

THE BENNETT GOVERNMENT'S PACIFIC NORTHERN RAILWAY PROJECT AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF BRITISH COLUMBIA'S "HINTERLAND"

LAWRENCE D. TAYLOR*

A SALIENT FEATURE OF THE BC Social Credit government under W.A.C. Bennett (1952-72) was its emphasis on providing infrastructure – mainly transportation – to further the development of the province's immense northern hinterlands. A key means of achieving this goal, Premier Bennett argued, was to greatly extend the rail network in the region.

Several historians, such as John A. Wedley and Stephen G. Tomblin, have examined the question of railway construction and development in British Columbia's north during the Bennett period. Wedley, in particular, has shown how the Pacific Great Eastern Railway (PGE) – the province's sole north-south trunk rail line – was used by the Bennett government as a "development tool" to open up new resource areas in central and northern British Columbia for industrial expansion.¹

Another northern rail project that merits close scrutiny by historians is the so-called Pacific Northern Railway (PNR), intended to connect British Columbia with the Yukon and, eventually, Alaska. Although the PNR project generated considerable public interest in its day, in part because it was originally planned as a monorail, the plan failed and the railway was never built. Most researchers tend to concentrate on successful projects. I argue, however, as geographer Jonathan Peyton recommends, that "we

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¹ John R. Wedley, "A Development Tool: W.A.C. Bennett and the PGE Railway," *BC Studies* 115 (1998): 29-50; Stephen G. Tomblin, "The Pacific Great Eastern Railway and W.A.C. Bennett's Defense of the North," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 24 (1989-90): 29-40.

need to look again at those projects that have been put aside, rejected, and cancelled” in order to “gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between development ideas, nature and the north in Canada.”²

An important aspect of the PNR project was the power of the Bennett government’s political vision, which appealed to Socred voters and was important for government agenda-setting. But vision and implementation are different things, and the PNR project failed not for want of imagination or vision but because of what Peyton calls a series of “breakdowns and disjunctures in execution.”³

Chief among the defects of the PNR plan was the antiquated metropolitan-hinterland philosophy of railway building that the Bennett government insisted was the key to successful development of the north. A second difficulty lay in the failure of the Socred government to properly evaluate the kind of technology best suited to building a railway in northwestern British Columbia. A further problem pertained to finance. The task of raising sufficient capital to complete a project of this magnitude was formidable enough and was exacerbated by the fact that the railway was originally conceived as a monorail. Potential investors, such as the Swedish Wenner-Gren corporation (which was initially involved in the project) and the American and Canadian federal governments, needed to be convinced that substantial, tangible results would accrue from the building of the railway. Their hesitation – which should have been shared by BC government planners – turned on the question of the economic viability of the proposed line.

Agenda-setting and political vision have continued to be strong factors in regional and national life since the PNR episode, but I contend that the most troubling legacy of the Bennett period has been the failure of policy-makers to learn from the failure of the PNR project.

THE PGER AND THE BENNETT GOVERNMENT’S NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

The Bennett government’s ambitions for the development of the province’s north and its conviction that a railway would have a pivotal role to play in this process drew something from the hope and plans of

² Jonathan Wynne Peyton, “Unbuilt Environments: Unrealized Geographies of Energy and Enterprise in the Stikine” (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2011), 7-8.

³ *Ibid.*, 21.

previous BC administrations, which echoed, in turn, nineteenth-century metropolitan-hinterland notions of rail development in North America.⁴

The first real spurt of railway growth in the BC interior occurred during the boom years preceding the First World War. Initiating the PGER in 1912, the Conservative government of Premier Richard McBride (1903-15) envisaged a through line from Vancouver to Prince George, where it would connect with the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway. Construction began at Squamish and ceased once the line reached Quesnel in 1918, owing to the withdrawal of the project's financial backers, the Foley, Welch and Stewart Company.⁵

Fifteen to twenty years on, the Liberal government of Thomas D. ("Duff") Patullo (1933-41) tried to promote regional development in the north with a number of projects, such as the search for oil in the Peace River area and attempts to persuade Ottawa to assist in the construction of a highway from British Columbia to Alaska. Linked with this vision was Patullo's desire – shared with Bennett – to annex the Yukon Territory to British Columbia.⁶ A third period of northward expansion began soon after the Second World War, during the Liberal-Conservative coalition governments led by Premier John Hart (1941-47) and Premier Byron Johnson (1947-52), when the PGER was extended to Prince George and work was begun on that section of the line between Squamish and North Vancouver.⁷

Bennett's assumption of power in August 1952 coincided with the end of railway supremacy in North America. In many parts of the continent, highways and trucking were making substantial inroads in hauling freight formerly handled by railways, although railways still held practical and economic advantages over truck transport in moving bulk commodities such as timber, minerals, and petroleum over long distances. Like his predecessors in power, however, Bennett was convinced that the railway

⁴ Karl M. Ruppenthal and Thomas Keast, *The British Columbia Railway: A Railway Derailed* (Vancouver: Centre for Transportation Studies, University of British Columbia, 1979), 103-10.

⁵ Stewart C.V. Dickson, "The Pacific Great Eastern Railway and Its Effect on British Columbia" (MA thesis, University of Toronto, 1952), 127-54, in British Columbia Archives, Victoria, British Columbia (hereafter cited as BCA), MS-2207; Patricia E. Roy, "Progress, Prosperity, and Politics: The Railway Policies of Richard McBride," *BC Studies* 47 (1980): 17-25.

⁶ *Vancouver Province*, 27 April 1937; *Vancouver Sun*, 14 May 1937; Daniel John Grant, "T.D. Pattullo's Northern Empire: The Alaska Highway and the Proposed Annexation of the Yukon Territory, 1933-1941" (MA thesis, University of Victoria, 1980); Robin Fisher, "T.D. Pattullo and the British Columbia to Alaska Highway," in *The Alaska Highway: Papers of the 40th Anniversary Symposium*, ed. Kenneth Coates (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1985), 9-24.

⁷ Bruce Ramsey, *PGE: Railway to the North* (Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1962), 43-191; John R. Wedley, "Laying the Golden Egg: The Coalition Government's Role in Post-War Northern Development," *BC Studies* 88 (1990-91): 65-86.

held the key to economic development in the north,⁸ and he undertook to push the PGER to Fort St. John and Dawson Creek in the BC portion of the Peace River region. He believed that this would give British Columbia an edge over Alberta in the exportation and processing of agricultural, mining, and forestry products from this zone.⁹

The Socred government floated a number of parity development bond issues to cover the PGER's debts with various finance companies. Using a combination of business acumen and a "pay-as-you-go" approach to government spending, Bennett's financial advisor, Einar Gunderson, underwrote the extension of the rail line to the Peace River area without incurring a large public debt.¹⁰ Completion of the Vancouver-Squamish segment of the PGER before the 1956 election helped Bennett consolidate his mandate, and completion of the Fort St. John-Dawson Creek extension two years later (1 October 1958) brought his government further recognition.¹¹

Then Bennett and the Socreds overreached themselves. Soon after the arrival of the first train at Dawson Creek, Bennett told reporters: "The PGE will be extended to the Yukon border sooner than you think." He also said that the railway would ultimately reach Alaska and that British Columbia would attempt to secure the right of way both there and in the Yukon.¹²

Strategically and politically, the extensions to Fort St. John and Dawson Creek made sense. The Peace River territory was a productive agricultural area and there were expectations of regular traffic, even if this was less than what was required for optimal efficiency, and usage levels were unlikely to turn an immediate profit. The extension to Prince George also made sense, even though 85 percent of the timber being hauled in the region was moved by river and truck transport. However, in the northern and northwestern parts of the province, through which Bennett proposed that the railway next advance, mining was the principal business, and mine sites were widely scattered, often in difficult terrain. Under such circumstances, a railway – unless it were to be interconnected

⁸ Ruppenthal and Keast, *Railway Derailed*, 110 and 112.

