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# **Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities**

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**EVIDENCE**

**Monday, September 26, 2011**

—  
**Chair**

**Mr. Merv Tweed**



## Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities

Monday, September 26, 2011

• (1530)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Merv Tweed (Brandon—Souris, CPC)):** If everybody's ready, welcome to the second part of this meeting of the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities. We're now into committee business.

We have two motions. I do know that Ms. Chow is not here and hers is the first order. I'm not sure if we want to present it and debate it...?

**A voice:** Yes.

**The Chair:** Okay. I'll open the floor.

Mr. Mai.

**Mr. Hoang Mai (Brossard—La Prairie, NDP):** On behalf of Olivia Chow, I'll read the motion:

[Translation]

That the government begin, without further delay, plans for the design and construction of a new Champlain Bridge in Montreal, Quebec; and that this motion be reported back to the House.

[English]

As you know, the Champlain Bridge is the busiest in Canada. There are two reports that have come out, one regarding the status of the bridge and one regarding the future of the bridge.

Regarding the future of the Champlain Bridge, the report says that the bridge has to be replaced as soon as possible. I think we all agree that the bridge, in terms of cost...yes, there are repairs, and yes, it's urgent that work be done so that the bridge can be used in a safe manner, but we are now talking about several years before we can actually have a new Champlain Bridge.

Reports that have come out say that in terms of traffic right now we're losing close to \$2.1 billion a year for the whole region of Montreal. Another report that just came out says that Montreal would be losing \$741 million per year if the Champlain Bridge were to close. Also, the impact is huge in terms of people being stuck in traffic for hours and hours.

My riding is Brossard—La Prairie. The Champlain Bridge comes into my riding and this is something that people have asked me about. They've sent me letters. I've received hundreds of letters, and the main issue is replacing the Champlain Bridge. It has become a national issue and a question of the economy. We're talking about productivity and the loss of productivity if we continue the way we are going forward now.

So the idea right now is to table a motion

[Translation]

to ensure that the government will quickly announce that the Champlain Bridge will be replaced.

Once the government has made that announcement, all the options will have to be exercised. The latest report, published this summer, mentioned some of the available options.

We also mustn't forget about public transit. I have met with members of the Legislative Assembly of Quebec, who are also calling for the replacement of the Champlain Bridge. Whether we are talking about chambers of commerce, municipal or provincial elected representatives, or the public, everyone is calling for the Champlain Bridge to be replaced.

This motion has been moved because we want to work as a committee on advancing this matter, which is very important for the replacement to take place as soon as possible.

• (1535)

[English]

**The Chair:** Further comments?

Monsieur Coderre.

[Translation]

**Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, please forgive me. My voice is hoarse, but you'll still be able to hear me. I may sound like a crooner, but I'm not.

This issue does not affect only one committee, or only Montreal, or only the province of Quebec; it affects the whole country.

I will support this motion, but I want to clarify a few things. I support this motion, but I will also put forward my own motion, as we need to know what is going on.

We don't want a new bridge just for the sake of having a new bridge. We know what the potential economic impacts are. We know that there could be serious consequences and that, the longer we wait, the more expensive it will be. In addition, all the reports we have looked at indicate that the project would have an impact not only in terms of social matters but also in terms of safety.

I am glad this meeting is public because it's important that we send a message today that the matter is not political. It is a matter of safety, an economic and social consideration. Goods valued at over \$20 billion are transported across that bridge every year. All of eastern Canada is affected. We must use the current infrastructure study to determine how related the infrastructure, the economy and sustainable development are. We must make decisions now.

The minister will probably say this is something we should deal with in five years, not right now and that, meanwhile, every effort is being made. When we discuss my motion, we will realize that there are already problems with this bridge and that, since it is located in a seismically sensitive area, the worst could happen.

That information does not come from politicians. We are talking about reports produced by engineers and experts. This is not about frightening people. These are professionals who used specific words to describe a specific situation.

I hope that the Conservative majority sitting on this committee will not dismiss the two motions out of hand. This is not just a political issue; it's something that concerns the future of our country.

Mr. Chair, we accepted the report a little earlier. When we conduct the infrastructure study, we will realize that this issue affects the very foundation of our economy. There are times when we must not only ask what the situation is, but also realize what an important role we as parliamentarians play in finding constructive solutions. One such solution is to look into what's happening with the Champlain Bridge.

