

OPINION

Canadians deserve more than smug silence when public projects go off the rails

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The tracks of Toronto's Eglinton Crosstown LRT line are seen from inside the train, on Oct. 12, 2021.

CHRISTOPHER KATSAROV/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Last week, the head of the public transport agency in charge of a repeatedly delayed transit project in Toronto stood in front of a microphone and refused to say when the new light-rail system would at long last go into service.

“We have a really good idea of ... what the approximate trajectory of the completion of this project is,” Phil Verster, the chief executive of Metrolinx, said with regard to

the Eglinton Crosstown LRT line.

“However, I am seeing too many defects and issues arising from the testing and commissioning phase. And therefore I can’t give you a range that I’m comfortable with, that will give enough certainty.”

This, for a project announced in 2009 with a scheduled completion date in 2020. Now almost four years late and \$3-billion over budget, the person in charge is blowing off the taxpaying public. He’ll avoid missing a future deadline by simply refusing to set one. Have a nice day.

Can you imagine the person responsible for a multibillion-dollar project in the private sector speaking to his company’s board of directors and shareholders the same way? There’s little doubt it would result in an immediate change of personnel.

We would suggest the same fate for Mr. Verster but, the day after his condescending performance, the Ontario government renewed his annual contract. (No word on whether his \$860,000 salary was hiked.)

For the beleaguered public, this lack of accountability is all too familiar. There are few big public infrastructure projects that come in on time and on budget in Canada, and it is very difficult to find an example of there being a consequence when projects go off the rails.

The Trans Mountain pipeline extension is one such case. Ever since the federal government rescued the project in 2018 by purchasing it for \$4.5-billion, the construction costs have exploded. The original cost estimate was \$7.4-billion. The latest estimate is \$30.9-billion.

The reason? Apparently, the builders have discovered to their shock that there is difficult terrain mixed with crowded urban areas along the pipeline’s path through British Columbia – a path that twins it with the original and still operational Trans Mountain pipeline – and didn’t calculate those obstacles into earlier estimates of the cost. (One hopes they at least foresaw the presence of trees.)

The Site C hydroelectric dam project in B.C. and its Muskrat Falls counterpart in Newfoundland are two more examples of government projects run amok. Both have

faced serious obstacles and both blew past their original budgets. Site C is still under construction, but it and the completed Muskrat Falls dam are unlikely to ever provide a return on investment.

And yet no one has been called on the carpet. It's unclear whether there is even a carpet to be called on to.

This is the problem with massive public infrastructure projects. Projects of a similar scale in the private sector are just as prone to delays and overruns. Nothing done on a huge scale and requiring long timelines for planning, approvals and construction is immune to unforeseen problems, hidden costs and, sometimes, catastrophes like a global pandemic.

But when things go wrong, the private sector examines projects from a performance-based viewpoint and can make a rational decision about whether they ought to go forward, and whether the right people are in charge.

With public works, politicians are selling grand ideas, making it hard to turn back. They have an incentive – regular elections – for providing overly optimistic budget forecasts and timelines for long-term projects, for overselling the benefits and for ignoring contrary opinions, because there's a good chance they won't be in office when the bills come due.

And fair enough – someone has to kickstart major public infrastructure projects. But the paying public deserves better than patronizing behaviour when delays stretch into years, and it insults them to see the people responsible for disasters such as the Eglinton Crosstown LRT be inexplicably rewarded by their masters in government.

Mr. Verster's salary – not including any bonuses – increased by nearly 70 per cent between 2018 and 2022. The public deserves to know why, because based on the performance of Metrolinx on one of its biggest files, the results simply aren't there. Being patted on the head and told to sit tight is not going to cut it.

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