⁹ Extracts from a speech given by Bennett at a Vancouver Board of Trade luncheon, 10 January 1955, *North Shore Review* (Vancouver), 14 January 1955.

¹⁰ Alfred E. Carlsen, "Public Debt Operations in British Columbia since 1952," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 27 (1961): 65-66; David J. Mitchell, *W.A.C. Bennett and the Rise of British Columbia* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1983), 29, 177-78, 185.

¹¹ Paddy Sherman, *Bennett* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966), 138-43; Donald B. Worley, *The Wonderful World of W.A.C. Bennett* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), 145-53.

¹² Quoted in Worley, *Wonderful*, 153.

by a multitude of branch lines to the individual mine sites – would be uneconomical.¹³

Prospects for passenger traffic were even slimmer. The population of the far northwest of British Columbia was small, and aviation, buses, and automobiles were likely to be equally stern competitors with a railway, as they were in northeastern and central British Columbia.¹⁴

Raising funds to build the Yukon-Alaska line was a vexing problem for Bennett's government. Knowing that it would be difficult for the province to go it alone, the premier invited the governments of Canada and the United States to join in the venture,¹⁵ although Ottawa earlier offered only \$25,000 per mile (1.6 kilometres) for the first eighty kilometres of construction north of Prince George. Determined to extend the railway, Bennett wagered that federal support might be forthcoming for construction beyond the BC border to Whitehorse and possibly Alaska to foster development in the Yukon.¹⁶

There were also prospects that private capital might be raised for the project. In the mid-1950s, Axel Wenner-Gren, head of the powerful Wenner-Gren corporation of Sweden, became especially interested in northern British Columbia. His general manager, Birger Strid, had learned of development prospects in the Rocky Mountain Trench area through meetings with William McAdam, the province's agent-general in London, and Percy Gray, a British expert in industrial projects in remote regions.¹⁷ Wenner-Gren, who had made a fortune in the interwar period from the manufacture of Electrolux vacuum cleaners and refrigerators, had visited British Columbia in August 1940 to inspect his company's interests in Electrolux plants and the pulp industry, and he noted the geographical similarities between interior parts of the province and his own country.¹⁸

In mid-November 1956, after preliminary discussions between Wenner-Gren personnel and Bennett and his advisors, a memorandum of intent was drawn up. It indicated that the BC government would incorporate the Wenner-Gren BC Development Company to develop and exploit the

¹³ Ruppenthal and Keast, *Railway Derailed*, 115-17 and 297-98.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 288 and 300.

¹⁵ *Vancouver Sun*, 6 July 1956, 30 August 1956, 8 December 1956.

¹⁶ Canada, *House of Commons Debates*, 1955, vol. 4, p. 4390-1.

¹⁷ *Vancouver Province*, 13 February 1957; *Vancouver Sun*, 13 February 1957; Percy Gray, "Central British Columbia Development Project," 23 July 1956, and report on preliminary series of meetings between Premier Bennett and his advisors and Gray, 17-27 October 1956, BCA, MS-217, Morfee Heritage Group Society Fonds.

¹⁸ *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 19 February 1957; Orjan Lindroth, "The True Story of Axel Wenner-Gren," *Swedish Press*, vol. 77 (2006): 17-19, <http://www.nordicway.com/Downloads/SweDish-PreSS%202006-01/Pag17-Feature1.pdf>.

resources of an area encompassing approximately 165,759 square kilometres (64,000 square miles) of the Rocky Mountain Trench region. The new company was granted exclusive rights to exploit the lands and forests within this immense tract and indicated that it would probably build a pulp mill in the area. It was particularly interested in the possibility of developing the great abundance of minerals that supposedly existed in the region and announced that its technical personnel would conduct surveys of the area's resources, including possible sites for the construction of hydro dams.¹⁹

Such development agreements between provincial governments and private companies were not unusual at the time. In 1953, the Liberal government of Premier Joey Smallwood signed an agreement with the British government and merchant bankers N.M. Rothschilds and Sons to form the British-Newfoundland Corporation (Brinco) to exploit the mineral and hydroelectric resources of Newfoundland's interior, particularly the Hamilton (Churchill) Falls area in Labrador.²⁰ A dozen or so years later a consortium of private interests joined the Manitoba government to establish Churchill Forestry Industries (CFI) Limited to develop forestry and pulp milling in the province's north. The NDP government of Ed Schreyer acquired the company after it went into receivership in 1971.²¹

As signalled by the term "memorandum of intent" the actions of the Wenner-Gren company would depend on the prospects of mineral and power development revealed by surveys yet to be made. The Wenner-Gren BC Development Company was not obligated to begin construction of the projected northern rail line until the spring of 1960.²²

¹⁹ "Memorandum of Intention," 16 November 1956, BCA, MS-2765, John Fortune Walker Fonds, box 1; *Vancouver Province*, 13 February 1957; *Vancouver Sun*, 13 February 1957; *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 13 February 1957; *Victoria Daily Times*, 13 February 1957.

²⁰ Philip Smith, *Brinco: The Story of Churchill Falls* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), 3-115. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Brinco officials were also involved in survey work in the Stikine-Iskut river basin. Jonathan Peyton, "Corporate Ecology: BC Hydro's Stikine-Iskut Project and the Unbuilt Environment," *Journal of Historical Geography* 37 (2011): 360.

²¹ Philip Mathias, *Forced Growth: Five Studies of Government Involvement in the Development of Canada* (Toronto: James Lewis and Samuel, 1971), 124-79. Newfoundland essentially allowed its Brinco partners to go it alone, whereas the Manitoba government contributed close to \$100 million in loans to the CFI initiative.

²² Colonel S.H. Bingham, "Report on Route and General Plan for a Railway in Northern British Columbia for the Wenner-Gren British Columbia Development Ltd.," 15 December 1959, BCA, GR-0500: British Columbia, Commission on British Columbia Railway, 1977, box 16, file 1001-38, p. 9.