Eventually, we could also talk about other bridges because the Champlain Bridge is not alone. We will also want to discuss the second Windsor bridge. There are other realities to consider. Are the bridges in good shape? For important economic and social reasons, we will also have to look at new infrastructure construction in the rest of the country. However, before we start building elsewhere, we should perhaps look at this situation and do the right thing.

Later on, I will talk about my motion, since there are important and complementary considerations to point out. The Liberal Party of Canada and I have publicly stated that a new bridge is a necessity. That much is clear, but the problem is that we started talking about this in 2006. A 10-year process was being discussed, which would bring us to 2016. Yet, here we are, in 2011, and nothing has been done so far. Crisis management is not enough. It's not enough to say that 28 alterations have been made since 1962 and that we have done everything that needed to be done, that we looked at the reports and that, if something should come up, the Federal Bridge Corporation Limited would handle it.

It's important that the minister come see us. His role is to represent the department and Canadians. He must come not only to reassure the public, but also to show transparency in this case. That is what my motion is about.

Adopting this motion is crucially important. We don't have to do so right away, but the government must make its intentions clear. There is more and more talk about an economic crisis and a debt crisis. The terminology is important, and it is being said that everyone must do their part and that cuts will be made. I hope that safety will not be the big loser in all that. We don't want a decision where only the \$2-billion minimum is allocated to fix the bridge,

under the pretext that we can't afford more for economic reasons. Unfortunately, all Canadians and Quebecers would lose out.

• (1540)

I hope that we will be productive and do useful work, and support this motion.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

**The Chair:** Mr. Nicholls.

**Mr. Jamie Nicholls (Vaudreuil-Soulanges, NDP):** I'd just like to hammer home how important this bridge is to the Canadian economy.

As the members across might know, according to the global competitiveness index, Canada has slipped four places, from ninth place to thirteenth. Now, one of the key factors in determining the global competitiveness of the economy is state-of-the-art infrastructure. At the present time, as I think all members here will recognize, Montreal is undergoing extreme difficulties with its infrastructure that was built in the 1960s. The federal government's responsibility in that network of infrastructure is the Champlain Bridge.

My colleague stated that the Island of Montreal, through traffic bottle-ups, loses \$2.1 billion in productivity every year. I think everyone in this room wants to promote a good, healthy economy, wants to increase Canada's competitiveness, and wants to assure that we'll again get into the top ten global competitors in terms of our economy. The Champlain Bridge is part and parcel of making that a reality. In fact, it's an important link to eastern Canada and it's an important link for international trade to the United States.

If our priority is jobs and the economy, the purchase price that's been quoted for this bridge—\$1.1 billion, I believe—is just a small investment in the health of our economy in the future. I hope we can all agree that making plans to replace the bridge from today will be an important message to our global partners in the economy that Canada is serious about improving its infrastructure, adding public transit to its cities so that it functions more efficiently.

The Champlain Bridge and our commitment to replacing the Champlain Bridge will play a key factor in improving Canada's productivity, its global competitiveness, and the Canadian economy in general. It will strengthen our international trade ties with the United States and with the provinces in eastern Canada. If we fail to replace it as soon as possible, it will create structural problems in our economy down the line in the next couple of years.

We too want to fix the roof while it's still sunny—and clouds are on the horizon.

I hope the members across will recognize that making a commitment to this bridge isn't about Quebec versus the rest of Canada. It's not about the city of Montreal versus the other cities in the country. It's really about the Canadian economy and helping the Canadian economy advance and become stronger, more productive, more competitive.

That's why we're putting forward this motion, so that we can strengthen Canadians' economy.

**The Chair:** Mr. Benskin.

**Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP):** We've heard a lot of talk about the economic value of the bridge, and that cannot go without saying. But as in any growing city, bridges become lifelines to getting off the island. Montreal is an island. I think those of us who live in areas where we need bridges to get to and from where we're going on a daily basis have all experienced how frustrating it can be when one of those accesses is not there any more and it takes us twice as long to get to work.

One of the things about a growing economy is the fact that people begin to move out of the city and move, in our case, off island. So for the massive workforce that comes onto the island every day over the Champlain Bridge, over the Mercier Bridge, over all of the bridges leading onto the Island of Montreal, this is extremely important.

