# From Talk to Action: A Stakeholder Discourse Analysis of Canadian High-Speed Rail in the Québec City – Windsor Corridor

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"*There was a time in this fair land when the railroad did not run*

*When the wild majestic mountains stood alone against the sun*"

- Gordon Lightfoot

This research project acknowledges the dark history of Canadian rail building. This legacy was partly built at the expense of Indigenous lands and lives. While the railway is often remembered as a symbol of national unity and progress, it is equally a reminder of displacement, broken treaties, and the imposition of colonial authority over sovereign Indigenous territories. As high-speed rail planning moves forward, this work stresses the importance of meaningful and ongoing engagement with Indigenous communities, recognizing their rights, knowledge, and central place in shaping future mobility corridors.

# Abstract

Canadian passenger rail has faced decades of stagnation and policy neglect, despite ongoing discussions and studies about high-speed rail development dating back to the 1970s. The recent announcement of a high-speed rail initiative in the Québec City–Windsor Corridor, the Alto project, has reignited public and governmental debates over whether Canada currently possesses the capacity to execute, or indeed needs, a project of this scale. This study employs a stakeholder discourse analysis to examine how political, institutional, and socio-economic narratives surrounding high-speed rail development in Canada evolved between 2009 and 2023. Parliamentary committee transcripts and governmental reports are analysed to trace how narratives were shaped and deployed by different stakeholder groups over time. My findings reveal diverging visions both between and within the various groups engaged in the discussions. Despite decades of feasibility studies and recurring political interest, fundamental questions regarding the long-term objectives and purpose of the project remain unanswered. While the launch of the Alto project signals renewed momentum, this research underscores the need for a cohesive long-term vision supported by inclusive and transparent stakeholder engagement. Without a clearly communicated vision and strategy, passenger rail developments in Canada risk falling back into a recurrent cycle of stagnation.

# Résumé

Malgré les nombreuses discussions et études sur le développement d'un train à grande vitesse remontant aux années 1970, le transport ferroviaire de passagers au Canada connait des décennies de stagnation et de négligence politique. Récemment, l'annonce d'un projet de train à grande vitesse, Alto, dans le corridor Québec–Windsor a suscité un débat public et gouvernemental quant au besoin concret d'un projet d'une telle envergure et sur la capacité réelle du Canada à le mener à bien. Cette étude utilise une analyse comparative du discours des parties prenantes pour examiner comment les récits politiques, institutionnels et socio-économiques entourant le développement du train à grande vitesse au Canada ont évolué entre 2009 et 2023. En s'appuyant sur les témoignages des commissions parlementaires et sur les rapports gouvernementaux, cette analyse se penche sur la manière dont les récits des parties prenantes ont été façonnés et déployés par différents groupes au fil du temps. Les résultats révèlent des visions divergentes à la fois entre les différents groupes engagés dans les discussions et au sein même de ces groupes. Malgré des décennies d'études de faisabilité et un intérêt politique récurrent, des questions fondamentales concernant les objectifs et visions à long terme du projet restent sans réponse. Si le lancement d'Alto marque un nouvel élan d'opportunités, cette recherche souligne la nécessité d'une vision cohérente à long terme, soutenue par un engagement inclusif et transparent des parties prenantes. En l'absence d'une vision et d'une stratégie clairement communiquées, le développement du transport ferroviaire de passagers au Canada risque de retomber dans un cycle récurrent de stagnation.

# Acknowledgments

Growing up, I was always fascinated by my grandfather's stories related to his honourable career as an engineer with the Canadian National. While my professional path follows a different track, having the opportunity to conduct research on Canadian rail today is truly an honour and a privilege.

None of this work would have been possible without the support of my supervisor, Professor Madhav Badami. His shared passion for high-speed rail and his expertise have been a constant source of inspiration and motivation throughout this research. I am also deeply thankful to Professor Ahmed El-Geneidy, who first opened the door to transportation research through my time with TRAM Lab during my undergraduate studies. This experience not only forged my transport research skills but also sparked curiosity and passion that I aspire to carry forward throughout my professional career.

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# Abbreviation list

| | |
|---|---|
| CN | Canadian National Railway Company |
| CP | Canadian Pacific Railway Company |
| HFR | High-frequency rail |
| HSR | High-speed rail |
| PPP | Public-private partnership |
| R&D | Research and Development |
| QCWC | Québec City – Windsor Corridor |

# 1. Introduction

The development of Canadian passenger rail has played a significant role in the country's nation-building efforts. Older than Confederation, passenger rail historically bridged distant provinces, drove economic expansion, and contributed to a sense of national identity among Canadians. Once emblematic of national progress and technological innovation, Canada's passenger rail system has experienced a marked decline, now lagging behind many of its international counterparts in terms of development and performance. Today, Canada stands as the only G7 nation without a single high-speed rail (HSR) line, and one of just five in the G20 (Hickman et al., 2023). Yet, discussions about developing HSR in Canada have been far from absent. Since the 1970s, numerous official government studies have explored the feasibility of HSR. However, recent developments in the HSR discourse suggest a shift toward growing political will and concrete action. VIA Rail's 2015 proposal for a High-Frequency Rail (HFR) system in the Québec City – Windsor Corridor (QCWC) has since evolved into a defined HSR project, characterized by nearly 1,000 kilometres of electrified, dedicated tracks that will run more frequent and faster trains. Now operating under the brand name Alto, the project has secured federal funding, appointed a consortium, and initiated preliminary steps toward implementation. Considering these recent changes, this research aims to examine how the HSR discourse among various stakeholders has evolved over time and sought to influence decision-making.

**Figure 1.**

*Current Québec City-Windosr corridor VIA Rail Train routes.*


*Note*: From VIA Rail Canada, 2025.

To guide this research, a discourse analysis is employed to examine stakeholder narratives surrounding the HSR debate in the QCWC across two key moments in time: 2009 and 2023. To situate the passenger rail and HSR discourse more broadly, Chapter 1 of this research examines the challenges facing passenger rail over the last decades and outlines the objectives of this study. Chapter 2 details the research methodology and data. Chapter 3 provides a literature review highlighting the challenges of implementing HSR in Canada and examining how the HSR discourse has evolved over time, providing a brief overview of Canadian passenger rail's history and its progression towards today's proposed Alto project. In Chapter 4, a discourse analysis of stakeholder interventions from the 2009 and 2023 parliamentary studies is provided. Stakeholders' interests, concerns, and narratives over a set of criteria are discussed, assessing their continuity and shifts over time. Chapter 5 synthesizes the major findings, identifying persistent themes and emerging divergences in discourse, and assesses how these insights can inform the future trajectory of the Alto project. Finally, conclusions and policy recommendations for successful HSR implementation in the Canadian context are provided.

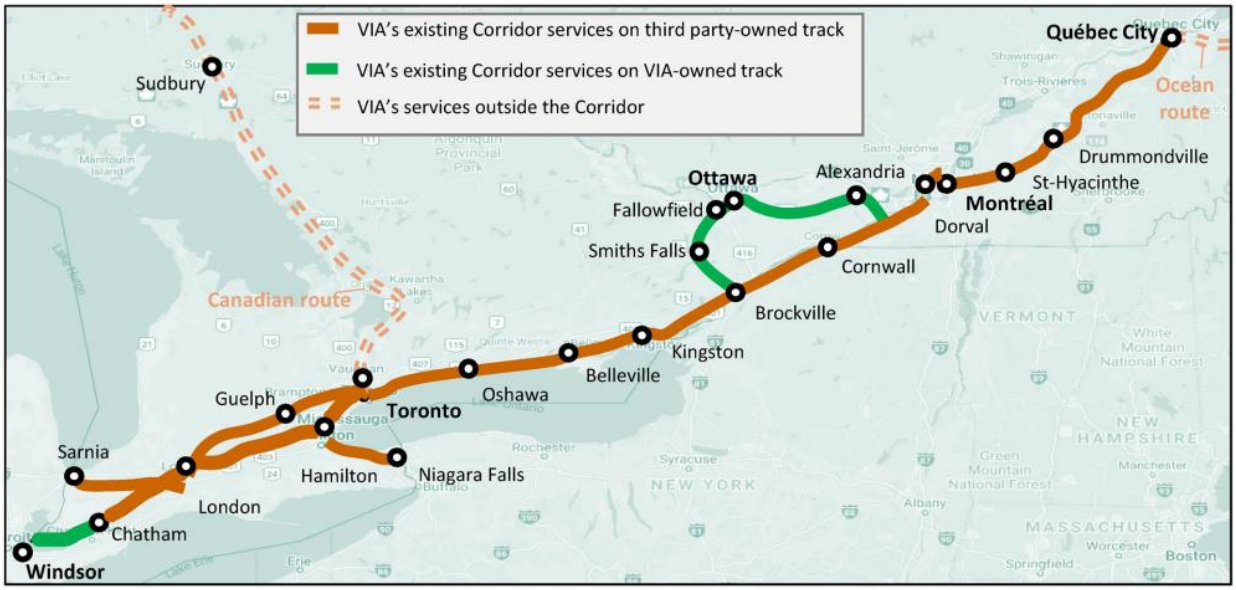
## 1.1. Context and key issues

Over the last 50 years, Canadian passenger rail, operated by the Crown corporation VIA Rail, has faced persistent challenges, often criticized as unreliable, inefficient, and outdated (Fariha & Jones, 2025). These issues are especially significant in the QCWC, the most densely populated region in Canada, with over 16 million residents (Government of Canada, 2024). This corridor alone accounts for 96% of Via Rail's total passenger trips, making it a critical area for service improvement. Spanning major urban centers such as Toronto, Ottawa, Montréal and Québec City, VIA Rail operates intercity passenger trains, serving business travellers, tourists, and daily commuters. In many smaller regional towns, VIA Rail represents the only available alternative to the car (Via Rail, 2015).