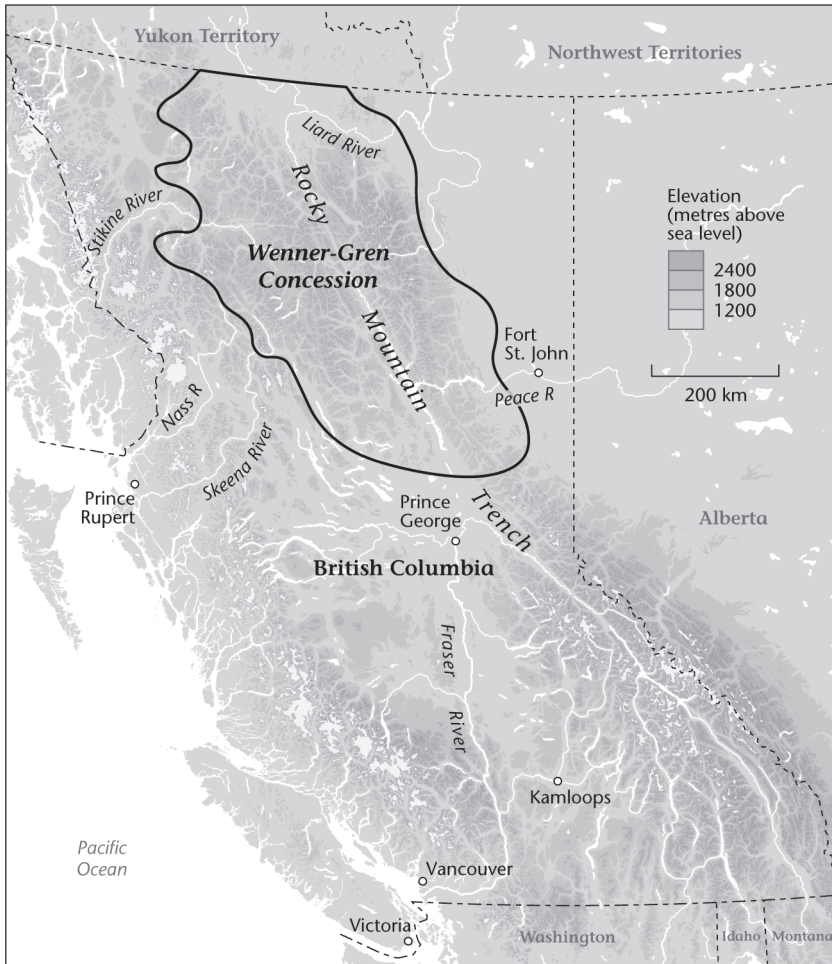


Figure 1. The Wenner-Gren concession in the Rocky Mountain Trench area. Please note that after 27 March 2002, through a change in the Yukon Act, “the Yukon Territory” became “Yukon.” Cartography by Eric Leinberger.

THE MONORAIL AS A TECHNOLOGICAL OPTION

Building the PNR was a formidable challenge. Surveys of the route were delayed, contingent upon selection of the site of the first of the projected dams on the Peace River. After this had been determined – near Hudson’s Hope in the Portage Mountain area – it was decided to route the PNR to the west of the Rocky Mountain Trench.²³ The first

²³ Bingham, “Report,” 6; *Vancouver Province*, 11 October 1958, 17 March 1959; *Vancouver Sun*, 14 October 1958.

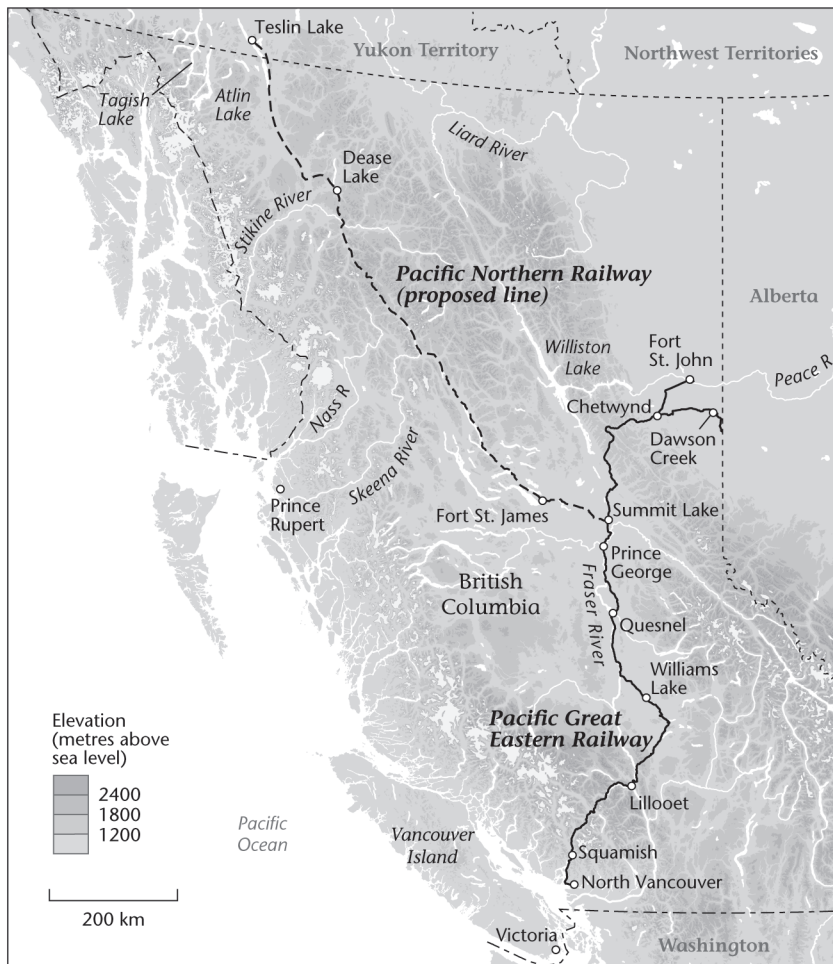


Figure 2. The Pacific Great Eastern Railway with the proposed route of the Pacific Northern Railway line. Cartography by Eric Leinberger.

stretch would run from Summit Lake, fifty-five kilometres northwest of Prince George, to Teslin Lake in northern British Columbia near the Yukon border. Subsequent stages of construction would extend the line to Whitehorse – earmarked as a future major depot – and eventually Alaska. The projected line was long – an estimated 1,185 kilometres – and ran through rugged topography, consisting mainly of mountains, lakes, forested zones, and muskeg.²⁴

²⁴ Bingham, “Report,” 9-13, 24-31.

These difficulties were magnified by the Wenner-Gren group's decision to build a monorail. By the early 1950s, the Wenner-Gren firm had expanded to include the manufacture of data-processing machines (handled by its ALWAC subsidiary in California) and the Verkehrsbahn-Studiengesellschaft (Transit Railway Study Group), established in Cologne, Germany, for the purpose of developing a new form of urban and regional rail transportation – the monorail. In October 1952, after reviewing previous monorail concepts and designs, the group produced its own prototype model. Over the next ten years, from 1952 to 1962, the group, rechristened the Alweg-Forschung, GmbH (Alweg Research Corporation, or Alweg for short), developed several improved versions of its monorail system.²⁵ The Alweg monorail was not only one of Wenner-Gren's own pet projects but also an integral part of his philosophy concerning the ways in which humanity might achieve universal peace and well-being. "By shrinking time and distance," he claimed, "improved transportation facilities will bring the peoples of the world closer together in ways of living, customs and language."²⁶

