

Via Rail: locked in 'culture of defeat?'

Since he was president of the American railway company Amtrak from 2002 to 2005, we think it can be reasonably assumed that David Gunn knows what he is talking about when it comes to rail passenger service. Even if the United States has the advantage of 10 times Canada's population, the fact Amtrak has made some real inroads in reawakening a 'train culture' in the United States — despite also being far and away the world's most developed 'automobile culture' — means that when Mr. Gunn talks, we should listen. He says Via is "dying," but

We Say:

Via should take cue from Amtrak and reawaken a Canadian 'train culture'

we prefer to believe the core message here is not one of 'doom and gloom' but rather one of hope. He sympathizes with Via Rail's ambitions of creating a 'train culture' in Canada but at the same

time finds it laughable, and rightly so. New Brunswickers already know that is not happening here. In fact the opposite is happening given that Via is steadily cutting service in the Maritimes, mainly in favour of more profitable high-speed lines in more urbanized portions of central Canada.

Mr. Gunn speculates that might be partly due to government. Via is a Crown corporation theoretically independent of Ottawa, but he suggests its efforts to make meaningful improvements in our region are frustrated by an overly controlling Transport Canada bureaucracy and federal budget cuts. That is a frustrating situation for Maritimers, who have — perhaps naively — believed that a Crown corporation as a creature of government should be promoting 'pan-Canadian' ambitions for what is, at least in our view, supposed to be a national public transit system. If Mr. Gunn's speculation is correct, that is a hard message to take from a federal government that scolds Maritimers about our supposed 'culture of defeat.' There are no easy answers, but Greg Gormick, the Toronto-based transportation consultant currently working up a commissioned report led by the City of Moncton to examine CN Rail's plan to abandon the track between Moncton and the north shore, suggests the appointment of Mr. Gunn to Via's board of directors. In our view that's as good place as any to start.