Since the mid-1990s, VIA Rail has struggled with stagnant intercity passenger traffic, largely due to the lack of dedicated passenger rail tracks. Since the privatization of the Canadian National Railway Company (CN) in 1995, VIA Rail has relied on access to CN'S network through a train service agreement. Under this agreement, freight trains are given priority over passenger trains, which frequently leads to significant delays for VIA Rail services. Currently, 97% of rail racks VIA Rail operates on are owned by third parties, resulting in on-time arrival rates of less than 60% (Via Rail, 2023). Accordingly, the coordination of freight and passenger service presents a sustained challenge for both CN and VIA Rail. In response to these challenges, VIA Rail has long advocated for a more modern and efficient passenger rail system. With the Alto project now taking shape, there is a growing perception that meaningful progress may finally be on the horizon. However, significant questions and unresolved concerns continue to generate uncertainty about the project's future trajectory.

**Figure 2.**

*Via Rail current services and track ownership.*




*Note:* From Alto, 2025.

## 1.2. High-speed rail vs. high-frequency rail: what sets them apart?

While numerous definitions exist for what qualifies as 'high-speed' rail, the International Union of Railways (UIC) defines HSR as a service operating above 250 km/h on dedicated lines, and up to 200 km/h on upgraded conventional tracks (UIC, 2018). However, these definitions are not universally adopted and vary significantly by country. In the Canadian context, a more nuanced classification is used, involving three distinct types of passenger rail services: (1) 'conventional rail,' such as the one operated by VIA Rail, with speeds up to 160 m/h and typically running on shared infrastructure with freight trains; (2) 'higher-speed rail,' with speeds ranging from 160 km/h to 240 km/h, where top speeds are attainable primarily on longer stretches with limited stops; and (3) 'high-speed rail,' defined as service operating at 200 km/h or more, generally on dedicated tracks (Borges, 2009). Within this classification, the HFR concept, first proposed by VIA Rail in 2015, corresponds most closely to the Canadian definition of higher-speed rail. HFR systems are typically designed for shorter-distance travel, operating at moderately high speeds and with greater frequency, often between 8 and 20 trains per hour. In contrast, HSR systems are intended for

longer-distance travels at significantly higher speeds. These systems require dedicated tracks, purpose-built trains, and substantial infrastructure investment. Although cost estimates remain uncertain in the Canadian context, initial projections placed the HFR system between $6 and $12 billion, while a full-scale HSR system is estimated to cost between $80 and $100 billion (CUTRIC, 2024). As a more cost-effective and adaptable option within the existing rail network, HFR presents an attractive solution for regions where population density and travel demand support frequent service over shorter distances, while HSR represents a more attractive solution for faster travel over longer distances (Malott, 2025). Understanding the distinction between HFR and HSR is essential to this study, as the two models diverge significantly in terms of cost, infrastructure demands, policy implications, and expected outcomes. Stakeholder discourses play a central role in shaping the debate between these two approaches.

**Table 1.**

*Passenger rail systems comparison.*

| **Criteria** | **Conventional rail** | **High-frequency system** | **High-speed rail system** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Speed | 160 km/h and lower | Between 160-250 km/h | 200km/h and higher, typically around 300km/h |
| Frequencies | Low – 28 departures per week for VIA Rail | High – typically between 8 and 20 trains per hour. Operating every 10-20 mins | Varies, but typically high, usually up to 15 trains per hour |
| Distance | Varies | Typically designed for lower distances than HSR | Long distances – typically on routes with inter-station distances of 50 km and above. |
| Cost estimates | | Between $6 and $12 billion | Between $80-$100 billion |

## 1.3. Policy relevance

The Alto HSR initiative represents a major turning point for Canadian infrastructure. If implemented, it would be the largest infrastructure project undertaken in the country in the past 20 to 30 years, and the most substantial investment in passenger rail in a generation (Transport Canada, 2025). Projects of this scale inevitably carry significant risks and uncertainties, particularly given the complex implementation challenges associated with HSR. International experiences, such as the delays and controversy surrounding HS2 in the United Kingdom or California's stalled HSR project, have demonstrated both the potential benefits and the difficulties of delivering such transformative infrastructure. In Canada, where HSR has been discussed for over half a century without materialization, this history of delay has contributed to polarized views among policymakers, the public, and the media. Now, as the Alto project begins to gain traction, there is a pressing need to better understand how it has evolved, who and what factors have influenced its trajectory, and what different stakeholders envision for its future. A clearer understanding of stakeholder claims is essential to shaping a coherent vision and guiding the project toward meaningful, long-term outcomes.

## 1.4. Research question(s) and objectives

Canadian HSR has been a subject of extensive political, public, and scholarly debate for decades now. While a substantial body of literature has addressed the various challenges associated with HSR implementation in the Canadian context, comparatively limited attention has been given to the role of stakeholders in shaping decision-making processes surrounding HSR development.

Thus, the objective of this research is to critically examine how diverse stakeholders have conceptualized, articulated, and engaged with the various phases of HSR discussions over the last 55 years. More precisely, this research asks the following questions: **(1) How have stakeholders' conflicting interests, concerns, and narratives on Canadian HSR evolved over time?** (**2) How have they sought to influence decision-making?** By addressing these questions, this research seeks to explore factors that are delaying the implementation of Canadian HSR. It further aims to formulate evidence-based recommendations to inform the future development of the proposed Alto project.

While the desirability of implementing HSR in Canada remains contested (Katz-Rosene, 2025), this research does not aim to resolve this normative debate. Instead, it seeks to examine the perspectives and narratives of key stakeholders involved in the Canadian HSR discourse, shedding light on the complexities of the politics of mobility, and informing recommendations for successful HSR implementation. This research proceeds under the assumption that improvements to passenger rail will benefit Canadians but does not go as far as to recommend a specific alignment for the project's development. In addition, this research does not seek to determine which technological approach between HFR and HSR is best suited for Canadian rail. It instead aims to contextualize stakeholder perspectives to understand the parameters under which the Alto project has been defined.

# 2. Methods and Data

This study employs a literature review and discourse analysis as qualitative research method to investigate how various stakeholders construct meaning, articulate narratives, and communicate positions, with particular attention to how these discursive practices inform and shape decision-making in the context of HSR development. Specifically, this research uses a version of Gualtieri & Lurati's (2024) narrative-based framework for stakeholder analysis within the context of a polarized infrastructure project to critically interpret stakeholder dynamics and meaning-making processes.

## 2.1. Literature review

This research is first grounded in an extensive review of academic literature relevant to Canadian HSR and stakeholder engagement. Initially, the review focused on studies examining the challenges associated with implementing HSR in the Canadian context. The scope of the literature review was also broadened to a more global context, identifying the specific conditions for successful HSR implementation. Additionally, the literature informed the selection and adaptation of the stakeholder analysis framework employed in this study, while also situating the research within the broader field of discourse analysis. To examine the historical development of HSR in Canada and contextualize the political and institutional conditions influencing decision-making over time, seven official Canadian HSR studies published between 1970 and 2011 were also reviewed. Table 2 below outlines the specific documents examined as part of the historical overview.

**Table 2.**

*Non-comprehensive review of studies, 1970-2011.*

| Year Published | Name of Study | Author |
|---|---|---|
| 1970 | The Intercity Passenger Transport Study | Canadian Transport Commission |
| 1984 | High-Speed Passenger Rail in Canada – A Feasibility Study | VIA Rail Canada |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1991 | Ontario-Québec Rapid Train Task Force | Provincial Governments of Ontario and Québec |
| 1995 | Québec-Ontario High-Speed Rail Project | Transport Canada |
| 1998 | The Renaissance of Passenger Rail in Canada | Transport Canada |
| 2002 | Via*Fast* – Improving Rail Services for Travellers and Shippers in Canada's most Congested Transport Corridor | VIA Rail Canada |
| 2011 | Updated Feasibility Study of a High-Speed Rail Service in the Quebec-City Windsor Corridor | Ministries of Transportation of Ontario and Québec |

## 2.2. Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis has been used across various disciplines since the 1960s, notably influenced by the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault. While its application in transportation and urban planning has historically been limited (Hickman & Hannigan, 2023), a growing number of recent studies have begun to incorporate discourse analysis into these fields. These studies generally seek to better understand how projects are shaped by narratives and viewpoints, which in turn reflect underlying power relations, values, and belief systems (Hickman & Hannigan, 2023). This study uses the following definition of '*Discourse*':

> *"an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories, through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices"* (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p. 175).