Alweg's designers and engineers believed that their monorail could play a useful role in isolated and lightly populated regions, and they targeted the Belgian Congo and Southern Rhodesia as two locales for its early construction.²⁷ Alweg promotional literature devoted little space to the monorail's capabilities as a freight carrier, but company officials suggested that monorails could be utilized for cargo transport and industry, citing several instances of new and improved monorail construction for mining and timber operations. Indeed, the General Monorail Corporation of San Francisco had carried out a survey in northern British Columbia in 1954 with a view to providing monorail service for the Consolidated Mining and Smelting operation near Stewart as well as for the newly constructed Frobisher smelter near Taku.²⁸

Bennett and his principal cabinet members – Attorney-General Robert Bonner, Minister of Lands and Forests Ray Williston, and Minister of

²⁵ "High-Speed Monorailway," *New York Times*, 16 October 1952; Jack Raymond, "One-Track Railway: Super-Speed Train Developed in Germany Studied as New Transportation Means," *New York Times*, 19 October 1952; "Monorail Company Formed," *New York Times*, 8 July 1954; J. Emlyn Williams, "Full-Scale Monorail Train Tested in West Germany," *Christian Science Monitor*, 19 September 1957; "Axel Wenner-Gren, Financier, 80, Dead," *New York Times*, 25 November 1961.

²⁶ Alweg Company, *Alweg Monorail: The Fascinating Story of the World's Most Modern Transportation System* (Cologne: Alweg Company, 1962), Seattle Public Library, Seattle Room, Northwest material, box 48; Alweg promotional brochure, May 1953, in "Alweg: The Vision," Alweg Archives, <http://www.alweg.com/alwegvision.html>.

²⁷ "High-Speed Monorailway"; "The Train of the Future?" (promotional film), 1952, Alweg Archives, <http://www.alweg.com>; "Rhodesia's Angel," *Business Week*, 27 September 1952, 150–51.

²⁸ "BC Industries Studying New Idea in Transport," *News-Herald* (Vancouver), 27 March 1954.

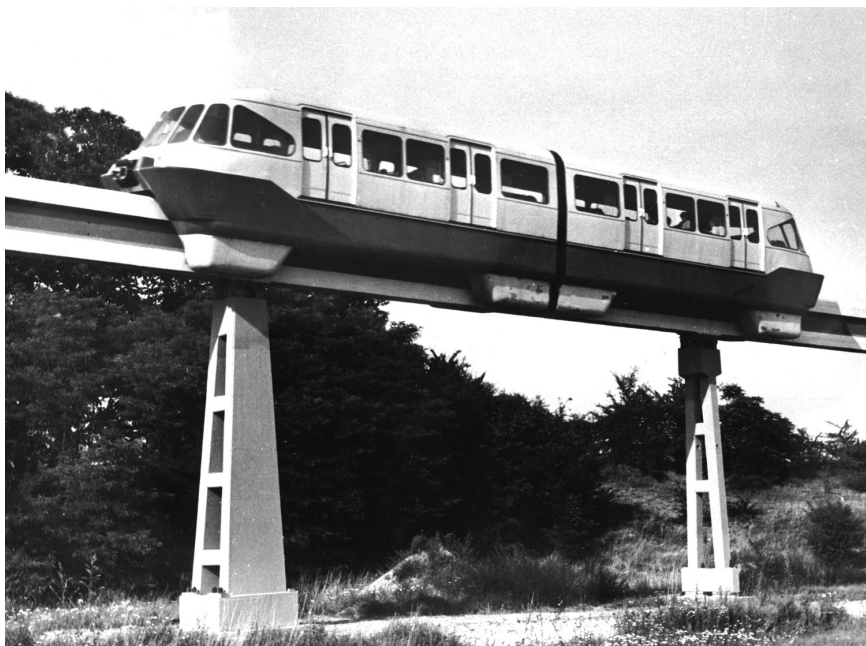


Figure 3. The first full-scale prototype test train of the Alweg monorail on the test site of the Alweg company's grounds in Cologne-Fuhlingen, West Germany, in 1957. Photograph by Maria Wendt, courtesy of Reinhard Krischer, Cologne, Germany.

Public Works Phil Gaglardi – were all enthused by the idea of building the PNR as a monorail. Aware of the public relations value of the project, they concluded that this advanced transportation concept would appeal to a large segment of British Columbia's electorate. On 17 November 1957, Williston, reporting to the Legislature on the planning of the PNR, spoke of “high speeds ... as much as 100 to 200 mph [161 to 322 kmph].” In boosting the monorail, Einar Gunderson, for his part, dismissed terrain difficulties. “When you come to a hill,” he commented to press reporters, “you don't have to tunnel through it – you [simply] go over it.”²⁹

Although the Alweg company and other monorail proponents stressed the monorail's advantage over two-rail systems in both urban and rural areas, this was still untested technology. Against every argument in its favour there were weighty counter-arguments – especially with regard to railway-building in northern British Columbia. BC government planners' unquestioning acceptance of the Wenner-Gren proposal suggests a neglect of due diligence and background research. But it was

²⁹ Glenn Bohn, “When Dreams Were All of Wenner-Gren,” *Vancouver Sun*, 26 August 1977.

perhaps understandable given that Wenner-Gren was to cover all costs for construction of the line.

Boosters argued that building a monorail would be cheaper than constructing an equivalent highway or subway and more economical than laying track on prepared railbeds and embankments. As an elevated system, the monorail needed no embankments. The central beam or rail would be supported by a series of pylons built with a special type of reinforced concrete. Each concrete pylon could be constructed, so proponents claimed, in a five-hour period; the rail line itself could be built at a rate of approximately five metres every hour.³⁰ Such claims may have impressed Bennett and his cabinet officials with the idea that the railway could be completed quickly and economically. Yet critics of monorail systems argued that, even if monorail tracks were cheaper to build than subways, the cost of the individual train cars would be higher due to the extra expense of the apparatus for keeping the car on the single rail or beam.³¹ They also argued that annual maintenance costs for the untried monorail system were likely to be considerable.³²

Wenner-Gren designers pointed out that a monorail could be designed to use either electric energy or diesel fuel; however, since the BC government planned to build hydro plants on the Peace River, they envisaged an electric monorail.³³ Designers drew attention to the superior flexibility of monorail systems. The central beam, or guide-way, could be shaped in a variety of forms. It could also be located at any elevation, enabling monorail lines to be built over rivers, streams, or deep canyons. The fact that the system would be elevated was, they noted, especially relevant in more northern latitudes, where snow blockage constituted a problem for conventional lines. Alweg officials also maintained that the rubber-tire-traction on concrete offered good acceleration and permitted trains to ascend steeper grades than would be possible with conventional two-rail systems.³⁴ According to some of Alweg's scientists and engineers,

³⁰ Edward H. Anson, *Monorail Systems for Mass Rapid Transit* (New York and Los Angeles: Gibbs and Hill Consulting Engineers, 1954), 9-15; Reinhard Krischer, "Why Alweg Monorail?" Alweg Archives, <http://www.alweg.com/alweghome/whywarumalwegmonorail.html>.

³¹ Richard E. Mooney, "Monorail Lines Stretching Out, But Not Very Far," *New York Times*, 27 November 1964.

³² Harry McDougall, "Monorails: Mass Transit Systems of Tomorrow," *Imperial Oilways*, December 1961, 3.

