

Sustainable Transport Practices Key to the Harper Climate Change Agenda

by Barry Wellar

(Barry Wellar is Distinguished Research Fellow, Transport 2000 Canada, and Professor of Geography (ret.), University of Ottawa. This article is based on the White Paper, *Sustainable Transport Practices in Canada: Exhortation Overwhelms Demonstration*, which can be viewed at transport2000.ca or geomatics.uottawa.ca).

The audit by federal Environment and Sustainable Development Commissioner Johanne Gelinas properly slammed the former Liberal government for its lack of achievement regarding climate change, greenhouse gas emissions, and environmental sustainability. Moreover, it re-emphasized the growing concern about this country's failure to make progress in dealing with our two worst greenhouse gas emission sectors, heavy industry and transportation.

Regrettably, by focusing attention on the wide-ranging and deep-seated ineptitude on the part of the Liberals, the Commissioner may have inadvertently worsened Canada's inclination to confront "...one of the greatest challenges of our time".

In the media stories that I have reviewed, the Harper government and governments across the country, as well as corporations, the media, and citizens, are deriving considerable comfort and perhaps even perverse pleasure from the Commissioner's report.

Blame has been placed, the perpetrator is ridiculed, and other Canadian political parties and governments, corporations, the media, and citizens are seizing the opportunity to regard themselves as off the hook. Canada's abysmal failure as a conscientious caregiver and caretaker of this country's natural and built environments is assigned solely to the dithering federal Liberals, and it's clean hands all around for everybody else.

Well, whoa on that one. Examination of what has been happening in the transportation sector makes it clear that the Liberal government was not alone in providing audit fodder for the Commissioner.

In May 2005 I accepted an invitation to prepare the report on Canada as part of an international overview of sustainable transport experiences. The background research for the report made it clear that there was a serious, expanding gap between promise and performance in this country's track record. The following "say one thing, do another" mismatches illustrate this finding:

- All levels of government call for more transit ridership, but they spend ever-increasing amounts of tax dollars on road expansion and maintenance programs, year after year after year.
- Provincial and municipal development plans emphasize increased urban densities, but proposals for sprawling, car-oriented residential subdivisions and big box retail stores receive approvals across the country.

- Local politicians extol the value of walking and cycling by children, youth, adults and seniors, but fail to ensure that sidewalks are cleared of ice and snow in the winter, that bicycle paths and networks provide safe, comfortable, and convenient passage, or that pedestrians, cyclists and transit users are given priority over private vehicle operators on roads and at intersections.
- Governments, corporations and citizens talk about the need to reduce fossil fuel consumption and pollution levels in order to help combat the ills of climate change (global warming), but massive amounts of freight continue to be moved by truck rather than by rail in urban corridors, sales of SUVs increase even in urban areas, national fuel consumption levels continue to rise, and no city in Canada appears to have removed even one kilometer-lane of roadway as part of a light rail- or bus transit-based smart growth strategy.

Beginning in the 1970s Canadians were world leaders in developing the concepts and principles underlying the notion of sustainable development. However, there is a world of difference between chatter at the level of concepts and principles, and doing something at the level of practices. As a result, the focus of my research was on practices, and two questions were used to direct the review of Canada's sustainable transport experiences:

- What sustainable transport practices have been achieved by Canadian governments, corporations and citizens?
- What are the tangible, measurable results that have been realized from the sustainable transport practices implemented by governments, corporations and citizens?

These two questions leave very little “wriggle room” in terms of the kinds of answers that are relevant, credible responses to issues associated with the performance aspect of our sustainable transport experience. Further, the explicit references to achieved and tangible, measurable results put a hard edge to the questions, and place emphasis squarely on what has been done, and the outcomes of those actions.

The White Paper prepared for Transport 2000 Canada, *Sustainable Transport Practices in Canada: Exhortation Overwhelms Demonstration*, provides the details on how the study was conducted. Further, it explains why I used “best practices” as a means of examining how well Canada is doing in terms of improving the sustainability of its transport systems.

The term ‘best practice’ refers to initiatives and activities that most effectively contribute to making sustainable transport practices a reality. Due to space limitations, the treatment of best practices in this article is limited to nine items and a brief comment on how Canada has performed in each case.

Sustainable Transport Test. Although Canada's physical and human geography accentuate the many economic, social, energy, financial, environmental, and health reasons to apply a sustainability test to transport decisions from the local to national

scales, no evidence was found to establish that any government in Canada has designed, much less implemented, a rigorous sustainable transport test for use in evaluating policies, programs, plans or projects.