Accordingly, through careful textual analysis of stakeholders' discourses, this study critically examines and problematizes the dominant narratives surrounding the HSR discourse and traces their evolution over time. Two studies carried out by the Canadian House of Commons' Standing

Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities form the basis of this discourse analysis. A total of 17 meeting transcripts from these studies were analyzed.

1. The 2009 'High Speed Rail in Canada' study conducted by the 40th Parliament, conducted between May 2009 and November 2009.

2. The 2003/2024 'Projects of High Frequency Rail between Quebec City and Toronto, between Calgary and Banff, and between Calgary and Edmonton' conducted by the 44th Parliament between September 2023 and June 2024.

Throughout these studies, Members of Parliament engaged in debates concerning HSR and HFR projects. Witnesses, identified in this study as 'stakeholders', were invited to provide testimony, share their expertise, and articulate their positions on HSR, thereby contributing to the production of discourse. Members of Parliament, in turn, posed targeted questions to these stakeholders, allowing for amplification, contestation, or reinforcement of various narratives. This dynamic not only shaped the contours of the debate but also contributed to the reproduction of dominant framings around HSR, infrastructure priorities, and national interest. In total, 75 stakeholder discourses were analyzed across the 2009 HSR and 2023–2024 HFR parliamentary studies. Specific stakeholders are listed in the Appendix and are organized by type: governmental sector, private sector, national/regional associations, and research and development (R&D)/non-profit and advocacy groups. Although members of parliament also provide interesting insights, this research does not include a discourse analysis of their contributions. The highly political nature of their statements introduces a level of analysis that extends beyond the scope of this research. Accordingly, the governmental stakeholders identified in the Appendix do not include Members of Parliament.

## 2.3. The narrative-based framework for stakeholder analysis

While there is an extensive body of literature presenting frameworks for identification and characterization of stakeholder engagement, few frameworks are available to comprehensively understand and analyze stakeholder's perspectives (Gualtieri & Lurati, 2024). Gualtieri & Lurati (2024) advance a narrative approach to stakeholder analysis, positioning narratives as a sense-making tool, through which stakeholders express their positions on specific issues. By closely examining the narratives that are constructed and reiterated, the narrative-based framework offers

deeper insight into stakeholders' perspectives, hidden agendas, interests and concerns related to a given issue. Living in an increasingly polarized world, with opinions being held at opposite ends of the spectrum, Gualtieri & Lurati (2024) showcase the need for a deeper exploration of stakeholders' perspectives. Considering the sharp political and public divisions surrounding the HSR debate, understanding these contrasting perspectives is essential for unpacking the complexities associated with advancing such a large-scale and politically sensitive project. Accordingly, this study uses an adaptation of the narrative-based framework, which was conducted using the following steps:

A. **Gather diverse stakeholders' perspectives around the HSR/HFR debate:** This process began during the initial stages of conceptualizing this research, involving an exploratory review of online sources, media coverage, news articles, and governmental reports. Ultimately, meeting transcripts from parliamentary studies were selected for discourse analysis based on the richness of arguments provided, the accessibility of relevant information, and the presence of contrasting narratives within and across the two time periods of study. The transcripts analysed for this research are available to all on the Canadian House of Commons Website.
B. **Detecting the narratives produced around the HSR/HFR debate**: In this phase, 12 criteria relevant to evaluating the development of HSR/HFR were identified based on a review of existing literature and their recurrence within stakeholder discourses, as outlined in Table 3 below. Each stakeholder's discourse for the 2009 and 2023 studies was analyzed through the lens of these criteria, allowing for a systematic assessment of their positions, the arguments presented, and the relative importance attributed to each criterion.
C. **Extracting insights from the narratives to understand stakeholder's perspectives and comparing their evolution overt time**: During this step, each stakeholder's discourse was evaluated and coded by assigning a score from one to five for each criterion listed in Table 3.

The 1-5 scoring scale is defined as follows:

1- The criterion is not mentioned in the stakeholder's discourse.
2- The criterion is rarely mentioned and is not central to the stakeholder's discourse.

3- The criterion is mentioned occasionally and contributes to the stakeholder's discourse but is not a primary focus.
4- The criterion is mentioned frequently and constitutes a central element the stakeholder's discourse.
5- The criterion is among the most significant elements shaping the stakeholder's discourse.

This scoring system facilitated a more systematic comparison of stakeholder discourses across different types: 1) governmental bodies, 2) private sector actors, 3) national and regional associations, 4) R&D actors and non-profit/advocacy groups. This method facilitated the identification of patterns, divergences, and shared themes in how stakeholders framed and prioritized key issues. It also supported a systematic comparison over time, enabling the analysis of evolving perspectives, interests, and concerns between the 2009 and 2023 studies. Radar charts were used to visually represent the results, as presented in Chapter 4 of this research. To ensure objectivity and enhance the accuracy of the scoring process, each transcript was read and evaluated three times, minimizing the risk of overlooking or misinterpreting elements based on a single reading.

**Table 3.**

*12 criteria definitions.*

| Criterion | Definition |
|---|---|
| 1. Environmental considerations | Refers to the potential effects of HSR development and operation on ecosystems, land use, carbon emissions and overall environmental sustainability. |
| 2. Time savings | Refers to reduction in travel time offered by HSR compared to existing modes of transportation, including conventional rail. |
| 3. Reliability | Refers to the frequency and punctuality of the service, including on-time performance and delays, as well as technological and operational reliability. |
| 4. Safety | Addresses all physical health risks associated with HSR compared to other transportation modes, including |

| | |
|---|---|
| | passenger safety, rail infrastructure and at grade separations. |
| 5. Technology | Involves the type and level of innovation in system (HFR or HSR), in terms of rolling stock, rail infrastructure design, and other components influencing system performance. |
| 6. Routing | Concerns the geographic alignment of the rail corridor including station locations, corridor alignment and population centers served. |
| 7. Life cycle cost | Encompasses the total cost of development, construction, operation, maintenance, and upgrading over the system's lifespan. |
| 8. Economic opportunities | Refers to economic opportunities associated with HSR development and operation, such as job creation, industry growth, increased productivity, long-turn returns on infrastructure investment, etc. |
| 9. Regional development | Refers to the role of HSR in serving mid-sized or underserved communities, enhancing access to urban centers, and supporting balanced geographic development. |
| 10. Impacts on other transportation modes | Refers to the potential of HSR implementation for affecting demand and operations of other transport systems such as airlines, intercity bus lines, the car, and conventional rail. |
| 11. Intermodal network integration | Refers to how HSR is integrated with other transportation hubs such as local transit, airports, conventional rail stations, etc. |
| 12. Funding model | Describes how the project is financed and governed, such as public funding, private investment, or a public-private partnership (PPP). |

# 3. Literature Review

## 3.1. Challenges to implementing HSR in Canada

Since the 1990s, scholars and governmental studies have recognized the potential of HSR as a strategy to address mobility and environmental challenges, while also contributing to economic development (Cheng & Chen, 2021). However, challenges such as Canada's low population density, vast geography, significant capital and operational costs (Manmohan & Saxena, 2023), restrictive curve radii (referring to the limited curvature widths that high-speed trains can navigate without causing passenger discomfort due to lateral g-forces), and harsh northern climate (Katz-Rosene, 2015), have been identified as significant barriers to HSR implementation. In the QCWC, cost challenges are even larger due to the corridor's diverse topography characterized by farmlands, roads, lakes, and densely built urban and peri-urban areas. These conditions necessitate extensive infrastructure such as bridges, overpasses, complex routing, and land acquisition, all of which substantially drive up the overall cost of HSR development (Katz-Rosene, 2015). Nevertheless, research demonstrates that while these factors introduce complexity to HSR implementation, they do not make it technically unfeasible. On the contrary, long-term economic benefits of HSR appear to outweigh the costs in most projects (Manmohan & Saxena, 2023). However, even a small degree of uncertainty can be a significant obstacle for decision makers, particularly in projects involving very large investment and shaped by political agendas. As such, research demonstrates that on the geopolitical front, inconsistent political leadership, shifting global economic conditions, and difficulties in intergovernmental coordination have further hindered progress toward realizing HSR in the Canadian context (Hickman et al., 2023). It is also important to note that the environmental benefits of HSR are not assured in all contexts. For example, D'Alfonso et al. (2015) argue that the introduction of HSR may lead to a net negative environmental impact, especially in cases where the market size is too small to support its efficiency. This highlights a tendency within broader policy discussions to assume that HSR is inherently more sustainable than other modes of transport, even though this may not consistently hold true in all contexts. Overall, the literature reviewed reveals that while the technical feasibility and long-term benefits of HSR in Canada are recognized, there is no clear consensus among scholars as to which specific barriers have most significantly impeded its implementation. Indeed, findings point to a complex interplay of geographic, economic, political, institutional, and social

factors that have played a role in delaying HSR implementation. As such, questions of governance, values, long-term national priorities, and stakeholder narratives are central to understanding the Canadian HSR discourse, which extends well beyond issues of technical feasibility alone.

