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*...from the  
director's chair*

# The Nipigon River Bridge fiasco

By the time you read this, we'll no doubt know more about why the Nipigon River Bridge had to be closed in mid-January.

As I write, it's only about 36 hours after the incident, and there is already a surfeit of arm-chair engineers offering up explanations of why the cable-stayed bridge split under frigid temperatures, as well as a growing number of voices demanding answers for the newly constructed bridge's failure, the lack of alternative route options, and what some are calling the "mismanagement" of northern Ontario's highways.

The bridge was to be the crown jewel in Ontario's rapidly expanding infrastructure renewal program; now it's a national embarrassment.

When construction began in July 2013, Michael Gravelle, the province's Minister of Northern Development and Mines, touted the bridge as a "magnificent structure" that was "sure to become a destination attraction in its own right."

This is likely not the kind of attraction he was thinking of. But here's the thing. Even when a forensic investigation determines what caused the bolts to break, even when blame has been ascribed, even when there's a viable contingency route found, vehicle weights and dimensions obstacles are overcome, or we negotiate emergency stop-gap procedures to get Canadian goods moving through the US, we still have one mammoth problem on our hands.

The real question is why is there any place in this country where cross-Canada traffic can be effectively severed because there is only a single transportation link between Eastern and Western Canada? The failure of a \$106-million, 49-day-old piece of infrastructure is indeed a catastrophe, but our country can just as easily be cut in half by a major snow storm, a flood, or even a traffic accident at this critical juncture.

To say that investment in Canada's National Highway System (NHS) is sorely lacking is an understatement, considering that every day

the bridge is closed is a \$100-million blow to our economy. Put another way, the business loss from a one-day shutdown would pay for a new bridge.

The Trans-Canada Highway, which travels through all 10 provinces between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, is the core of the 38,000-km network of roads designated as the NHS. While the NHS represents only about 3% of roads in Canada, it accounts for 40% of all vehicle-kilometres travelled in the country. And more significantly for this industry, more than 94% of truck travel occurs on the NHS core. What makes the Nipigon fiasco so dreadful is that for 1,300 trucks a day, their access to this vital stretch of the NHS disappeared with the snap of a bolt.

So could an integrated national highway program have saved the Nipigon River Bridge? Federal-provincial relations in this country are complex and can be incredibly frustrating for JQ Public who just wants "government" to do something. But it's the fundamental characteristic of Canadian federalism, and it's not going to change. Highways are primarily the responsibility of the provinces and territories, although the federal government has a long history of providing assistance for highway construction under specific pieces of legislation, and a variety of funding programs. Under the current system, provinces decide on the design, construction, safety standards, and financing of highways within their boundaries, then look to the feds to share the cost. Federal funds flow primarily through ad-hoc, bilateral agreements with individual jurisdictions.

Efforts to establish an integrated national highway policy go back decades. One time we got pretty close. In 1988, the federal and provincial transportation ministers commissioned a huge, multi-phase study. Design standards were identified, costs of upgrading the NHS to the recommended standards were estimated, options



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were set out for a national policy, and cost-sharing and funding formulas were recommended. After six years, governments couldn't agree on the funding mechanism, and the idea of a national highway policy was road kill.

Yet the lack of a long-term commitment to highway funding from the federal government is a recurring issue. There is no argument that efficient transportation is a key contributor to our country's economic productivity and competitiveness, not to mention the overall quality of life for its residents, but there is still no consensus on a long-term funding formula between the various levels of government.

Provinces continue to commit huge sums of money to infrastructure renewal, the feds promise infrastructure investment of historic proportions, and everyone talks about secure, long-term funding, but what we haven't seen yet is any policy change to the Canadian approach of planning, building and paying for highways. The current federal government's pot of infrastructure money promises to be bigger, longer, and more transparent, but doling it out in a series of bilateral agreements that will meet local infrastructure needs and priorities of individual provinces and territories doesn't sound like we're moving any closer to an integrated policy that speaks to national priorities.

As we approach the celebration of Canada's sesquicentennial next year, we remain the only G8 country without a national transportation vision. It's too late for the Nipigon River Bridge, but this debacle might be a wake-up call to start working toward a truly national policy that considers our country's primary highway system as a whole.

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