³³ Ibid.; Eileen Williston and Betty Keller, *Forests, Power and Policy: The Legacy of Ray Williston* (Prince George: Caitlin Press, 1997), 175-76. The idea of using electricity to power trains in British Columbia was not new. In March 1927, for example, Premier John Oliver, in an address to the Legislature, suggested that the BC Electric Company could utilize energy produced from the Bridge River development to power the lower sections of the PGE. See Ramsey, *PGE*, 213.

³⁴ Williams, "Full-Scale"; Krischer, "Why Alweg Monorail?"

monorail trains could achieve velocities of up to 336 kilometres per hour; they would be, they affirmed, “as fast as some aeroplanes and completely safe.”³⁵ However, experimental models had maximum velocities of only 80 kilometres per hour. The trains that Alweg manufactured for Seattle’s Century 21 Exposition (World’s Fair) in 1962 never achieved their specified maximum velocity of 96 kilometres per hour.³⁶

One strong criticism of monorail systems was that they could not be linked with conventional railway lines. Given the existing railway network in British Columbia, this was a concern,³⁷ but Wenner-Gren officials assured Williston that the system would be built to allow its connection with conventional railways. They did not offer details as to how this might be accomplished.³⁸

The idea of constructing the PNR as a monorail lasted until mid-1960, although Axel Wenner-Gren conceded during a visit to Vancouver in March 1957 that the PNR might be built as a conventional railway.³⁹ According to Williston’s report to the Legislature in November of that year, extreme cost estimates for the monorail had escalated to \$1 billion, an enormous sum in terms of government budgets of the period, especially when compared with estimates of \$250 to \$350 million for the construction of a conventional railway.⁴⁰

The final decision to abandon the monorail design was probably influenced by a report on the PNR railway survey undertaken by Colonel Sidney H. Bingham of New York for the Wenner-Gren BC Development Company. Taking into consideration the high costs of constructing monorails in other regions, coupled with the enormous length of the contemplated line, Bingham indicated that the expenses involved in the construction of the PNR as a monorail would be enormous.⁴¹ Concerns about connecting a monorail system to the existing provincial rail network also lingered, and there was growing doubt about the monorail’s capacity to carry heavy loads. As time went on, Wenner-Gren and other monorail manufacturing companies conceded that monorails were better suited to urban centres or downtown areas than they were to rural or

³⁵ *Vancouver Sun*, 10 October 1957; *Vancouver Province*, 9 October 1959.

³⁶ *Vancouver Sun*, 23 July 1957; “Monorail Whispers,” *Vancouver Province*, 6 March 1962; Bohn, “Dreams,” 6.

³⁷ McDougall, “Monorails,” 4; Mitchell Gordon, “The Cities: Our Crowded Society,” in *Here Comes Tomorrow! Living and Working in the Year 2000, by the staff of the Wall Street Journal*, ed. Paul Lancaster (Princeton, NJ: Dow Jones Books, 1966), 119.

³⁸ *Vancouver Province*, 19 February 1957.

³⁹ *Vancouver Sun*, 11 March 1957, 10 July 1959; Sherman, *Bennett*, 231–34.

⁴⁰ Bingham, “Report,” 61–62; Sherman, *Bennett*, 216; Wortley, *Wonderful*, 224; Mitchell, *W.A.C.*, 287.

⁴¹ Statement of Colonel Bingham, quoted in *Vancouver Sun*, 5 September 1959.

cross-country transit.⁴² Finally, the collapse of the monorail idea was most certainly precipitated by the death of Axel Wenner-Gren, a staunch supporter of the monorail, in November 1961.⁴³

THE COLLAPSE OF THE PROJECT

By the early 1960s, the entire PNR project had ground to a halt without a single section of the line in place. Bennett attempted to shore up the project and strengthen public confidence in it. On 13 May 1960, the Socred government announced that four large multinational companies were joining Wenner-Gren in the Peace River development. Three of these were British: the A.V. Roe Company, a subsidiary of Hawker-Siddeley Aircraft; Associated Electrical Industries, belonging to the industrialist Lord Chandos; and the Cleveland Bridge and Engineering Company. The fourth company was Perini Limited of Toronto, a Canadian subsidiary of the head US company of the same name.⁴⁴ In response to petitions from several of the towns in northwestern British Columbia to have access to the new railway, the government announced plans for the construction of branch lines to “the large ports of the Skeena, Stikine and Taku Rivers.”⁴⁵ Responding to criticisms from the Prince George municipal authorities that the projected railway would not have a link with the CNR, the government declared that there would be a branch line connection between the two major lines at Hazelton.⁴⁶

In conformity with its obligations under the memorandum of intent, the Wenner-Gren BC Development Company made a formal start on construction of the line shortly before the expiration of the agreement on 30 June 1960. On 29 June 1960, Bennett and company representatives participated in a ground-breaking ceremony on a 38.5-hectare section of land that the government had ceded for the building of a marshalling yard. The Socred government benefitted as a provincial election was held

⁴² William H. Stringer, “State of the Nations: Whoosh!-Monorail?” *Christian Science Monitor*, 23 June 1959; McDougall, “Monorails,” 3-4; Gordon, “Cities,” 118-19.

⁴³ “Vision.”

⁴⁴ Bernard G. Gore, President, Wenner-Gren BC Development Company, to Bennett, 13 May 1960, and Lyle Wicks, Minister of Commercial Transport, to Bennett, 8 November 1960, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Archives and Records Management Department, F-55, W.A.C. Bennett Fonds, F-55-35-007, Pacific Northern Railway (28-2b). See also *Vancouver Province*, 14 May 1960; *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 14 and 17 May 1960; *Vancouver Sun*, 14 and 26 May, 1 September 1960.

⁴⁵ *Vancouver Province*, 1 June 1960.

⁴⁶ *Vancouver Province*, 16 June 1960; *Vancouver Sun*, 1 September 1960; *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 28 August 1960.

a bare six weeks later (12 September), but no construction work was done on the line after June.⁴⁷

Although the survey work had been completed late in 1959, there was no funding for construction of the line. The Wenner-Gren BC Development Company conceded that the completion of geological surveys in the area revealed no large-scale mineral deposits. Under those circumstances, financing the project became almost impossible, especially after the death of Wenner-Gren slashed the company's enthusiasm for the BC development project.⁴⁸

With Wenner-Gren's withdrawal from the PNR project, the Bennett government had little choice but to take it under its own wing and search for other forms of backing. To this end it transferred control of the railway, by means of a legislative act, to the cabinet in late March 1961.⁴⁹ Bennett then tried to drum up American and Canadian federal government interest in the project. One approach stressed the supposed benefits that would accrue to the Pacific northwest region in general from an inter-regional railway. Bennett argued that cooperative development of the northwest by Canada and the United States could not be ignored. "If ever there was a place that needed planned growth and millions of dollars in expenditure, it is northern BC, the Yukon and Alaska," he asserted: "Last week the Russian ambassador told me in a very clear way ... that in the part of Russia opposite us, Russia is spending forty percent of all its capital expenditures. We in the US and Canada cannot sit idly by and see that great economic development take place without matching it with more than words."⁵⁰ Bennett considered that, if the United States could be brought on board for the rail project, Canada might be induced to follow suit.