## 3.2. Framing the HSR debate

To better grasp the complexity of the ongoing debate over the desirability of HSR in Canada, several studies have sought to categorize the diverse and often competing narratives that shape this discourse. Notably, Ryan Katz-Rosene (2017) employs a discourse analysis approach to move beyond a binary pro/anti-HSR framing. Through his findings, Katz-Rosene identifies three principal narratives grounded in differing socio-ecological and politico-economic worldviews: The first, the 'Turbotrain' narrative, promotes public investment in rail modernization and positions HSR as a driver of economic growth and job creation. The second, the "Ecotrain" narrative, favours a public-private partnership (PPP) model to develop HSR as a fast, safe, and environmentally sustainable mode of transportation. The third, the "Zerotrain" narrative, opposes HSR development on the basis that low population density and car dependency render it economically unviable. His analysis draws from a range of primary and secondary sources, including interviews and official transcripts, to uncover the underlying assumptions embedded in stakeholder positions. His stakeholder analysis of the 1992 federal review of HSR by the Standing Committee on Transport offers particularly valuable insights into how actors' perspectives are shaped by broader ideological frameworks. As he argues, "*By digging deeper into the respective presuppositions of different HSR stakeholders, it is possible to locate the inherent subjectivity involved in various claims made about HSR development*" (p. 15). Ultimately, his work underscores the importance of discourse analysis in unpacking the narratives that frame HSR in Canada, not merely as expressions of support or opposition, but as reflections of deeper structural and ideological commitments (Boulden, 2021).

In addition, Veccia (2023), in a chapter from Hickman et al., (2023) applies the Q methodology to examine the discursive landscape surrounding HSR in Canada, identifying three distinct narratives that reflect diverging public attitudes and perceived barriers to implementation. The first discourse, labeled the "Enviro-Optimist", reflects a strong belief in HSR as an environmentally beneficial alternative to car and air travel. The second, termed the "Strategic Critic", emphasizes concerns about the lack of long-term political vision and critiques policy decisions that have

deprioritized rail infrastructure. The third, the "Federal Skeptic," expresses doubt about the viability of HSR in Canada, citing cultural reliance on cars and planes and a lack of effective federal–provincial coordination. In response to these varied perspectives, Veccia recommends segmenting the HSR project into smaller, line-specific initiatives to mitigate development challenges and addressing what the author refers to as "environmental naïveté", by promoting transparent and inclusive dialogue around environmental assessments and anticipated benefits.

This literature review highlights the fragmented academic, political, and public views within which HSR debates are situated. This diversity of views demonstrates the need to further investigate how these narratives have evolved and how they shape and are shaped by policy processes. The following section builds on this foundation by presenting how competing visions have persisted, shifted, or re-emerged in light of recent developments in Canadian rail policy.

## 3.3. Canadian rail: A brief history

The history of Canadian rail is extensively documented. Thus, this research does not seek to revisit previous accounts. However, to properly contextualize the contemporary rail discourse, it is essential to establish a basic understanding of the historical foundations that have shaped it. The following section presents an overview of the importance of rail in Canada's history.

Canada's development is closely tied to its railway tracks, which served as the backbone of the country's early growth and national unification. Railways played a transformative role in shaping mobility in pre-Confederation Canada and laid the groundwork for national integration following Confederation in 1867 (Railway Association of Canada, 2016), resulting in Canadian railway development being inherently closely intertwined with political processes. By 1870, British Columbia agreed to join Confederation on the condition that a railway would be built to link the province to eastern Canada. The federal government of Canada thus concluded an agreement with the Canadian Pacific Railway Company (CP) in western Canada and CN in eastern Canada to materialize the project, building nearly 40,000 km of transnational railways, ultimately completed in 1885 (Murray, 2011).

Today, these two companies remain the most dominant railway companies in the nation, owning approximately 75% of all Canadian railway tracks combined (Canadian Association of Railway Suppliers, 2025). In the decades following the 1890s, the expansion of railway networks

continued, further connecting the nation from east to west, stimulating industrialization, economic growth, and the development of new cities along rail corridors (Railway Association of Canada, 2016).

**Figure 3.**

*''Donald A. Smith at the ceremony marking the last spike to be driven into the Canadian Pacific Railways on 7 November 1885".*


*Note*: From The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2008.

In the 1940s, and 1950s, passenger rail experienced a sharp decline due to the arrival of the car. To avoid losing passenger rail service completely, which was primarily operated by the two national carriers CP and CN, the federal government established VIA Rail as a Crown corporation in 1977 (Dupuis, 2015). Operating independently from both CP and CN as a distinct entity, VIA Rail was required to pay track access charges to use both companies' rail infrastructure, as well as several equipment and facilities such as rolling stock and train stations. VIA Rail thus necessitated substantial federal subsidies to sustain its operations. By the 1990s, the federal government required VIA Rail to restructure its financing model due to difficulties in maintain its operating costs (Hickman et al., 2023). During this restructuring, several unprofitable routes were abandoned, further reducing annual ridership and overall federal funding.

Since its creation, VIA Rail has operated under a broad but ambiguously defined mandate to provide national passenger rail service. Today, the corporation offers three main types of service: corridor routes, transcontinental routes, and remote or regional services. By the late 1990s, the federal government began to critically assess the scope and sustainability of VIA Rail's operations. This included questioning whether the corporation should continue serving all three areas, under what financial conditions, and whether its mandate was limiting its ability to operate efficiently and with long-term financial stability (Standing Committee on Transport, 1998). It is within the context of these foundational questions, centered on service optimization, strategic prioritization, and institutional clarity, that the contemporary HSR debate is also situated. Decisions about HSR are therefore not just about adding a new service but about redefining the role and scope of intercity rail in Canada's broader transportation system.

## 3.4. The HSR discourse over time

Despite the challenges facing passenger rail since the 1980s, many of which remain unresolved, several HSR studies have been conducted since 1970, reflecting ongoing efforts to revitalize passenger rail in Canada. Rather than providing an exhaustive review, this section focuses on seven influential studies conducted between 1970 and 2011 that have significantly shaped the Canadian HSR discourse over the past four decades.

## 1970 – The Intercity Passenger Transport Study:

Mandated by the Canadian Transport Commission, the purpose of this study was to evaluate the potential application of new technology for passenger travel in the Montréal/Toronto/Ottawa Corridor. The feasibility of three different HSR technologies was evaluated and compared to other alternatives in terms of revenues, costs, and traffic volumes. The main conclusions were that new train technology is encouraged, through improvements in Turbo Train technology as well as major track improvements. Turbo Trains were first introduced in 1968 on the Montréal–Toronto route. Designed by United Aircraft Corporation and operated by CN, the trains were intended to reach speeds up to 270km/h, reducing travel time by approximately 90 minutes. However, due to technological challenges, the Turbo service was short-lived and withdrawn in 1969. In 1973, the service was reintroduced and operated until 1982. Nevertheless, they were unable to reach their intended speeds because they shared tracks with freight services, limiting their performance to speeds comparable to conventional rail. The service was once again replaced by conventional rail in 1982 (Noakes, 2021).

**Figure 4.**

*CN's Turbo Train.*


*Note:* From the Canadian Encyclopedia, 2025.

## 1984 – High-Speed Passenger Rail in Canada: A Feasibility Study:

Conducted by VIA Rail Canada, this study evaluated the potential for HSR passenger rail services in Canada, a mandate assigned by the federal government. Two corridors were studied: QCWC and Edmonton to Calgary. This feasibility study indicates that a high-performance (200-300 km/h) railway service in the QCWC is feasible, while improving Via Rail's financial position. On the other hand, the Edmonton to Calgary corridor would be less desirable due to insufficient potential riders.

## 1991 – Ontario/Québec Rapid Train Task Force – Final Report:

In 1989, Premier David Peterson of Ontario and Premier Robert Bourassa of Québec established a Task Force to explore the feasibility of HSR in the QCWC. This report presented a comparative analysis of three alternative HSR strategies. This study confirmed the physical and operational feasibility of the 200-300 km/h system in the QCWC. However, it concluded that further studies should be conducted before a final decision of "go-or-no-go" was made.

## 1998 – The Renaissance of Passenger Rail in Canada:

At the request of the Minister of Transport of the federal government, the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities was tasked with conducting a comprehensive review of passenger rail services and recommending strategies for their renewal and improvement. The committee observed that many of the same questions surrounding passenger rail had been revisited repeatedly over the past decade, signaling a lack of progress. As part of its recommendations, the committee urged the federal government to engage with the Lynx Project, a consortium of private firms, including system suppliers, rolling stock manufacturers, and engineering and construction companies formed in the aftermath of the 1995 Québec–Ontario High-Speed Rail Project. The consortium conducted a pre-feasibility study of an 854 km HSR line in the QCWC, estimating in 1997 that a high-speed system would cost $12 billion and take ten years to complete. Subsequent federal review placed the cost closer to $18 billion (Standing Committee on Transport, 1998).