One of the other things to consider, which we're hoping for as far as this new bridge goes, is a very strong focus on public transport, on using the bridge as a means to give people incentive to leave their cars at home, or to at least use park spots during the workday, and on having efficient public transit that allows them to take an electric train or a bus over the bridge to their destination. This is something that can be built into the project. This is something that would also help the new bridge live that much longer, because it's not carrying the weight of the tens of thousands of cars that use it each day.

But, again, this is not a cosmetic thing. This is not a popularity thing. This is not a partisan thing. This is something that is vital to the Canadian workforce, vital to Canadians living their day-to-day lives. It's something that has to be planned for. And the planning has to start now, because it's going to take 10 to 12 years to come to fruition.

Right now, we have it blocked down to one lane going either way at any given time, which is causing massive bottle-necking in that area. The entrance to the bridge from Montreal is in my riding, and studies have shown that respiratory illnesses in people who live in that area are up by 20% just because they're sitting in areas where cars are sitting idling for hours. Again, this is something that is of benefit not only to Montreal or Quebec but to the whole of Canada.

• (1545)

**The Chair:** Are there any further comments?

Madam Morin.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Isabelle Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, NDP):** Much has been made of the bridge's economic value. I just want to raise the committee's awareness of the fact that building the new bridge is an urgent need.

Consortium BCDE's latest report stated that just the feasibility study on the environmental impact would take two years. This bridge will take some 10 years to build. My riding is located a few kilometres from the bridge. Three bridges connect the Island of Montreal and the South Shore, and they are all aligned. This summer, work was being done on two of those bridges, and it took three hours to get from my riding to downtown Montreal, a distance of 12 km. Walking would have taken less time. We don't want to alarm anyone, but there are still risks involved. If we wait until it's

too late and the bridge becomes unusable, the traffic jams will be unbelievable.

We talk a lot about the economy, which is indeed very important. But I'm thinking about the families in my riding. The people who work in downtown Montreal will spend four hours commuting every day and will not get to see their families when they get home in the evening because it will be too late. This is an extremely urgent concern for all Montreal suburbanites, and it must be resolved as quickly as possible because of its impact on their private lives. A number of Canadian cities are struggling with similar traffic jams. I think that if we do not tackle this problem, here or elsewhere, and if we don't encourage public transit or the implementation of infrastructures that could improve the situation, the country's busiest downtown cores will be faced with really hazardous problems.

I think that we absolutely must support this motion as a committee for the benefit of Canadians. I would also be able to go back to my riding very soon and tell my constituents, who have been writing me for a few months, that this situation will be resolved, that the government has agreed to take the right path, to repair this bridge and immediately begin studies to move things forward.

• (1550)

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Any further comment?

Monsieur Coderre.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Denis Coderre:** I have just one question, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

I'd like a recorded vote, please.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Yes. I'll call the vote.

For new members, your name will be called out and you'll identify a yes in support of the motion or a no in opposition to the motion.

(Motion negated: nays 6; yeas 5)

**The Chair:** We'll now move to the second notice of motion given by Monsieur Coderre.

Monsieur Coderre, please.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Denis Coderre:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I kind of figured that the government was going to vote against the first motion since it wants to have enough room to play with and do its announcements. But at the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, it is important to get the real facts about the current situation. The Federal Bridge Corporation Limited for the greater Montreal area is somewhat of a unique organization. That is because the management of some bridges, including Champlain, Jacques Cartier and part of the Mercier Bridge, falls under federal jurisdiction. So it is important to have the real facts about the situation.

The hon. member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine was talking earlier about environmental assessments. That also has to do with aboriginal communities. An aboriginal burial site was discovered on Île des Soeurs, where a new bridge was supposed to be built. That is not going to take 2 years; that could take 3 to 4 years, without even getting into the political situation. That is why it is imperative to acknowledge that Quebeckers, Montrealers and Canadians deserve to have a new Champlain Bridge. Once they realize that this affects people's lives, some of them might change their minds.

Having said that, I hear all sorts of things from subject matter experts. They are telling me to avoid driving in the outside lanes of the Champlain Bridge and to stay in the middle lane. A film produced by engineers and focusing on the piers of the bridge came out recently. After seeing it, I told my wife to never take the Champlain Bridge again. We have a serious problem, since the study that was made public as a result of pressure from the opposition clearly shows that part of the bridge could collapse.

