The Bennett Government’s Pacific Northern Railway Project and the Development of British Columbia’s "Hinterland"

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Abstract

The "Pacific Northern Railway" (PNR) project, a proposed interregional rail link between BC, the Yukon and Alaska, which was initiated by the Social Credit government under Premier W.A.C. Bennett in the late 1950's, was one of the most ambitious provincial transportation megaprojects of the twentieth century. Although the project never really entered the construction phase, its failure merits study for what it reveals concerning the dangerous gaps that may arise in government policy between vision and agenda-setting, on the one hand, and, on the other, questions of feasibility and suitability in terms of goals which ought to be pursued rather than those that are largely politically motivated. The rail project failed primarily owing to the gap that existed between the metropolitan-hinterland philosophy of railway building that the Bennett government insisted on pursuing, despite the fact that it was no longer in tune with the times. Its failure was also due to inadequate study and consideration of the appropriate kind of transportation technology for a project of this nature and magnitude. It likewise proved to be a hard sell in an economic sense; both the powerful Swedish Wenner-Gren corporation, which was to originally finance the construction, as well as the US and Canadian federal governments, whose aid was sought once the former had withdrawn from the project, declined to fulfill this role. The most damaging long-range effects of the PNR failure have been the persistence on the part of governments and private initiative, often acting in conjunction with one another, in continuing to pursue the dream of building an interregional railway in the northwest without due consideration of the limitations and pitfalls of such a project.

Key words: Pacific Northern Railway, W.A.C. Bennett, monorails, northern development, railways

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British Columbia attracts millions of visitors annually, and the land is a hunting and fishing paradise. There are four national parks—Glacier, Mt. Revelstoke, Yoho, and Kootenay—and hundreds of provincial parks and camping grounds. The climate along the west coast, tempered by the warm Japan Current, has made that area, especially Vancouver and Victoria, very attractive to tourists. Large areas of central and N British Columbia are sparsely settled; almost three fourths of the population is crowded into the southwest coastal tip in the Georgia Strait region. The Social Credit party regained control in 1975 under Premier William Richards Bennett, who was succeeded in 1986 by William Vander Zalm and in 1991 by Rita Johnston, the province's first woman premier. In 1960, the Bennett government introduced British Columbia's first provincial flag, the first official provincial flag adopted west of Quebec. Financial policy. BC Rail, formerly the Pacific Great Eastern Railway, owned by the province since 1918, underwent a series of major expansions. [10] His Minister of Highways, Phil Gaglardi, oversaw major highway expansions and improvements. Although the signatories were the federal governments of Canada and the United States, Premier Bennett was reported to have played a major part in the negotiations. Under the provisions of the treaty, the U.S. paid British Columbia C$275 million (plus interest) for the downstream power generation rights over the following 30 years. Eagle, J. A. The Canadian Pacific Railway and the Development of Western Canada, 1896-1914. McGill-Queens University Press 1989. Fleming, R. B. The Railway King of Canada: Sir William Mackenzie, 1849-1923 University of British Columbia Press, 1991 online at Questia. Fournier, Leslie T. Railway Nationalization in Canada: The Problem of the Canadian National Railways (1937). A Thousand Blunders: The Grand Trunk Pacific Railway and Northern British Columbia University of British Columbia Press, 1996 online edition from Questia. Lewis, Frank D. and David R. Robinson. "The Timing of Railway Construction on the Canadian Prairies," The Canadian Journal of Economics Vol. 17, No. 2 (May, 1984), pp. 340–352 in JSTOR.