## 2002 - ViaFast – Improving Rail Services for Travellers and Shippers in Canada's most Congested Transportation Corridor:

In response to the high costs associated with a very high-speed project, VIA Rail undertook in this 2002 report a recommendation for an alternative. The ViaFast plans called for a slightly slower speed (up to 240 km/h) and higher frequency trains (very similar to the 2021 HFR proposal), promising shorter travel times under a $2.6 billion plan. The ViaFast proposal was ultimately abandoned, emerging during a period of political instability when the fiscally constrained government of Paul Martin froze major capital projects when he became Prime Minister in 2003 (Wilson-Smith, 2025).

## 2011 - Updated Feasibility Study of a High-Speed Rail Service in the Quebec City-Windsor Corridor:

This report constituted an update to the 1995 feasibility study. Commissioned by the Québec and Ontario Ministries of Transportation, the EcoTrain consortium was tasked with reviewing prior HSR studies in the QCWC and providing strategic recommendations for advancing HSR development. The study reaffirmed the technological feasibility of HSR in the corridor but emphasized the need for substantial public investment, estimating project costs between $18.9 billion and $21.3 billion (in 2009 dollars), depending on the technology selected. According to press reports, Transport Minister Denis Lebel had concluded shortly after reviewing the study that: "in these fiscal circumstances, a new project of this scope is not a priority for our government" (Zeliger & Grenberg, 2011).

## Study takeaways

While these studies vary in scope, purpose, and time, the overview reveals a convergence around several recurring themes, including:

1. VIA Rail's operations are unsustainable, with an outdated system that is no longer financially viable.
2. The QCWC has been the preferred focus for HSR development due to the corridor's potential for growth in passenger volume and revenue.

3. Shared tracks between passenger rail and freight add challenges to the technological advancements of passenger rail.
4. Dedicated tracks with no level-crossings are required for HSR to ensure safety.
5. HSR is technologically feasible and desirable but requires major public investments.
6. Most studies have focused on technological feasibility, but few have focused on long-term impacts of introducing HSR.

Although these studies offer valuable insights into the broader HSR discourse, conducting deep analysis and cross-comparison remains challenging due to inconsistencies in methodologies for cost estimation, ridership projections, and cost-benefit analyses. Over time, the absence of methodological continuity has led each study to approach the HSR discourse in isolation, rather than building on previous findings. This reveals a fragmented and repetitive trajectory in Canada's HSR discourse, marked by a tendency to revisit foundational questions. As a result, decades of studies and substantial public investment have resulted in a cycle of reassessment, with limited tangible progress towards HSR development.

## 3.5. Newer developments in the HSR discourse

Although numerous studies on HSR in Canada have been conducted since the 1970s, there has been no tangible progress towards implementation. However, in 2015, VIA Rail proposed a HFR project between Québec City and Toronto as a more feasible alternative to HSR (Transport Canada, 2019). In response, Transport Canada launched a detailed assessment and in 2021, the Prime Minister's mandate letter to the Minister of Transport called for advancing a procurement process to select a private developer partner through a PPP funding and governance model. This progress marked the first substantive steps toward translating decades of analysis into concrete initiatives aimed at modernizing and expanding intercity passenger rail infrastructure in the corridor.

In December 2022, the federal government announced the establishment of a new Crown corporation, VIA HFR, the VIA Rail subsidiary to support, co-develop and oversee the project. The launch of a Request for Expressions of Interest marked the beginning of the procurement phase, informing future project directions (Alto, 2025). In 2023, a Request for Proposals was issued, requiring bidders to submit two options: one with a maximum train speed of 200 km/h and

another exceeding 250 km/h (Government of Canada, 2025). This dual-scenario approach suggested that HSR remained under consideration, despite the project's official branding as high-frequency.

In February 2025, just before the end of Trudeau's mandate, the federal government announced a renewed push for the project by selecting the Cadence consortium as the preferred partner for its co-development phase, officially confirming that it would move forward as a HSR project rather than a HFR one. The consortium includes CDPQ Infra, AtkinsRéalis, Systra Canada, Keolis Canada, Air Canada, and SNCF Voyageurs S.A., integrating both domestic and international expertise. The project was awarded a $3.9 billion contract over six years, in addition to the $371.8 million allocated in Budget 2024. Simultaneously, VIA HFR, the Crown corporation overseeing the project, was rebranded as *Alto* (Governent of Canada, 2025).

"*Canada is getting high-speed rail. Today's announcement of Alto, a high-speed rail system between Toronto and Quebec City, will transform our economy – drastically shortening commute times for millions of Canadians, turbocharging economic growth, creating thousands of good-paying jobs, improving productivity, and reducing emissions. Montréal to Toronto in three hours – you can't beat that*." – Justin Trudeau, Former Prime Minister of Canada, February 2025

The federal government has identified a set of cities as proposed stops for the HSR project. These were inherited from the earlier HFR initiative and include Toronto, Peterborough, Ottawa, Montréal, Laval, Trois-Rivières, and Québec City. The map below shows the proposed station locations, although the exact route alignment will be determined during the development phase.

**Figure 5.**

*Proposed HSR stops.*


*Note:* Alto, 2025.

**Table 4.**

*Expected time savings for HSR.*

| Route | Current Average Travel Times (Conventional Rail) | Expected HSR Travel Times | Time Savings |
|---|---|---|---|
| Toronto – Montréal | 5 h 30 mins | 3h 07 mins | 2 h 33 mins |
| Toronto – Ottawa | 4 h 26 mins | 2 h 09 mins | 2 h 17 mins |
| Toronto – Peterborough* | 1 h 27 mins | 0 h 40 mins | 0 h 47 mins |
| Ottawa – Montréal | 1 h 59 mins | 0 h 58 mins | 1 h 01 mins |
| Montréal – Québec City | 3 h 17 mins | 1 h 29 mins | 1 h 48 mins |
| Montréal – Trois-Rivières | 1 h 44 mins | 0 h 50 mins | 0 h 54 mins |

*Note:* *No direct passenger rail services currently available. Average travel time estimated by car. Table adapted from Alto, 2025.

Travel times are expected to be cut by half with the arrival of HSR. According to Alto, these time savings will enable intercity rail ridership to increase to 1.21 billion trips over the project lifecycle (Alto, 2025). This projection assumes unconstrained time savings and a direct service without intermediate stops.

These recent developments mark a turning point in Canada's longstanding and often redundant exploration of HSR. The transition from decades of studies to an official procurement process, the establishment of a Crown corporation, and the selection of a private consortium marks a significant turning point from exploration to implementation in Canadian HSR development. However, while the procedural advancements of HSR are gaining traction in the public and political eye, the trajectory of the project has been shaped by persistent ambiguity surrounding its core objectives. From the outset, federal communications consistently framed the project as a HFR initiative, prioritizing reliability and frequency over speed. However, the simultaneous exploration of higher-speed scenarios and, ultimately, the formal shift toward HSR with the selection of the Cadence consortium in 2025, reveal an ongoing lack of clarity in the project's political framing. This ongoing ambiguity indicates the absence of a clear long-term vision and well-defined objectives for the project's potential benefits. As a result, many Canadians remain wary of the project's direction. Public narratives and stakeholder discourses continue to shape the perception, legitimacy and political viability of the Alto project. Thus, a more in-depth analysis of the narratives advanced by key stakeholders, detailed in the following chapter, will provide critical insight into the underlying values, tensions, and ambitions driving the renewed momentum for HSR in Canada.

# 4. Discourse Analysis: Findings

This chapter presents a stakeholder discourse analysis, comparing the 2009 "High Speed Rail in Canada" study conducted by the 40th Parliament in 2009 and the 2003/2024 "Projects of High Frequency Rail Between Quebec City and Toronto, Between Calgary and Banff and Between Calgary and Edmonton", conducted by the 44th Parliament. The analysis examines shifts in framing priorities and tensions across institutional, political, and economic dimensions. It highlights how stakeholder perspectives have evolved and how they contribute to ongoing debates surrounding HSR planning and implementation in Canada, using the previously established five-point scoring system across 12 key criteria: reliability, safety, technology, time savings, routing, intermodal network integration, impacts on other transportation modes, regional development, life cycle cost, economic opportunities, funding models, and environmental impacts. A discussion follows, highlighting key shifts across time, dominant narratives, and impact on policy making.

## 4.1. The 2009 HSR Study in Brief

In 2009, prior to the launch of the EcoTrain study (a $3 million initiative jointly funded by the governments of Québec, Ontario, and Canada to reassess the feasibility of HSR in the QCWC), the House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities was mandated to evaluate and debate the viability of HSR in the QCW, Calgary-Banff, and Calgary-Edmonton corridors. This initiative aimed to revive national discussions on the feasibility of HSR, following a prolonged pause since the 1995 study and 2003 ViaFast proposal. The Committee's review began in May 2009 and resumed in November of the same year. Throughout this study, a total of 42 stakeholder witnesses from 28 different organizations were invited to present their perspectives. The table in the appendix presents these stakeholders and their respective organisations.