Let us provide our engineering friends with a bit of history. The bridge was built in 1962, and its absorption rate allowed heavy traffic at the time. But because of climate and corrosion problems, radical changes were made. As a result, the initial absorption level was no longer there and the way the bridge worked changed completely. The problem is this: we were told that it could easily take another 10 years. Let me remind you that we were told so in 2006, without factoring in the problems with the Jacques Cartier Bridge and especially with the Mercier Bridge, where traffic became heavier. On top of that, we are being told that this bridge is not made for trucks over a certain weight. You can imagine that, when you are being told first that 28 changes have been made to alter the actual absorption of the bridge, that the joists and pillars are... I am not the one saying this—it is not political—you can watch the show *Découverte* hosted by Charles Tisseyre on the TOU.TV website. And take a look at the reports that were made public when we put pressure, which also became public. You will see that we have a major problem on our hands.

Here is what intrigued me most in this whole adventure, this soap opera. After my news conference—the minister was supposed to go and give interviews—the cat came out of the bag; there are currently inspection reports, but they don't want to release them because of security reasons. When you hear those sorts of comments and when things are being kept secret, you get the feeling that someone is hiding something. I am not questioning the Hon. Denis Lebel's good faith; he is a friend, I know him; he is the former mayor of Roberval and he is close to people because he was a mayor previously. He knows what proximity policies are all about. But he might have been slightly overtaken by events. That is why his job is to come and reassure people.

The last report said that, if there was an earthquake, part of the bridge could collapse. A bridge “collapsing” is no small issue. We are not just talking about being stuck in a car for four hours. With the report published and with my colleague's question in the House of Commons today, we realize something else. What if you are stuck on the bridge, there is a traffic jam in both directions and the bridge collapses? It is no longer a social issue then, it is criminal negligence.

We don't want to end up with “should haves”. Our job, in all good conscience, is to make sure we ask all the questions and receive all the answers from both sides. That is the reason behind my motion today. Yes, we want a new bridge—my father would say: “Get off the pot”—but we need to have the real facts about the current situation with this bridge.

• (1555)

Mr. Chair, we need those inspection reports. As a matter of fact, all the data that allowed those engineers to produce the infamous report that talked about part of the bridge collapsing were from the day-to-day inspections.

[*English*]

We need to know what truly happened during that time: what was the data that inspired you to write that kind of report?

My role as a legislator is to make sure that through this committee we will have the capacity to have access to that data. I'm a member of Privy Council. I'm a former minister. I understand the in camera issue.

If it's a true in camera issue, eventually we should all sit together and say that the report, the access to that report.... But they have to prove first that it's a true security matter. We are big boys and big girls. We should all sit amongst ourselves, but we should have access to those reports, just like we can for national defence and other issues of operations. I'm telling you, it's about saving lives. That's point number one.

In point number two—don't worry, I won't lose my voice completely—all I'm saying is that we need the minister to come here to talk about the role of the Société des ponts in that matter. We need to know what the Société des ponts has planned for the future. Because it is a clear issue: it's the Champlain Bridge. But it's also about the relationship and the transparency issue regarding that institution vis-à-vis the constituents.

And this is the place to be. The minister, the representative of the Société des ponts, should come here, provide all the data, come clean, and tell us exactly what happened—and as a matter of fact, what's happening. We will have other questions, of course, because it seems that the Jacques Cartier Bridge is rebuilt every two years. There's always something there. We have the Mercier Bridge. We have many, many issues.

But we need to see the plan and we need to see what's going on. That's the purpose of my motion, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

This is crucial. It is about safety and decency. We must be responsible and recognize that it has nothing to do with political parties.

As a Montrealer, as a Quebecker and as a Canadian, I don't want to see here what happened in Minnesota in 2007, when a bridge collapsed. We might end up asking ourselves whether we have done everything in our power to prevent this from happening. In all good conscience, I want to be able to say that I did everything I could, as a legislator, to protect the public interest and the public. That is the purpose of my motion. My hope is that everyone will support it.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

**The Chair:** Comments?

Mr. Nicholls.

• (1600)

[Translation]

**Mr. Jamie Nicholls:** I will be quick. We intend to support Mr. Coderre's motion. We feel that, if the government acts in good faith, it has to be transparent about all the infrastructure reports in order to reassure the people affected, especially the constituents in the ridings of Mr. Mai and Mr. Benskin.

I feel that the Quebec government has shown good faith in making all the MTQ reports public. It has shown Quebecers that it is transparent. The federal government has to follow suit and reassure the people using those bridges that the bridges are safe. It has to show its good faith and prove that it is thinking about people's safety.