In the Cold War context, an inter-regional railway might have seemed valuable as a service adjunct for increasing or building up defences in Alaska and the northwest in general.⁵¹ A couple of news stories published in the *Vancouver Province* in June 1960 reported that the US government wished to locate missile-launching bases along the contemplated rail

⁴⁷ *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 28–30 June 1960; *Vancouver Province*, 29 June 1960; *Vancouver Sun*, 29 June 1960.

⁴⁸ John R. Wedley, "The Wenner-Gren and Peace River Power Development Programs," in *Sa T'ye: Historical Perspectives on Northern British Columbia*, ed. Thomas Thorner (Prince George, BC: College of New Caledonia Press, 1989), 530.

⁴⁹ *Vancouver Sun*, 23 and 24 March 1961; *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 24 March 1961.

⁵⁰ Extract from Bennett's presentation of 20 July 1960 at the Second Alaska-British Columbia-Yukon Conference in Juneau. See Worley, *Wonderful*, 232. See also Roger Keene and David Humphreys, *Conversations with W.A.C. Bennett* (Toronto: Methuen Company of Canada, 1960), 96.

⁵¹ Laurel J. Hummel, "The US Military as Geographical Agent: The Case of Cold War Alaska," *Geographical Review* 95 (2005): 50–66.

route and might therefore be willing to lend financial support for the building of the PNR.⁵² The reports, however, turned out to be rumours. In addition, Bennett's reasoning that the United States and Canada ought to build up their economic potential in the northwest as a counterweight to increased Soviet development in eastern Siberia echoed arguments similar to those put forward in the Diefenbaker government's "Northern Vision," with its premise that whatever the Soviets were accomplishing in their northlands Canadians could also accomplish.

Bennett made another attempt to gain the support of the United States and Canada for the PNR during the Alaska-British Columbia-Yukon conferences on inter-regional development prospects. Some progress was made during the first conference, which took place in Victoria in July 1960, when, in a special session devoted to the topic, the Vancouver Board of Trade made a pitch for the railway as a means of stimulating industry and commerce in northern British Columbia.⁵³ At the second conference, which took place in Juneau a year later, other issues, such as fishing and land development, were more prominent on the agenda.⁵⁴ A study undertaken by the Battelle Memorial Institute of Columbus, Ohio, at the behest of the Alaska International Rail and Highway Commission, drew a great deal of steam from the inter-regional railway proposal. Published in 1960, the report described earlier appraisals of mineral wealth in the areas to be traversed by the projected railway as overly optimistic and suggested that the only real economic potential lay in the growth of tourism. It also considered that future transport needs would be more adequately served by a highway network and maritime transport than by a rail line.⁵⁵ Another factor sapping the impetus behind the inter-regional rail connection was the inauguration, in the early 1960s, of car-charge and train-ship services between Whittier, Alaska, and New Westminster and Prince Rupert, British Columbia.⁵⁶

Waning US enthusiasm for the inter-regional railway was also evident at the third conference, which was held at Whitehorse in September 1964.

⁵² *Vancouver Province*, 15 and 17 June 1960.

⁵³ First Alaska-British Columbia-Yukon Conference, *Minutes* (Victoria: Queen's Printer, 1960), 3-4, 6, and 8-9; *Vancouver Province*, 14 July 1960; *Vancouver Sun*, 30 March 1961.

⁵⁴ Second Alaska-British Columbia-Yukon Conference, *Minutes* (Whitehorse: Queen's Printer, 1961), 3-18.

⁵⁵ Battelle Memorial Institute, *An Integrated Transport System to Encourage Economic Development of Northwest North America*, 2 vols. (Columbus, OH: Battelle Memorial Institute, 1960), 2:1-26; "Alaska-US Railway Won't Pay," *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 17 June 1960. The emphasis on highway rather than rail transport also reflected the great surge in highway construction in the United States during the boom years of the 1950s and early 1960s.

⁵⁶ Edwin M. Fitch, *The Alaska Railroad* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), 15, 21, 132-37, and 300. The possibility of a car-charge system had also been mentioned in the Battelle report.

Although the Yukon commissioner Gordon Cameron believed that an inter-regional railway would help boost the territorial economy, Bennett's comments that British Columbia would help to improve transportation infrastructure in the Yukon and the Northwest Territories if these territories were annexed to his province severely blunted the proposal. Neither the Yukon representatives nor the Canadian federal government was enthusiastic about Bennett's territorial ambitions.⁵⁷ Seeing the writing on the wall, the Bennett government had, in fact, formally liquidated the railway in August 1964, a month before the Yukon conference.⁵⁸

THE PNR'S INFLUENCE ON SUBSEQUENT RAIL PROJECTS IN THE NORTHWEST

Although the PNR had run its course, the project as a concept and as part of the Bennett government's plans and ambitions for the development of northern British Columbia continued to influence other ideas for stimulating northern development, particularly with regard to transport possibilities.

In the late 1960s, Richard Rohmer, a lawyer with expertise in transport, management, and municipal law, developed and attempted to promote what he called the "Mid-Canada Development Corridor." Rohmer believed that "mid-Canada" or the "mid-North," as opposed to the Arctic regions or the Far North, had considerable potential for settlement and economic development. The Toronto-based engineering firm of Acres Research and Planning Limited was commissioned to prepare a preliminary feasibility study on the region's economic and geographic resources. A key feature of the "Development Corridor," which Rohmer described as a wide swath of land extending throughout the Arctic Shield and sub-Arctic regions of Canada, comprising not only the northern half of the provinces (excluding the Maritimes) but also a portion of the Yukon and Northwest Territories in the northwest, would involve the construction of a rail system throughout this area. The system would extend from the northern portion of the island of Newfoundland (by way of a bridge over the Strait of Belle Isle) to Great Slave Lake; from

⁵⁷ Third Alaska-British Columbia-Yukon Conference, *Minutes* (Whitehorse: Queen's Printer, 1961), 7-8; "Yukon Mineral Resources," exposition presented as part of the Third Alaska-British Columbia-Yukon Conference, 14-16 September 1964, 9-10, 12. See also *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 19 July 1959; *Vancouver Province*, 12 September, 3 October 1964; *Vancouver Sun*, 28 March and 15 September 1964.

⁵⁸ *Vancouver Sun*, 5 August 1964.

there, separate lines would branch out to other areas of the northwest. One would proceed up the Mackenzie River valley to Tuktoyaktuk on the Arctic coast, another would extend to Whitehorse, where it would connect with the White Pass and Yukon Railway, and a third would connect with Prince Rupert. While the proposed system would involve the construction of a vast amount of new track – some several thousand kilometres – it would also be intermodal, using existing track, road, and pipeline rights of way wherever possible.⁵⁹

Rohmer's "mid-Canada" railway scheme shared some of the traits of the PNR, especially the high cost of the system – at least \$2 billion (including a \$200 million bridge or tunnel crossing for the Strait of Belle Isle). It also reflected a similar misguided faith in possible technological breakthroughs that might make the job easier or more feasible. "Technological advances," hoped the Acres company, "may make the mid-Canada project even more feasible than it is now."⁶⁰ Needless to say, the Development Corridor scheme failed to attract either private or public backing and, after a few years, quietly became a part of the historical storehouse of similar great northern development proposals. Rohmer's book on the concept, *The Green North* (1970), which offers a fascinating glimpse into many of the prevalent development philosophies of its day, exudes the same type of ebullience as did Bennett's policy on northern development.

