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Commentary

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François Legault's less than stellar performance

It was observed by many political analysts that the first 100 days in power of Quebec's new premier François Legault and his government were sound, that he and his team had been able to adopt a much-needed change of tone, compared to the arrogance and insensitivity of the previous Liberal Party regime.

There seemed to be room for new ideas, for flexibility in the way the government would tackle problems and adopt solutions, and Mr. Legault's speech following the October 17 cabinet nominations was promising, as he committed to be the premier of all Quebecers, even those who had not voted for the Coalition avenir Québec. He asked his team to act accordingly through showing a capacity to listen to people's preoccupations.

Regionally, François Legault proved that he could live up to his early commitments when he showed up in Gaspé a week before Christmas to announce \$16.6 million for the Gaspé, Grand River and Sainte-Annes-Monts airports, and \$12.8 million for commercial fisheries.

The money was ready and he announced it right away, so that those projects could get underway. We had not seen that kind of swiftness under the Liberal Party regime.

The ensuing 100 days of the CAQ government proved that François Legault and his team can forget real fast too. If we stick to regional stakes, the presence of the premier and Quebec's Transport Minister François Bonnardel at the April 25 railway "announcement" seems to have been taken from a preceding government scenario.

It could hardly be more different from the December 18 visit to Gaspé. Mr. Legault came to "announce" what he and Mr. Bonnardel had repeated on many occasions since the October electoral victory, that the refurbishment of the Matapédia to Gaspé railway will continue. More accurately, both men "announced" the start of the \$100 million restoration of the line, and that the work would concentrate between Matapédia and Caplan.

By so doing, they practically undid what was so promising about the December visit. It sounded as if it was back to "let's take Gaspésians for fools" mode seen too often under Philippe Couillard's reign.

It took Mr. Couillard's government three years to realize the potential and understand the necessity of the Matapédia-Gaspé railway, and another year before making any moves.

On April 25, François Legault showed that he will likely adopt the same slow approach. First, the current premier acted as if he and his supporting cast completely ignored that \$15 million has been invested in the railway since 2017. So, there is not \$100 million left

in the envelope announced in May 2017 by Philippe Couillard, there is only \$85 million.

Secondly, the replacement of the two Cascapédia-St-Jules bridges, as emphasized by Premier Legault, is not news. Almost all Gaspésian media had reported on that at the beginning of April.

François Legault's only real news, an element that was invisible in the Transport Quebec press release, was that it would take seven years to repair the line to its extremity, Gaspé. Seven years is bad news, given that no major work has been carried out since the fall of 2013. A small chunk of the \$15 million spent since 2017 went for studies despite the fact that the line has been studied to death over the last decade.

Along the Gaspé Peninsula railway, "major" means fixing the numerous bridges located between Saint Jules and Gaspé.

Seven years is not feasible considering that practically all the line's growth potential is located along the part, between Caplan and Gaspé, that was closed to traffic in 2015.

Seven years is ridiculously too long when we think that, in Montreal, at least \$6.3 billion will be invested in three years and one quarter in the REM (*Réseau express métropolitain*), the new light train that is supposed to improve the city's commuter services. They can build it in three years and we can't repair something already existing in seven years? Let's be serious.

Mr. Legault tried to make up for our long waiting time by saying that the 170 "well-paid jobs" coming with the repairs of the Gaspé Peninsula railway will last... seven years, as if it was good news. What the region needs above all is to allow its enterprises to count on a reliable railway as soon as possible. That will create more than 170 well-paid jobs and bear more fruit for the long term.

The Quebec premier forgets that the more time repairing the line will take, the more expensive that task will cost!

There are methods to accelerate the realization of the line's refurbishment, like working in the winter, as LM Windpower's Alexandre Boulay suggested, since more contractors are free during colder weather.

The slow solution presented by François Legault sounds like deciding to send a man alone to cut 200 trees with an axe instead of allowing him to bring 10 friends all equipped with chainsaws to do the same work.

It looks as if another round of regional mobilization will be needed to make the CAQ government understand that Gaspésians deserve better transportation.