



Permanent Funding, Safety Needs, and the Ontario Line All Part of Transit Debate

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Public transit doesn't fall within the immediate jurisdiction of the Federal government, but what happens in Ottawa concerning transportation policy affects the whole country. New spending on transit, connecting rail links, airport authority, marine shipping, and more was discussed in a special debate held in Toronto by Transport Futures.

Three Federal candidates from three Federal parties took part in the debate: Liberal MP Adam Vaughan, NDP candidate Diane Yoon, and the Green Party's Tim Grant. People's Party candidate Renata Ford was supposed to take part, but was not in attendance, while debate organizer Martin Collier said that the Conservative Party refused to participate.

The *Toronto Star's* transportation reporter Ben Spurr moderated.

In a little over 90 minutes, Spurr covered a lot of ground with the three candidates in a mostly friendly exchange of ideas. Vaughan touted the Liberals' record of investment in infrastructure, including \$4.9 billion for the TTC alone. Yoon said that the key word was "innovation," and that governments can find ways to improve transit cheaply through projects like the King Street street car pilot until new funding starts to flow.

Grant was the most ambitious saying that regional transit needs to move to a "hub and spoke" model with rail serving as the "hub" with more buses feeding people to rail stations as the "spoke." Grant also said that transit is a great example of how climate adaption and mitigation is going to drive a lot of public policy over the next few years.

Although no Conservative candidate was present, a prominent Ontario PC politician served as a proxy for the three debaters.

“We need to create opportunities, look at where the gaps in funding are and I think a lot of that has to do with Doug Ford pulling out so much funding, and interfering with the subway uploading in Toronto,” said Yoon.

Vaughan, who was at Toronto City Council at the same time as Ford and his brother, former-Mayor Rob Ford, pulled no punches about one specific Ford transit project.

“The Ontario Line is a joke,” Vaughan said initiating a nearly three-minute rant on the subject about all its technical flaws. “Someone needs to tell Doug Ford that magic markers aren’t magic. You don’t build transit this way, you build transit with evidence-based data, and you do it with real costing.”

Vaughan explained that there are a lot of unanswered questions about the Ontario Line, including why there will be a stop at Ontario Place when there’s still no firm idea about what will be going into Ontario Place. Also, the Liberal MP noted the perilous nature of digging under portions of King Street in areas of his riding that Vaughan noted are still being serviced by wooden sewers.

“The questions cascade from this ridiculous proposal, and as a Federal government we just look at the Provincial government and our jaw drops. It’s insane,” Vaughan said. “We will fund real transit projects that are based on real evidence that come from cities because cities run, deliver and understand how it works.”

“The biggest job we have the next four years is making sure that Doug Ford doesn’t destroy the city with his inane plans,” he added

The idea that cities should be equal partners in transit planning was a point made not just by the Liberal on stage.

“Cities need the opportunity to be constitutionally protected from their provinces, and to have the financial resources they need to build transit and the affordable housing and we need,” said Grant.

“An issue of concern to me is that the Federation of Canadian Municipalities is asking for a greater proportion of the gas tax to be dedicated to urban municipalities, and I think that’s really dangerous,” Grant explained. “The fact of the matter is, we’re going to be getting off fossil fuel cars, and to leave cities on the hook with the gas tax as a diminishing resource is then to reinforce the usual problems of getting adequate funding.”

“The NDP is committed to creating a permanent stable funding source for transit,” Yoon said, but she added that those details will be revealed with the rest of the NDP election platform in due course. “I do think it is really about working with provinces, territories, First Nations communities and municipalities to deliver reliable and public infrastructure, and we really want to make sure that it puts people, not profit, first.”

One area that affects Guelph commuters was discussed in detail, the proposed rail bypass between Georgetown and Brampton that will make two-way, all-day GO Train service between Toronto and Kitchener possible. The bypass was near ready for construction under the former Provincial government, but the present government thinks it can make all-day GO happen without it.

“Things like this, where we know that communities need it, I think it makes sense to support funding these projects,” Yoon said. “It shouldn’t be about prioritizing ‘this project’ or ‘this project,’ it should be about how we can get the best of integrated transit network as possible.”

“There’s many missing links in rail transport across the country,” Grant added. “So if you’re going to have a seamless network and expand inter-city rail then you’ve got to deal with those missing links.”

Still, transit is not a Federal jurisdiction, so how will the parties negotiate between all levels of government?

“We’re a country that doesn’t have a national transportation policy,” Grant said. “We have things like GO Transit expansion, which is mostly for the good, but meanwhile, it’s cannibalizing some of the lines of VIA Rail.”

“There should be a partnership between VIA Rail, Metrolinx, and other regional transit systems,” Grant explained. “It’s the lack of federal leadership that is creating lots of waste.”

“Those are some really good ideas and I wouldn’t be Liberal if I wasn’t open to stealing them,” Vaughan joked before saying that it takes a serious effort for all sides to work together.

“In Saskatchewan we said, ‘Let us sit down and work with you in recreating some of the [Greyhound] bus lines, in particular the ones that disappeared in some of the northern parts of Saskatchewan,’ and the government said, ‘Get lost. It’s not your jurisdiction, we don’t want to talk to you,’” Vaughan explained.

Yoon made the point that transit isn’t just about transportation policy, it’s also about social mobility.

“With the cancellation of Greyhound, a lot of the bus routes that were canceled have disproportionately negatively impacting Indigenous communities, and this has come up with the Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women,” Yoon said.

“There are people in Toronto, and in other cities, who cannot pay for a monthly pass up front, because they just do not have the funds, so they end up paying more,” she added, saying that the NDP will work with cities to provide free transit if they want it. “We understand that yes, this is a costly proposal, but transit infrastructure needs to be expanded because cost should not be a barrier to get people moving.”

Fireworks at a transportation debate with three centre-left candidates? Yes there was.

A question about air travel and expanding the Pearson airport gave Vaughan an opening to take a swipe at NDP leader Jagmeet Singh for flying out of Billy Bishop airport on Toronto Island. The noise and increased frequency of use at the island airport is a particular sore spot for Vaughan's constituents in the downtown Toronto riding of Spadina-Fort York.

"The NDP is not renting out a plane for the entire duration of this election, we have been chartering planes and that is a decision we are making to reduce the emissions for this election cycle," Yoon retorted.

The SNC Lavalin scandal also came up in a question about public/private partnerships, so-called P3s. Grant said that the scandal is a lesson about the dangers of P3s and the influence of private corporations on government.

"The most shocking aspect of that controversy was not in the headlines, but it was the fact that this corporation had its tentacles not just in the the political parties, and the government, but right into the all the major ministers, and the deputy ministers," Grant said. "When you're talking about P3s in that kind of political atmosphere, where big corporations have that kind of influence over governments, it's a recipe for disaster."

"You have to be very careful because you do not have corruption in government without private interests, and P3s open the door to that risk," Vaughan replied.

"Nobody gets into politics to misspend public dollars and nobody gets into politics to make mistakes. Mistakes get made, governments get held accountable for them, and that's as it should be," Vaughan explained.

"I think that we have to be realistic about how we fix problems in this country," Vaughan continued. "The private sector and the public sector need to work together sometimes, and that requires strong public oversight, but it also requires an open line to making the right deal, good deals, and oversight to make sure the public interest is at all times protected."