Meanwhile, at the regional level, successive BC governments and private concerns continued to pursue the dream of realizing a mega-rail transportation "solution" to the challenge of economic development in northwestern British Columbia and the northwest in general. The "Dease Lake Extension," a project undertaken in the 1970s for the construction of an extensive rail line in northwestern British Columbia, met a fate similar to that of the PNR.

The Dease Lake Extension was a continuation of two earlier rail development projects in northwestern British Columbia. One of these, initiated by the Bennett government in a belated attempt to get the inter-regional rail project moving again, was a 117-kilometre line (the Fort St. James Extension) from O'Dell to Fort St. James, completed in 1968. The other, the Takla Lake Extension, extended the route 130 kilometres further north from Fort St. James to Leo Creek and was completed in 1973

⁵⁹ Acres Research and Planning Limited, *Mid-Canada Development Corridor*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: Acres Research and Planning Limited, 1968), 6–7 and 48–50; Alexander Ross, "A New Vision for the Near North," *Maclean's*, March 1969, 20–21; Richard Rohmer, *The Green North: Mid-Canada* (Toronto: Maclean-Hunter Ltd., 1970), 43–44 and 84–85.

⁶⁰ Ross, "New Vision," 21. See also Acres, *Mid-Canada*, 59.

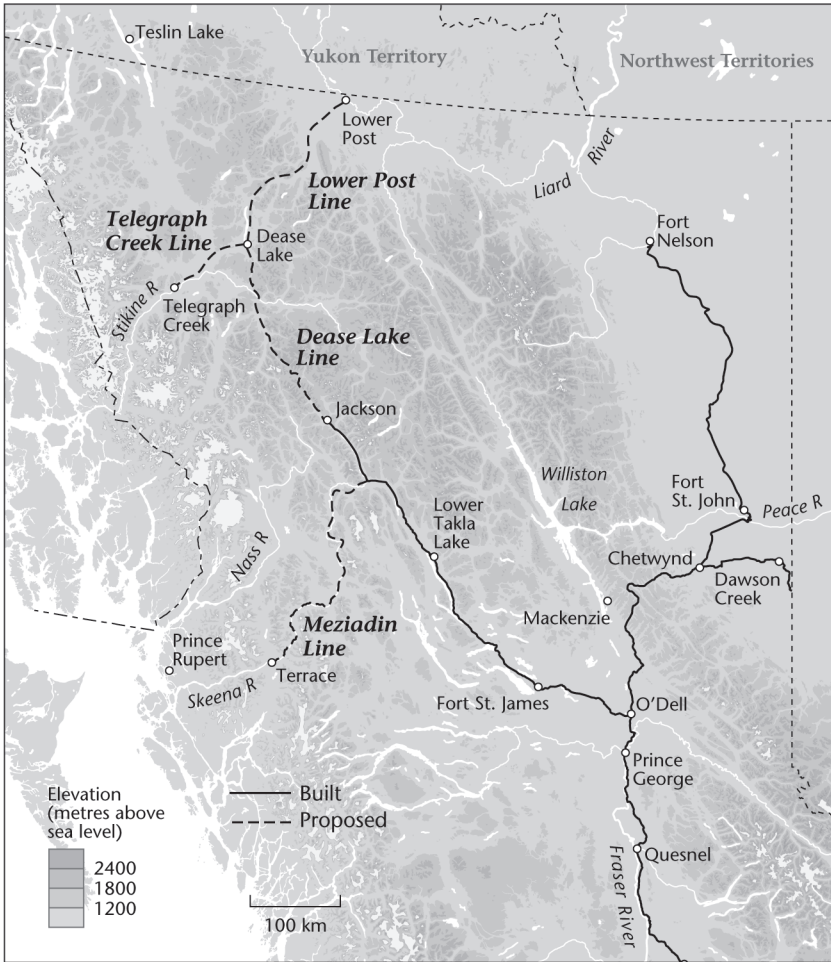


Figure 4. Railway extensions in northern BC either built or proposed in the latter part of the 1960s and in the 1970s. Cartography by Eric Leinberger.

under the NDP government of Dave Barrett, which came into power in August 1972 and opted to continue the previous administration's northern rail expansion program. The Dease Lake Extension was projected as a 663-kilometre line running from Fort St. James up through the Stikine River valley to Dease Lake, some 232 kilometres from the Yukon border.⁶¹ By mid-October 1973, the first stage of the line had been constructed to

⁶¹ The three extensions had been proposed by the Bennett government during its later years in power. See BC Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, 1st Sess., 29th Parl., 24 February 1970, 565-67, http://www.leg.bc.ca/hansard/hanindx/29th1st/29_oindex_P.htm.

Lovell (201 kilometres). However, increasing construction costs due to inflation, the decline in global markets for asbestos and copper (the two principal commodities that would make up line haulage), and the fact that the Cassiar Highway (which already served the Dease Lake area) had been upgraded, combined to halt construction (at Jackson) in early April 1977.⁶²

The decision to suspend the Dease Lake Extension was also the outcome of numerous financial, administrative, construction, and labour problems that had plagued the provincial rail system for years. The Royal Commission on the British Columbia Railway, appointed in February 1977 by the Socred government under William R. Bennett to conduct a full investigation of the railway's problems and mounting losses, concluded its work in the summer of 1978. It targeted the Dease Lake Extension and the four hundred-kilometre line built from 1968 to 1971 north from Fort St. John to Fort Nelson (the Fort Nelson Extension). Like the PGER, both lines had been built to relatively low standards in anticipation that improvements would be made as traffic increased. The commission concluded that necessary expenditures on these two lines would be greater than income from shipping and other forms of traffic.⁶³ While, due to petitions from local businesses and users, the government decided to continue with train service on the Fort Nelson Extension, it agreed with the commission's recommendation to cease construction of the projected line to Dease Lake.⁶⁴

The unfinished portion of the Dease Lake Extension remains as a mute testimony to this later example of a "leap too far north," much as the PNR was in its day. As Peyton shows in his study, "Unbuilt Environments," this industrial remnant remains a kind of open scar cutting across the northwestern BC landscape. As such, it has had adverse effects on the environment and traditional regional economic activities (hunting and trapping, for instance) up to the present.⁶⁵

The abandonment of the Dease Lake Extension did not spell the end to projects for the construction of rail lines through northwestern British

⁶² Peyton, "Unbuilt Environments," 204-31.

⁶³ British Columbia, Royal Commission on the British Columbia Railway, "Interim Report on the Future of the Fort Nelson Extension," 30 December 1977, http://www.llbc.leg.bc.ca/commissions/rc_titles.asp; British Columbia, Royal Commission on the British Columbia Railway, "Report of the Royal Commission on the British Columbia Railway," Lloyd G. McKenzie, Chairman, vol. 2, chap. 4, *The Northern Extensions* (Victoria: Government of British Columbia, 1978), 1-208, http://www.llbc.leg.bc.ca/public/pubdocs/bcdocs_rc/216321/index.htm.