[English]

Just to recap, I think in the interests of the transparency of the government they should release all the inspection reports from these bridges to reassure the population of Quebec that their bridges—both provincial and federal—are safe. In doing so, they will show, in good faith, that they care about the safety of Quebecers.

**The Chair:** Monsieur Mai.

[Translation]

**Mr. Hoang Mai:** I am actually going to support the motion. One of the reasons for my decision is that, when the Hon. Denis Lebel said this summer that there were reports that he didn't want to release because the public might get worried, it had quite the opposite effect. People were more alarmed by the fact that reports were being kept secret using the excuse that the public might not understand.

As a result, based on the comments I got, people were offended. We have to trust the public. They are the ones who have the last word. So they must receive information, especially when it has to do with a bridge that poses not only an economic issue, but also a real public safety issue. It is therefore important for the reports to be public.

The government is to be thanked for bringing forward the latest Consortium BCDE report on the pre-feasibility study. Unfortunately, the opposition parties had to exert pressure in the media. There is a way for us to work it out now. The motion is really about asking for the reports to be released here, in committee, so that we can examine them together and, at the same time, join our efforts to find a real solution and move forward. I feel that is what the public is asking. That is what the people want: not only to be informed, but also to feel that the government and the opposition parties are working together to protect their interests.

I don't think this motion is asking for too much. All it asks is that the existing reports be made public, without having to go through the media, like we did. Today, we found out that a January report estimated the potential economic loss for Montreal at \$741 million if the Champlain Bridge had to close.

So perhaps for the sake of transparency and the willingness to move ahead with things, we ask that all the reports be made public in this committee.

As my colleague mentioned, if matters or issues have to be discussed in camera, perhaps we can talk about that then, but we would have to be able to justify why they are being discussed in camera, not just say that the reports are not being released because the people won't understand.

Thank you.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Benskin.

**Mr. Tyrone Benskin:** We were all individually elected by a group of people in a city or a village or a town to represent them in this place. There are 308 of us who are tasked with looking after the safety and well-being of our constituents, the people of this country.

It seems to me that we would be better able to do our jobs if we had all the information. Now this may seem to be practised as an “us and them” type of thing, but in matters of public safety—and believe it or not, the NDP is as much about public safety as anybody else—like these lifelines, our bridges in Canada, it is important that we, as parliamentarians, as people who are tasked to take care of these issues, know what we're dealing with, know what people who are better educated than we are in matters of engineering and so forth are saying about our bridges. I think it's important for those of us in this room to know what's going on with those bridges. These bridges have been around a lot longer than some of us have been here. But it is really important to know what has happened so we can plan what is going to happen.

For that reason, I support this motion, and I hope you give consideration and will support it as well, because it is about being able to do our job.

• (1605)

**The Chair:** Are there further comments? Seeing none, I will call the vote.

**Hon. Denis Coderre:** A recorded vote.

**The Chair:** We're going to have a recorded vote. Again, after the clerk calls your name, indicate “yes” in favour or “no” opposed.

(Motion negatived: nays 6; yeas 5)

**The Chair:** Monsieur Coderre.

[Translation]

**Hon. Denis Coderre:** On another topic, I would like to know whether the rule of the majority will still apply if we ask the Hon. Denis Lebel to appear. Will he come at some point? Has that been looked into? In my view, the first thing he has to do is to appear before the committee in order to tell us what goes on in his department.

[English]

**The Chair:** According to the report we approved at the start, we were going to deal with it in the agreed order, which would include a national public transit strategy. I see no problem inviting the minister to attend. I would suggest that we should probably ask the departmental people for this Wednesday and hope, due to the short timeline, they'll be available, and include an invitation for the minister to attend.

[Translation]

**Hon. Denis Coderre:** Given that an official for the minister's department will appear and that public transit will also be a topic of discussion, I feel it is important that the Federal Bridge Corporation Limited be also represented, since public transit uses the various bridges. So questions will come up on that topic as well.

[English]

**The Chair:** We will invite as many of them as we can, and I will also include a note to the minister for him to appear at his earliest convenience.

I will also ask the committee members in regard to the study that we will do on a national public transit strategy if they have names of people they would like to appear before the committee. Could you forward them to me, either through my office or the clerk's office, as soon as you possibly can. We will start with the departmental people, hopefully on Wednesday, which will give us some lead time for next Monday and Wednesday.

Okay? Is there any further business?

The meeting is adjourned.

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