Despite the 2011 EcoTrain study (published shortly after the 2009 Canadian House of Commons debates) which also concluded that HSR in the QCWC was both feasible and desirable for Canadians, the project was not pursued after all. Indeed, the federal government ultimately deemed the project too costly and therefore did not consider it as a priority within Canada's infrastructure agenda (Zeliger & Grenberg, 2011).

## 4.2. The 2023/2024 study in brief

Following the 2021 announcement of the proposed HFR project, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities agreed in 2023 to the following motion:

"*That the committee undertake a study of the government's proposed high frequency rail (HFR) project between Quebec City and Toronto, as well as the projects of high frequency train between Calgary and Banff, and between Calgary and Edmonton, examining the advantages and disadvantages of the various options, including high frequency rail (HFR), in terms of ridership, route, stations, connectivity and cost. That the committee hold a minimum of four meetings on this study*." (44th Parliament, 2023)

Ultimately, the committee conducted six meetings, analyzing issues and opportunities associated with the proposed project. The study debuted in September 2023 and resumed in June 2024. Over this period, Parliament members heard from 33 stakeholder witnesses across 21 different organisations. The Table in the appendix presents these stakeholders and their respective organisations. By applying the narrative-based framework to the 12 criteria introduced earlier in this research, the following analysis identifies discursive patterns across four overarching categories of analysis:

1. **Operational factors**, encompassing themes of reliability, safety, technology, time savings and routing.
2. **System integration**, including intermodal network integration, impacts on other transportation modes, and regional development.
3. **Economic dimensions**, covering discourses related to life cycle cost, economic opportunities, and funding models.
4. **Environmental considerations**, focusing on environmental impacts and climate-related discourse.

This categorization enables a more focused examination of how key themes are framed, debated, and prioritized over time, highlighting evolving perceptions of risks and benefits, as well as the broader implications for the legitimacy and strategic direction of Canadian HSR. The radar

charts below visually illustrate the evolution of stakeholder debates between 2009 and 2023/2024, highlighting key trends, continuities, and shifts in discourse.

## 4.3. Public sector discourses over time

**Figure 6.**

*2009 public sector discourses.*

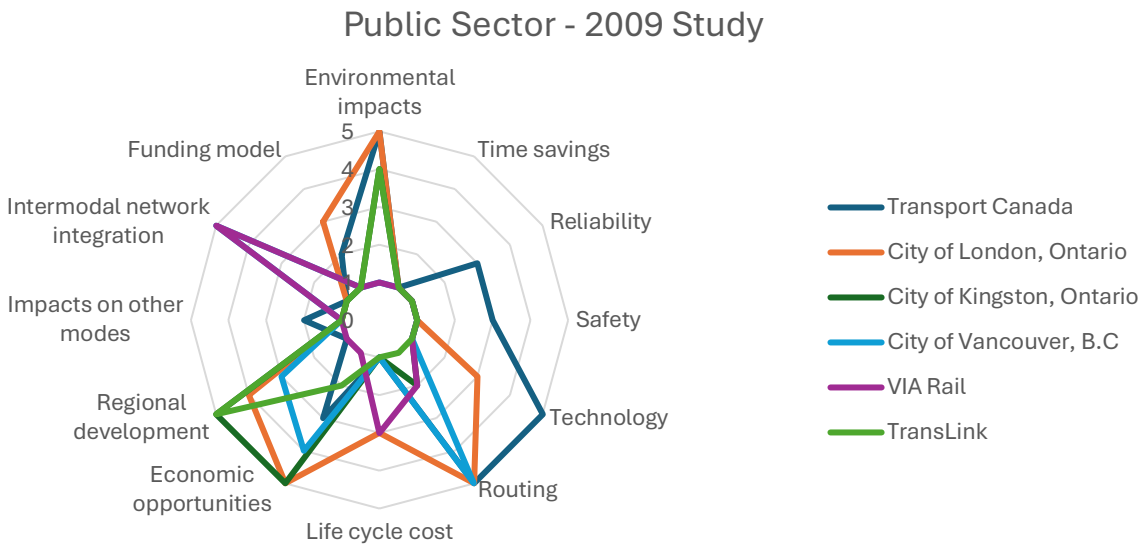
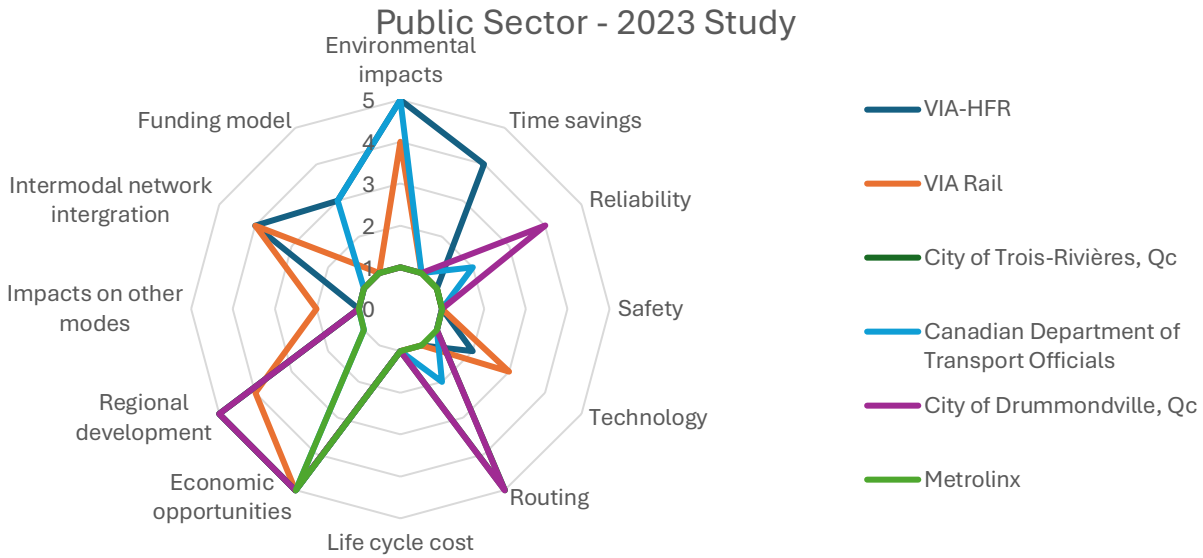



**Figure 7.**

*2023 public sector discourses over time.*



## 4.4. Private sector discourses over time

**Figure 8.**

*2009 private sector discourses.*

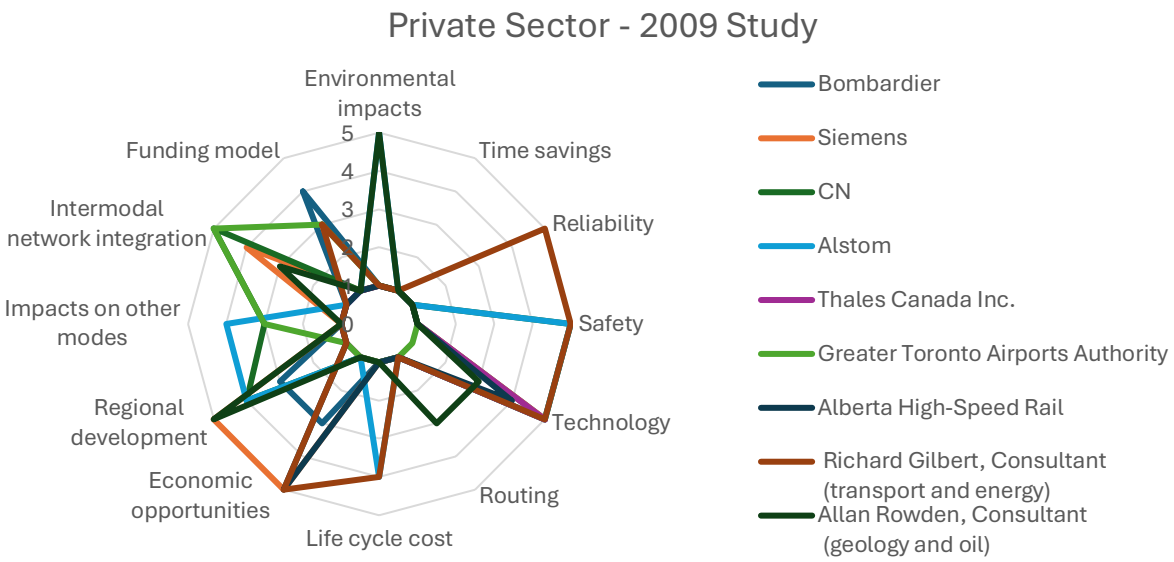
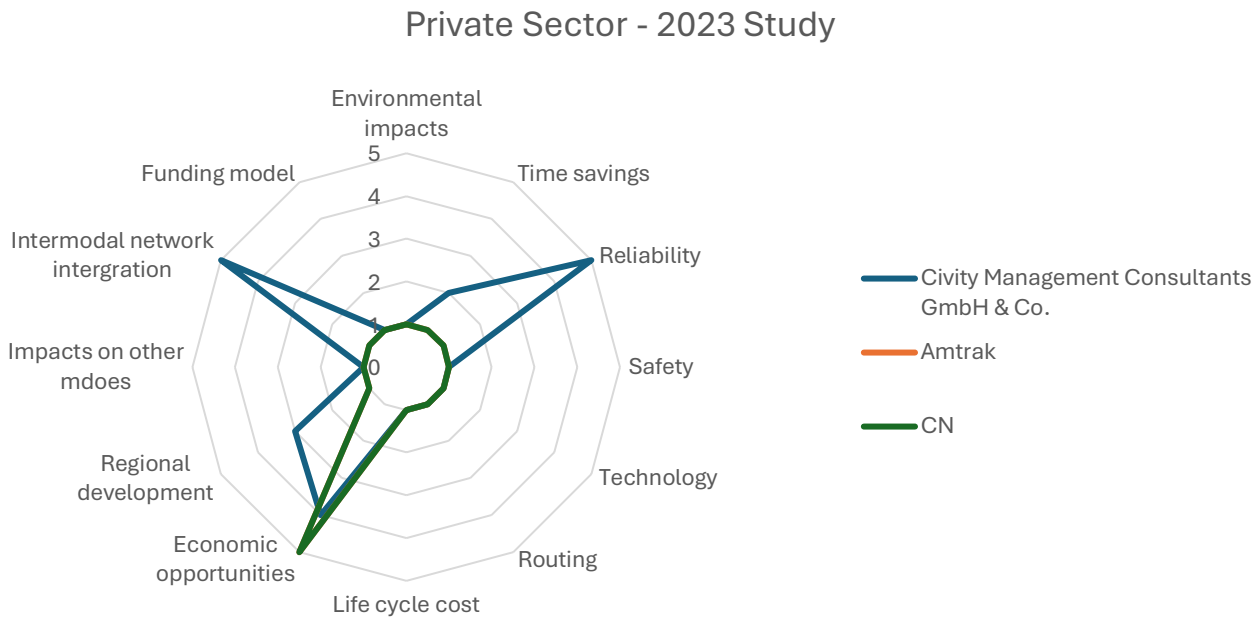