⁶⁴ BC Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, 3rd Sess., 31st Parl., 20 April 1978, 621-24, http://www.leg.bc.ca/hansard/31st3rd/31p_03s_780420p.htm.

⁶⁵ Ruppenthal and Keast, *Railway Derailed*, 20-35; Peyton, "Unbuilt Environments," 221-31.

Columbia into the Yukon and Alaska. In more recent years, two other inter-regional rail projects have been initiated, largely in response to the rise in prices for mineral and other resource products over the last two decades as well as to a desire to exploit possibilities for new global transport routes and markets.

One of these projects was the Canadian Arctic Railway (CAR), a federal incorporated company established in 1998 and headquartered in Coquitlam, British Columbia. The first phase of the project, estimated to take up to ten years, was to focus on the acquisition, or negotiation, of operating rights to approximately fifteen hundred kilometres of existing railway in British Columbia, Alberta, and the Yukon as well as to the construction of approximately three thousand kilometres of new line in British Columbia, the Yukon, and Alaska. During the second and third phases of the project, which would occupy another two decades, the regional rail network would gradually be extended over the rest of the western Canadian Arctic and then into the eastern Canadian Arctic. Funding was expected to come primarily from private sources, although government aid would be sought through the issuance of land grants for unused or undeveloped Crown lands to facilitate the environmental and aboriginal approval process. However, the recent dissolution of the company – lately known as the Canadian Arctic Railway Development Corporation – has put an end to this initiative.⁶⁶

In October 2005 a new initiative, the Alaska-Canada Rail Link (ACRL), a consortium of investors, lobbyists, and politicians cosponsored by the governments of Alaska and Yukon, announced that it would undertake a feasibility study to determine a possible BC-Alaska rail route, taking into special consideration the access to coastal ports.⁶⁷ A long-range aim of the ACRL is to connect to the eastern Siberian rail system in the

⁶⁶ “Canadian Arctic Railway,” n.d., <http://www.canarco.ca/aboutcar.shtml>; Industry Canada, Corporations Canada, Federal Corporation Information - 3498344 (Canadian Arctic Railway Development Corporation), <https://www.ic.gc.ca/app/scr/cc/CorporationsCanada/fidriCrpDtls.html?corpId=3498344>.

⁶⁷ “Memorandum of Understanding: Alaska-Canada Rail Link Feasibility Study,” Alaska-Canada Rail Link, http://alaskacanadarail.com/documents/mou_final_april252005.pdf. To some extent, this new initiative dates back to 1976, when Alaska, as a follow-up to a conference on inter-regional development that it had hosted in April of that year, expressed a renewed interest in a rail link between Fairbanks and the BC Rail system. See Alaska, Department of Commerce and Economic Development, “Alaska-Canada Transcontinental Rail Connection to Contiguous United States: A Preliminary Study,” January 1977, 42-56, BCA, GR-0500, British Columbia, Commission on British Columbia Railway, 1977, box 7, file 138B.

event that the Bering Strait tunnel or bridge, proposed by the Russian Federation, becomes a reality.⁶⁸

However, the ACRL's study indicates that construction costs would be several times greater than those estimated for the PNR in the late 1950s, ranging between \$7.3 to \$10.9 billion. The system would incorporate large sections of the abandoned Dease Lake Extension. Of the nine alternate rail routes or corridors considered in the feasibility study, that extending from Minaret, British Columbia, to Watson Lake, Yukon, via Dease Lake (using the unused roadbed) is estimated to be the most expensive, "with very high capital, maintenance and operating costs." The study adds, with a certain sense of foreboding, "this is a high energy consumption line and the right-of-way would have a high risk of exposure to natural disasters."⁶⁹ All of the alternative routes would pass through areas with wildlife and endangered species as well as numerous bodies of water. The study indicates that the extensive curves and steep grades required on virtually all the routes would augment the risk of accidents and spills.⁷⁰ Yet, despite the ominous nature of the study results, the ACRL appears determined to press on toward the goal of building an inter-regional rail link, regardless of the costs that may have to be incurred or the environmental and socio-cultural impacts of the project on the regions it will affect.

Hence, although the PNR project of the Bennett period may have terminated decades ago, its "spirit" evidently lives on in these more recent attempts, which share many of the risks and preoccupations of their noteworthy predecessor. If heed is not taken of the lessons of the former project, these newer projects may suffer much the same fate as the PNR.

CONCLUSIONS

Although "vision" is a necessary part of government policy-making, its exercise must always be tempered with an adequate comprehension of what is feasible and what is not, or of what is convenient and what is not, at the time of its implementation. A major reason for the PNR's failure

⁶⁸ Mark P. Barry, "Advancing the Bering Strait Tunnel Project in the United States and Canada," 4 October 2011, <http://www.upf.org/programs/bering-strait-project/4017-mp-barry-advancing-the-bering-strait-tunnel-project-in-the-united-states-and-canada?tmpl=component...>

⁶⁹ Alaska Canada Rail Link Project, *Feasibility Study Report, Alternative Route Segment Assessment, Work Package B1(g)*, June 2006: 3, <http://www.alaskacanada.rail.org>.

⁷⁰ Alaska Canada Rail Link, *Phase 1 Feasibility Study: Research Report*, n.d.: 42, <http://www.alaskacanada.rail.org>.

was the mistaken belief that the railway could be extended throughout the vast expanse of the northwest without conducting an adequate study of the economic feasibility of such a project. The PNR also failed because it lacked the funding adequate for such an expensive project. It hinged on the possibility of the discovery of significant mineral deposits in the Rocky Mountain Trench area and the ability of the Wenner-Gren company to exploit them. When that possibility fell through, the Bennett government had no other recourse – other than the premier’s hollow boast that British Columbia would go it alone if necessary – than a forlorn hope that the Canadian or American federal governments would lend financial help to the project. As the BC government pursued this goal, it became evident not only that such help would not be forthcoming but also that transport possibilities in the northwest should be enhanced by the development of highways and maritime facilities, or a combination of the two, in the form of intermodal transport.

The idea of building the PNR as a monorail was not viable as the technology had not been tested in difficult topography and extreme climatic and geographical conditions (such as those of northwestern British Columbia). Even a conventional railway had its limitations, and highways were being increasingly favoured as alternatives to railways in the 1950s and 1960s. Rather than thinking how the PNR might be linked to British Columbia’s system of conventional railways, its planners should have given more thought to how it could be intermodal in the sense of becoming linked to the existing highway network and, in the case of coastal areas, to maritime transport.

The true impact of the failure of the PNR project occurred in the decades following its demise, especially in the case of the Dease Lake Extension. This line, which remains largely incomplete, offers a glimpse of how the PNR, or a substantial portion of it, might have ended up had it been built. The unused roadbed remains as a testimony to the kind of dead-end dreams of inter-regional rail links that are still being pursued. This is not to say that such megaprojects have no place in plans for the future but, rather, to insist that they need to be rooted in a clearer and fuller understanding of the development possibilities and needs of the peoples who inhabit the regions affected. Only then may it be possible to define and achieve what could be truly beneficial for the residents of these areas and those who make up the nations of which they are a part.