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CRISIS IN CHURCHILL, MANITOBA

INQUIRY—DEBATE ADJOURNED

Speech by:

The Honourable Patricia Bovey

Wednesday, June 21, 2017

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Hon. Patricia Bovey rose pursuant to notice of June 19, 2017:

That she will call the attention of the Senate to the crisis in Churchill, Manitoba.

She said: Honourable senators, you're going to know that my heart is in the North today.

I rise to speak on my motion on the inquiry for the emergency humanitarian situation in Churchill, Manitoba's town on the edge of the Arctic and its northern port on Hudson Bay. Churchill is connected to the rest of Canada only by rail and air. There are no roads into the town. Rail is their lifeline.

The town began as an outpost and is steeped in fur trade and Hudson Bay history. In the late 1920s, its role as a seaport began with the building of the Hudson Bay Railroad and the Port of Churchill, and through the 1950s and 1960s, it was a thriving military community, a need again perhaps given the issues of our northern sovereignty.

For the second time in just a few months, the rail tracks are utterly impassable and air is now the only means of transporting food, medical supplies, other goods and materials and people into the community. The community is in a dire need at the moment and urgently requires assistance from both the federal and provincial governments, a subsidy to get supplies to the community.

I have been in touch with the mayor of Churchill and a number of indigenous leaders from along the bay from Opaskwayak to York Landing and Churchill and into Nunavut. All are very honest about the situation. Echoing Mayor Spence's words, "Our community has gone through a lot."

Let me give you a summary of their recent plights.

This past winter, the railway line was shut down for 17 days in March due to blizzards, causing Churchill to declare a state of emergency, a situation I mentioned when I spoke in this chamber on the national basic income program on May 9. Grocery store shelves were empty, with no milk, bread or vegetables, and little meat. Normally, there are deliveries once a week.

Then in late May, due to unprecedented flooding from high spring runoffs and high water levels in the Churchill River, the rail line was damaged again in at least 19 locations, as were five bridges between Gillam and Churchill. Apparently, another 30 bridges and 600 culverts need to be assessed as well.

I cannot overemphasize that rail is the only means of transporting goods to the town, including food, medicines, medical supplies, fuel, building materials, vehicles, essentially everything. Last week, the temperatures were at 2 degrees, so

home heating is still very much required. Perhaps fuel can be shipped into the port during the summer season and that is being looked into.

While the impact of this situation absolutely affects Churchill, its impact is also widespread throughout the Arctic region because Churchill is a gateway to the North. As if the 2017 situations were not bad enough, we must remember that Omnitrax, the Denver-based U.S. company that has owned the rail line and port facility since 1997, cancelled the 2016 grain shipping season, a move that affected 70 employees.

The community is still dealing with the economic fallout of that. It is the community's largest employer.

[Translation]

Honourable senators, this is a very serious situation. As I said in the speech I gave on May 9, food is very expensive in the North, including in Churchill. Milk costs more than alcohol, and when there are actually fresh vegetables and fruit on the shelves, they are basically unaffordable.

[English]

Shipping by air is three to five times as expensive as rail. According to the *Winnipeg Free Press* on June 14, the owner of the rail line has indicated that it might be the spring of 2018 before the rail line can be restored. It will take four weeks for that damage to be assessed and another two weeks to issue the report. I have learned that Omnitrax has stated that it will cost \$500,000 to do the assessment and that they lack the funds to fix it. I have also learned that two bikers travelled the rail line on the weekend and took photos, which I have, that show water levels have dropped. What the report will reveal, I don't know. Perhaps the long-term situation isn't quite as bad as it looked a couple weeks ago, but the situation is unacceptable. The railway track and bed is not straight.

My overriding concern is a humanitarian one: the need for food, medicines and various supplies. It is an emergency. How, I ask, can a town of 899 people, including Inuit, Cree, Dene and non-indigenous citizens, be so cut off in this day and age, in 2017?

Smaller communities on the line between Thompson and Churchill are also affected because the train stops with supplies for those small communities on its way north. Not only are they cut off from critically needed supplies and access to medical attention, they are also cut off from one of their major businesses: tourism. Tourism is a key economic driver of the region, exceeding a little more than 50 per cent of the town's revenues.

We can only hope that the tourist season this year will not be affected, given that I'm told 80 per cent of tourists arrive by air. Once there, they get hiking supplies, food and other services, and those services required for the tourists are rail dependent. If those costs go up substantially, one has to be concerned about tourist

cancellations. The polar bear tours, which leave Winnipeg by train, visit Churchill and then fly out, are fully booked at least a year in advance.

The owner of an inn and hotel in the town, Belinda Fitzpatrick, is concerned some tourists planning to come by train will cancel, as the train is part of the adventure.

As reported in the *Globe and Mail*, she said:

With the Canada 150 celebrations, we were looking forward to a bumper year so . . . hopefully we can still try and save some of that . . . There will be no doubt some kind of price increase, and probably a lessening of the hours in the restaurant.

