Windsor border crossing. There are always lessons in such events, and, amid the honking and blaring music, the disaffected truckers have raised a vital question about infrastructure in Canada. Their call to get the country “back on track” was poignant, but only in the plural. We need our system for the movement of goods to get back on the tracks, as it were, by investing in our railways and moving more goods via train.

Early on in the “Freedom Convoy” saga, news of truckers sidelined by vaccine mandates was seized upon by political opportunists who [warned](#) of empty grocery-store shelves. At first, it was political fear-mongering – 85 per cent of truck drivers were already vaccinated and traffic flow continued as normal, up until a trucker blockade at Ambassador Bridge [snarled supply chains](#) for both the food and automotive industries at a crucial land border crossing. It was a reminder that we have become over-reliant on these vehicles to keep our economy running. Long-haul transport trucks might appear vital to our infrastructure, but just as the automobile reshaped the North American way of life in its own image, our dependence on trucks is really a consequence of being accustomed to living in a system that accommodates them by turning rolling rubber and burning fuel into a national obsession.

Instead, we should pivot to nationalizing and sustainably expanding our railways into a network that connects the country fully and efficiently. This would require a fundamental reevaluation of how we invest in our transportation systems, but the benefits would be worth the cost. For fundamentalists—and the convoy supporters are, if nothing else, freedom fundamentalists—precedent is everything. Here are a few.

The average freight train numbers [120 railcars](#) in Canada, with a single train often carrying the freight of several hundred semi-trailer trucks (the average freight train carried over 9100 tons in 2021, according to the [Railway Association of Canada](#), while trucks are limited to about 70 tons). The current rail network is limited, but ties can be

laid. For those who are always banging on about jobs and the economy, expanding a national railway would provide good, government-pensioned work, with the security of thousands of kilometers of track to repair. And for those looking for a noble, patriotic cause, it would be a chance at having a railway built by Canadians, and not indentured immigrants.

A well-veined and sustainably-powered rail system would also reconnect parts of Canada that have become disconnected from essential services. If more rural stations were reintroduced, for example, trains could bolster the woeful lack of public transportation in less-populated parts of Canada, and better connect West to East. Though Via Rail's service [doesn't have a great record](#) of arriving on time – I experienced these delays firsthand on a recent cross-country journey – there is little reason for either passengers or freight to be delayed if we built a rail system more complex than a single-track road.

Reducing the number of long-haul trucks used to transport goods long distances would also solve the industry's driver shortage. And though many have enjoyed pointed out that much of what we own is today brought by a truck, we weren't always so reliant on long-haulers (another precedent). Many a house, including those of my family, were purchased in the Sears-Roebuck Catalog, hauled onto the bald prairie by rail, and picked up by horse carriage.

The trucking business is in no danger of disappearing; door-to-door service will always be needed. More pressing now is having a cohesive, national rail network that connects the country fully and efficiently. Truck drivers' livelihoods face no greater threat from a high-functioning rail network than they do from autonomous vehicles or the buy-local movement. Neither can the evils of nationalization can't be condemned here. Truck drivers are already the beneficiary of the greatest public offering in Canada besides healthcare—the national roads system. The highways this and any future convoys pound into dust will all be repaired with public funds.

On the question of whether expanding our railways makes sense for Canada, we must consider the experience of Russia – the only country with a land mass greater than our own. Though its roads may be terrible, its railways are not, and form the backbone of the Russian economy.

Russia's first rail line was laid in 1837, Canada's in 1836. In 1885, our transcontinental railroad was the envy of the world; the longest ever built, and an incredible feat of engineering and vision (and sacrifice by the immigrants who built it). But after 137 years, we've failed our early aspirations. In 2019, while 330 million tonnes of freight were

hailed on Canadian rails, Russian Railways hauled over 10 times that amount. Passenger statistics are even more staggering: whereas Via Rail carried some 5 million passengers (96 per cent of which were on the Montreal-Ottawa-Toronto corridor), Russia Railways hosted 1.2 billion riders. In other words, a Russian takes the train 60 times before a Canadian takes it once.

Aside from simply increasing its haulage, a more sustainably-powered rail system would be a key element in re-establishing Canada's rail network as a new global standard. Investing seriously and smartly in rail, and replacing the now common diesel-fueled engines with electric and high-speed alternatives, the railroads could help Canada attain its often conflicting environmental and infrastructure goals. While Canadian Pacific Railway, Canadian National Railway and Via Rail are all in the process of introducing electric or hybrid trains to their fleets, our infrastructure has a long way to go. Of Russia's 85,600 kilometres of track, 51 per cent are electrified; of Canada's 49,500 kilometres, only 129 kilometres – 0.2 per cent – are electric.

The comparison to Russia isn't to encourage lazy comparisons with the country's political deviations. Drawing such parallels is only a tool for those who too easily confuse ideas with ideology. Sometimes a good idea is merely a good idea, and trains are one. The point is geographical and historical, and on the notion of what makes for an effective national-transportation system, Russia has surpassed us. Forget John A. Macdonald's dream of a country made glorious by rail – after 137 years, we've failed those early aspirations. The network now barely lives up to Gordon Lightfoot's *Canadian Railroad Trilogy*. How else but through failure to square that Bill Gates is Canadian National Railway's largest stockholder?

Canadians also shouldn't have to rely as heavily on the private sector to deliver better transport services. When Manitoba's Hudson Bay Railway line was washed out in 2017, Omnitrac, the Denver-based owner of the line, declined to foot the repair bills. Churchill, Man., and other northern communities were left with no land exit for 18 months while the provincial and federal governments passed the buck. Repairs were finally taken up by Arctic Gateway Group (now OneNorth), a partnership of local government and Indigenous groups. In 2021, OneNorth received a federal injection of \$40-million for rail repairs – a lame-duck ending that only amplified the ridiculousness of the rail line remaining privatized. Were all the railroads nationalized (as only 0.05 per cent are in Canada today), there would be no question about repairs – it would be a matter of national interest, not shareholder capitulation.

And perhaps trains might bring some much-needed romance back to a country that is—clearly—in need of some relaxed inspiration. Trucking isn't doing much in that

department—for a vehicle with a bed, a semi-tractor is awfully unappealing against a sleeper car. What's the harm in indulging in this Alice Munro fever dream? Too many brooding young women reassessing their life as they choogle through northern Ontario?

Geographical disconnection is Canada's great challenge. Just as our size can be our strength, when we lose the 'public' in public infrastructure, it can also become our weakness. The highways have not solved it, but the railroad might, if given another chance. From the fundamentalist's view, the world constantly decays and must be constantly re-created. What's old is new again. Let's ditch the trucks, and get back on the tracks.