**Figure 9.**

*2023 private sector discourses.*



## 4.5. Associations discourses over time

**Figure 10.**

*2009 national and regional associations' discourses.*

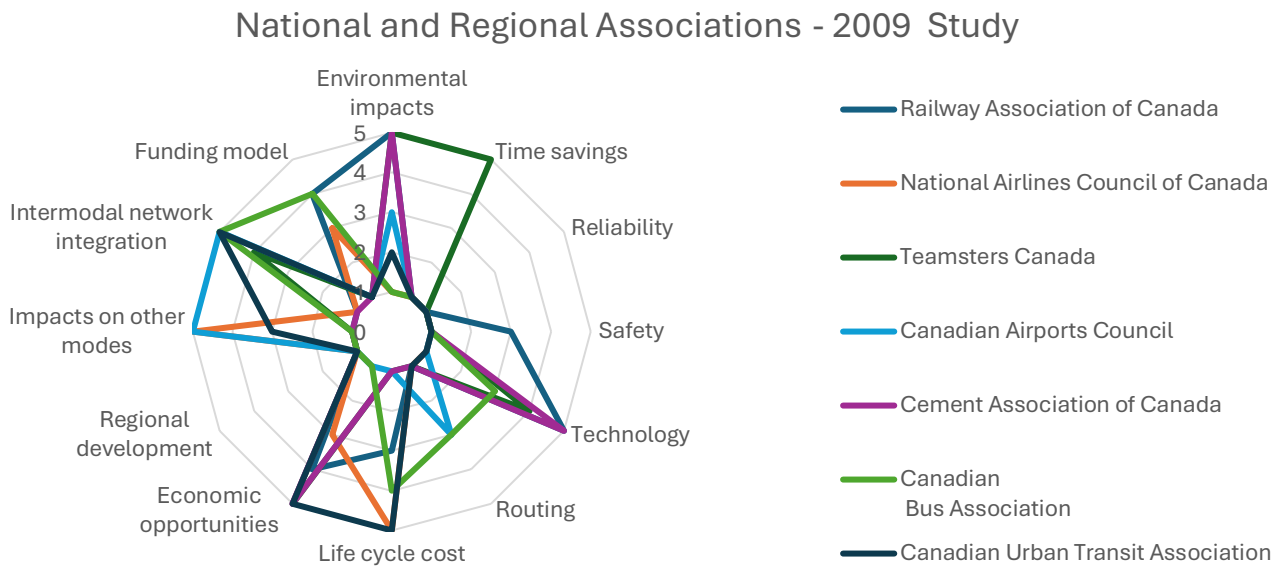
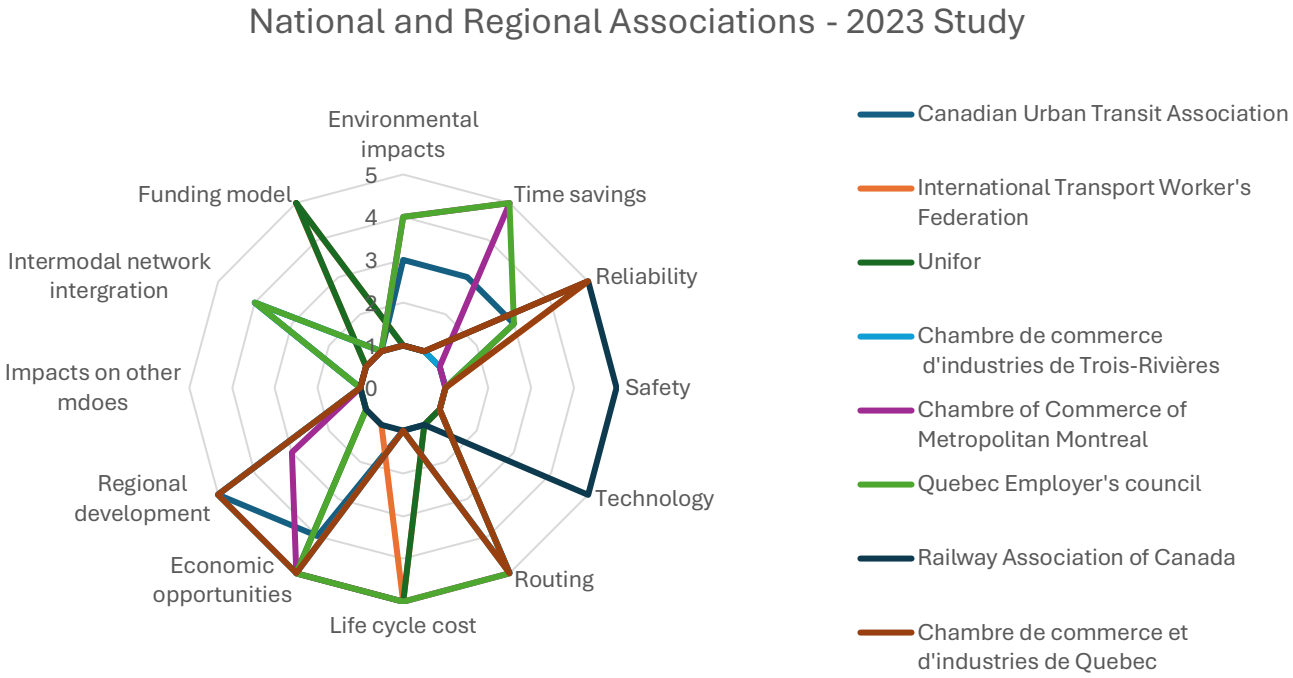