As you can appreciate, I have spoken with Mayor Spence several times and he has updated me on both the short-term crisis and longer-term needs. The immediate need is, of course, for subsidies for foods and supplies to get to the town. Calm Air has put on two extra flights from Thompson to Churchill daily and reduced the freight costs a bit, but we all know that is not sustainable.

As the mayor told me on the weekend:

We have reached out to both our respected Federal and Provincial governments for assistance . . . subsidies are required for food and supplies for the higher freight costs.

[*Translation*]

Despite the crisis, Mayor Spence is optimistic about the future. Here is what he told me, and I quote:

Governments need to make sure that the work to repair and reopen our rail line begins as soon as possible. We believe that our community has a role to play in building a better Canada.

[*English*]

That sentiment has been expressed by all of those to whom I have spoken. Tim Johnston of Community Futures North Central Development feels new approaches are required and that an all-weather road should be seriously considered for transportation of people, those who live in the region and for tourists. All talk of the need for the governments to work together with One North, an organization including the First Nations chiefs, mayors and leaders of all the municipalities and communities.

Longer term, they desperately require reinvestment in the rail line still owned by Omnitrax. With a new model of investments including, but not dependent on, governments, the town is poised for takeoff. Due to climate change, and with the longer summer and fall seasons, the tourism and shipping seasons are extended. Winter, however, poses new challenging situations.

As for a key opportunity, the \$30 million Churchill Marine Observatory has been prepped and was to have been developed this summer. With the rail crisis, materials for construction cannot get in. This facility is seen as a gateway to new initiatives further north. Obviously, the ownership of the rail line and the port need to be resolved and, according to the mayor, “as Canadians, we need to take control.”

It was reported in December that a sale was imminent and more recently that a consortium, a group of First Nations, is working to purchase the Port of Churchill and the rail line that is under negotiation, with a memorandum of understanding in place. It is believed the deal remains in place even with the flood damage to the line but, of course, the assessment is critically necessary.

For those of you who have not been to Churchill, I can attest it is truly a Canadian gem. The tundra with its very fragile flora and fauna is a significant tourist draw. Churchill is the polar bear capital of the world, the beluga hot spot, a birder’s paradise and, of course, a wonderful place to see the Northern Lights.

Its history is rich, with evidence of human presence going back 4,000 years. The area includes the Prince of Wales Fort, a national historic site and 18th century Hudson’s Bay fortress; Sloop Cove, the safe harbour and winter haven for the Hudson’s Bay company; Wapusk National Park, on the bucket list of thousands of ecotourists; York Factory, another national historic site, built in 1832 as a fur trade post, and the oldest wooden structure built on permafrost; and Cape Merry Battery, dating from the 1746 fur trade and built in its new, and present site, in 1749, just three years later.

The northern expeditions were critically important in discovering the Northwest Passage, a passage whose ownership is now being challenged by a number of nations, and that is just one of the reasons I support the motion by Senator Watt, as I said earlier.

Churchill’s culture is rich and its museum a real treasure, as are the wilderness tours and Northern Studies Centre, only some of the other draws to the area.

I have taken that train. It’s a two-day trip from Winnipeg, a spectacular one, and I did it when it was very hot outside, so hot that the train had to slow due to the movement of the rail lines as a result of it being built on muskeg. It was so hot the muskeg was visibly bubbling, so the train had to crawl very slowly, otherwise I guess I would have been in the muskeg myself.

[*Translation*]

Honourable senators, for the time being, we must do everything in our power to address this humanitarian crisis, and this means allocating funds to buy food and ensuring that medical supplies and construction materials can make it to their destination and that tourists can still get there.

The province is waiting for the results of an assessment before deciding whether to allocate emergency funding. This is understandable to a certain extent, but there are pressing needs to be met with regard to food and fuel. These Canadian citizens have been cut off from the rest of the country.

[*English*]

You have already seen many catastrophic situations due to climate change this year, including the announcement this past weekend that the scientific research ship monitoring sea ice each

summer, with teams of researchers in various fields, led by Dr. David Barber, who I mentioned before, have had to cancel their 2017 plans given the shifting ice and changing nature of that ice.

We must be prepared the best we can for what lies ahead, for the present, the short term and the long term. My concerns and thoughts go to all the citizens of Churchill, and the Kivalliq region of Nunavut serviced and supplied through Churchill, and all those dependent on being a thriving shipping, tourist and business centre. In Canada's one hundred fiftieth anniversary

year, it seems unfair and to a degree ironic that the railway which in so many respects bound this country together is itself isolating a vulnerable group of our compatriots.

It's my sincere hope that subsidies will be forthcoming from the Governments of Manitoba and Canada to alleviate the current situation and to address longer-term situations. I know the resolution of this devastating humanitarian emergency has the support of the tribal councils, the MKO and other indigenous and non-indigenous leaders and communities. We can do this and we can do better.
