



Statement regarding Canadian National's suspension of VIA Rail services

19 February 2020

Last Thursday, Canadian National ordered VIA Rail Canada to shut down all its passenger services nationwide in a matter of hours, on the grounds that CN was shutting down its network in eastern Canada, as its response to the protest blockades at Tyendinaga and elsewhere.

Over the last few days, it has become clear that CN did not actually shut down railway operations, as it publicly announced it was going to. Mandating complete suspension of VIA Rail services on lines without any blockades, and with very little notice to VIA Rail or passengers, does not therefore appear to have been operationally necessary.

For CN to unnecessarily cause many people to be stranded away from family and friends just before the long weekend, and without compensation or alternative transportation, was unacceptable. Much of the resulting frustration has been misdirected at VIA Rail staff, the government, and indigenous peoples, which is regrettable and was totally avoidable.

At a time when CN, CP, VIA Rail, and Transport Canada should be collaborating to minimize disruption to both freight and passengers while a peaceful and lasting resolution to the underlying dispute is found, this looks rather a like a hockey “dive” by CN, using VIA Rail and passengers as leverage to put pressure on Ottawa and the Ontario Provincial Police to take hasty and possibly ill-considered action.

Transport Action Canada has known for some time that the Train Service Agreement (TSA) between CN and VIA Rail had many weaknesses, including compensation for all delays to VIA Rail trains being borne by the taxpayer. This document has been shielded from public scrutiny on the grounds of commercial sensitivity. That it apparently allows CN to completely shut down Canada’s passenger rail network at a few hours notice, without an operational reason, is definitely not in the public interest.

Transport Action Canada therefore requests the publication of the complete and unredacted TSA, asks Transport Canada to support VIA Rail in securing a more reasonable TSA, and urges the government and opposition parties to swiftly pass a Passenger Rail Act to address the imbalances in the relationship between the freight railways and passenger services.

While some services are set to be reinstated tomorrow, we call upon the government to provide funding to continue paying the 1,000 other VIA Rail staff who have now been laid off until this matter is resolved.

Over the last week, it has also become clear for all to see that the lack of resiliency in our national railway infrastructure -- after years of network rationalization -- is at a critical level. We therefore ask the Minister of Transport, The Hon. Marc Garneau, to take a keen interest in ensuring that CN and CP maintain adequate network resilience and have contingency plans in place to mitigate the impact of any future disruptions.

Terence Johnson
President, Transport Action Canada