Integrated Land Use and Transportation System Planning and Development. This best practice was established in the 1960s, but as of 2006 it appears that no federal or provincial agency has fully implemented this best practice, and at the municipal level there are likely less than a half-dozen jurisdictions which can legitimately claim to have achieved this practice for all of the walk, cycle, transit and private motor vehicle modes.

Smart Growth/New Urbanism. No evidence has been located to demonstrate that even one municipal government in Canada has consistently achieved non-trivial sustainable transport practices under the rubric of smart growth/new urbanism, or that any provincial government has succeeded in implementing such an initiative.

Development and Adoption of a Pedestrian Charter. Charters for pedestrians are seen as major instruments for improving the walking experience of pedestrians across Canada. The Toronto Pedestrian Charter is a leading example of this best practice. It was formally adopted by Toronto city council in 2002, but has not been implemented. No evidence was located to establish that a pedestrian charter or bill of rights has been put into practice by any municipal government anywhere in Canada.

Incorporating Time as a Criterion for Defining Sustainable Transport. The concept of sustainability by definition involves a temporal process; a timeframe must be included with programs and projects so that progress in achieving sustainable transport practices can be measured and evaluated. This best practice rejects such vague notions as 'soon' and 'near future'. No government in Canada has been identified that assigns numeric start, interim and end points to programs or plans for the purpose of quantitatively measuring actual changes in the extent and rate that sustainable transport is being achieved in practice.

Incorporating the Geo-Factor in Sustainable Transport Measures. Over the past 30 years and especially in the last decade, advances in geographic information systems (GIS) applications have been designed to support increasingly sophisticated transportation studies and operations. Federal and provincial agency activity in this domain is almost totally limited to the private vehicle mode, and likely less than a half-dozen municipal governments are able to use the full power of GIS software to measure changes arising from implementation of sustainable transport practices in all of the walk, cycle, transit and private motor vehicle modes of transport.

Using Indexes for Decision Support. Indexes and similar analytical instruments are especially useful in complex transportation studies, programs and plans, and are among the primary set of decision support tools available to assess the match between situations and proposed solutions. However, no evidence has been found of even one case of an index being used by a government agency in Canada to make a policy, program, plan, project, or operational research decision involving a sustainable transport practice.

Defining Road/Highway “Improvements” in Sustainable Transport Terms. The term “improvements” has been used in the transportation field for decades to refer to projects that increase intersection, road segment and network capacity, or reduce impediments to vehicular traffic flow. The design and implementation of sustainable transport practices requires that projects are justified on the basis of sustainability criteria. This means, for example, that improvements are defined and measured according to the extent and rate that trip volumes and modal shares shift from private motor vehicles to the walk, cycle, and transit modes for people, and from trucks to trains for freight.

Fragments of this best practice can be found in a number of municipalities, but no municipality has been located in which this practice is fully functional. No published documents were located to demonstrate that any provincial or federal agency has undertaken studies into how to define road/highway “improvements” in sustainable transport terms, much less adopt this best practice for any mode.

Implementing Measures to Simultaneously Increase Walk, Cycle, and Transit/Train Trips while Decreasing Trips by Private Motor Vehicle. Successful alternative transportation strategies are based on the best practice of simultaneously increasing the number and share of trips made by the walk, cycle and transit modes, and decreasing the private motor vehicle component. The following survey result suggests that the majority of Canadians favor implementing measures to achieve this best practice:

“82% agree Canada should introduce laws to promote denser, walkable cities that would make public transit more practical and reduce traffic congestion.” (McCallister Opinion Research, 2006)

While the vast majority of Canadian citizens embrace this best practice, they do so only in principle. No evidence was located to indicate that the measures would be accepted, or that any governments or corporations favor imposing these kinds of measures, even at the 82% public approval level.

Using best practices as the standard against which to measure performance, the general finding of this research is that Canadians’ high level of professed support for sustainable transport practices has not been matched by action on the parts of federal, provincial and municipal governments, corporations or citizens.

That being the case, the Harper government is heading for the same failing grade that the Liberal’s got unless it can somehow persuade Canadian citizens, corporations and municipal and provincial government leaders to join in common cause to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

I suggest to Mr. Harper that how he leads the effort to achieve sustainable transport practices across Canada will be a key measure in assessing both the sincerity and the effectiveness of his government’s climate change agenda.