**Figure 11.**

*2023 national and regional associations' discourses.*



## 4.6. Research and development, non-profit and advocacy groups over time

**Figure 12.**

*2009 R&D/non-profit and advocacy groups over time.*

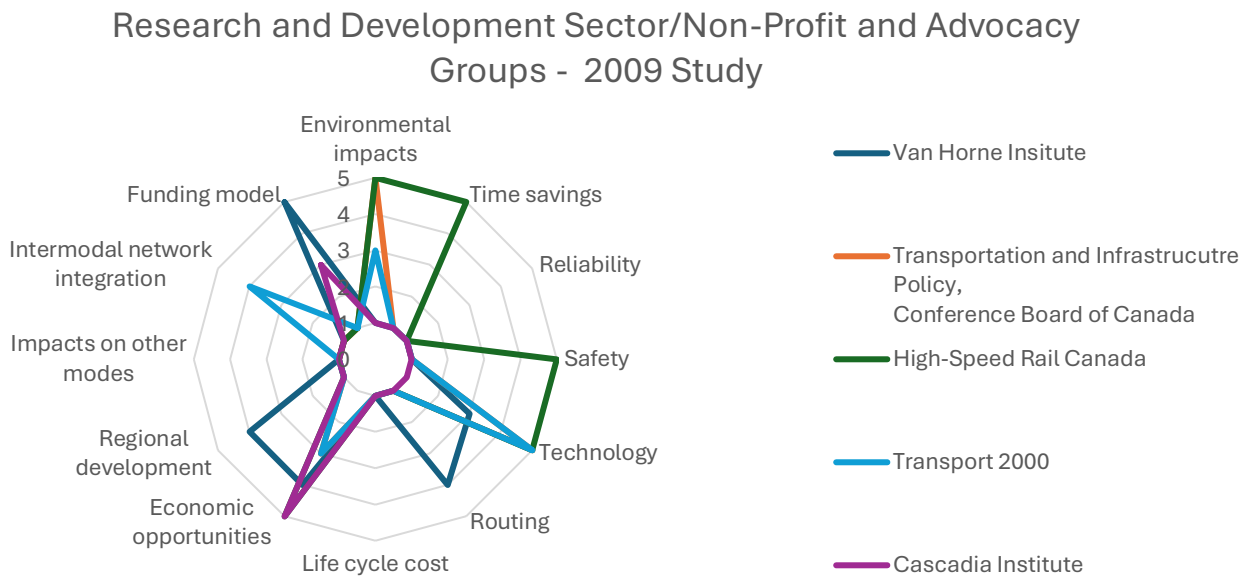
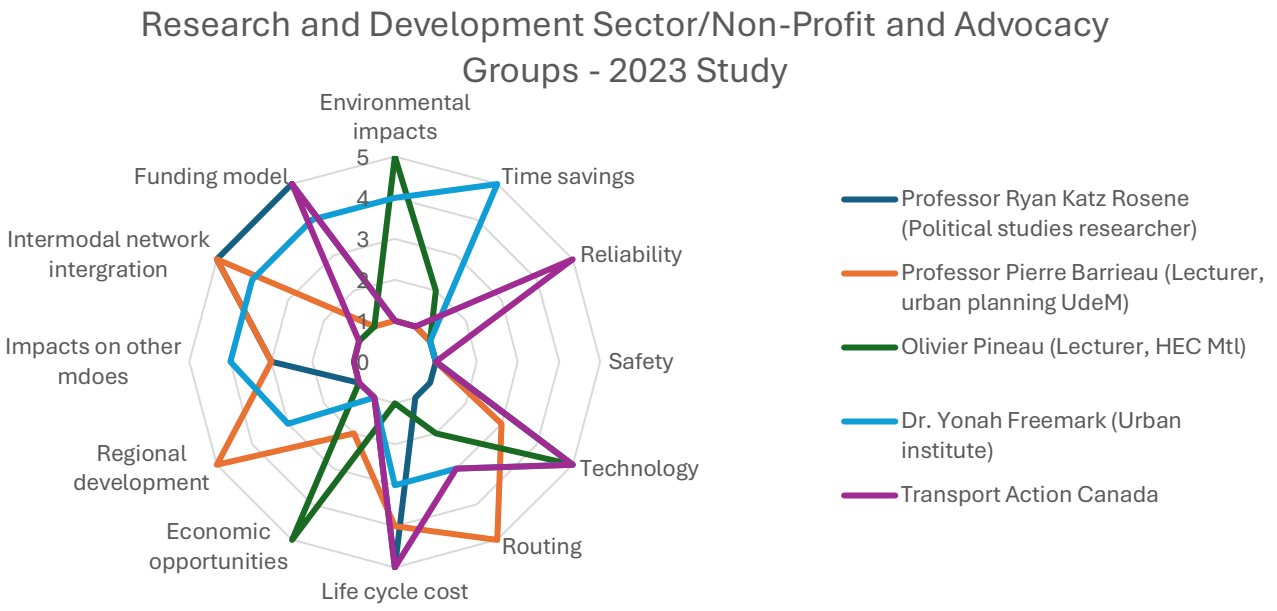



**Figure 13.**

*2023 R&D/non-profit and advocacy groups over time.*



## 4.7. Operational factors

The following section explores stakeholders' discourses related to operational factors, including time savings (speed), routing, safety, reliability, and technology. These criteria reflect core technical aspects of HSR development and shape public, institutional and political perceptions of the viability and desirability of HSR in Canada. Accordingly, this section highlights how operational expectations have evolved in response to project maturity, institutional priorities, and broader narratives surrounding HSR/HFR discourses.

### Time savings

Although it may be assumed that time savings, particularly speed, would dominate discussions about HSR, the findings of this study reveal that in both 2009 and 2023/2024, very few governmental actors identified speed or time saving as the central factor in their arguments for high-speed rail development (Figure 6 and Figure 7). However, in the R&D sector, Dr. Yonah Freemark, an urban studies specialist, strongly emphasized in 2024 the importance of prioritizing speed over frequency in the development of Canada's passenger rail system (Figure 13). Drawing from international comparisons, Freemark stated:

> "*[…] my examination of evidence from international examples suggests that the HFR project would fail to live up to the full potential of the central segment of the line, whose length and distribution of metropolitan areas is similar to those of the Paris-Marseille, Madrid-Barcelona and Milan-Naples corridors. Thanks to considerable investment in high-speed rail infrastructure to allow travel at speeds up to 300 kilometres per hour, those routes operate at far higher average speeds than those proposed for Canada after the completion of the HFR project*."
> (Freemark, 2024)

Freemark further urged the committee to reconsider what he characterized as a "potential missed opportunity" to pursue a true high-speed rail system, cautioning against settling for a more limited, moderate-speed alternative. His remarks are particularly noteworthy in retrospect, given that the HFR project transitioned into a full HSR vision following the announcement of the Alto project in 2025. Accordingly, while time savings were not a central focus in the 2009 discussions, they emerged more predominantly in the context of comparing the slower HFR model to a full HSR system in the 2023/2024 discussions.

Anticipating concerns from the public about the implications of lower speeds under the HFR approach, Martin Imbleau, CEO of VIA HFR (now Alto), addressed the concerns in his introductory remarks to Parliamentary members in 2023, stating:

*"Many people ask about speed – understandably so. We will reach high speeds where it's feasible, safe and affordable […] The objective is not top speed for the sake of speed. It's about saving time. Faster average speed that shortens travel time is the way to go."* (Imbleau, 2023)

These contrasting perspectives between Freemark and Imbleau highlight a core tension in the evolving discourse on Canadian passenger rail. While early debates paid limited attention to speed and time savings, they have, over time, emerged as key points of contention. On one side are those who argue that reaching very high speeds is the most efficient and transformative approach. On the other hand, are proponents of incremental improvements, like those offered by HFR, who view speed not as an end in itself but as a means to improved service within existing constraints. As the Alto project moves forward under a HSR mandate, addressing this unresolved tension will be crucial to developing a coherent and effective rail strategy. However, the pivot toward HSR appears abrupt and lacks a clearly articulated long-term vision to support it.

## Routing

A notable shift in discourse emerges in relation to routing (Figures 6 and 7). In the 2009 study, routing received considerably more attention compared to the 2023 study, likely due to greater uncertainty about proposed alignments at the time. The heightened focus on routing in 2009 suggests that the lack of clarity over foundational HSR elements can strongly influence stakeholder engagement and perceived feasibility. On the other hand, the limited discussions around routing during the 2023 study, especially in relation to the Banff-Calgary and Edmonton-Calgary corridors (which were explicitly included in the study's mandate), prompted criticism after the study's release, notably from Conservative Members of Parliament serving on the committee (Schiefke, 2024). This selective focus reflects how political priorities, and regional interests can shape and potentially influence bias in the framing of national infrastructure debates. This raises a critical question: Was the inclusion of the Edmonton-Calgary and Banff-Calgary corridors a substantive contribution to the discussion, or merely a politically strategic gesture?

## Safety

In both 2009 and 2023, safety was only marginally addressed across most stakeholder groups. When it was raised, it was primarily in relation to the need for dedicated passenger tracks separated from freight and the elimination of at-grade crossings for both HFR and HSR systems.

Paul Miller, Chief Safety and Transportation Officer at CN in 2009, unsurprisingly emphasized safety concerns around shared freight-passenger operations at higher speeds, stating that a fully dedicated track system would be essential to ensure safe and efficient service:

> *"Our concerns with operating on a non-dedicated basis and co-mingling freight and passenger operations at higher speed include safety--and we would certainly want to have the rail safety group from Transport Canada at the table in any sort of discussion--passenger schedule reliability, and protection of our ability to move our customers or freight in an efficient manner."* (Miller, 2009)

In addition, Ashley Langford, Vice-President of Alstom Transport in 2009, highlighted the safety benefits of HSR, particularly its ability to transport large volumes of people safely in winter conditions, when road travel poses heightened risks. These perspectives suggest that, despite its limited presence in broader discourse, safety remains a critical underlying concern in the design of any HSR system. In the 2023/2024 study, similar perspectives were expressed, with a few stakeholders citing safety as a key benefit of HSR systems to reduce road collisions.

## Reliability

Throughout stakeholder discourses from 2009 to 2023/2024, reliability was rarely highlighted as a central concern. However, a few actors underscored its importance as a key factor in advocating for HSR investments. In 2009, for instance, Helena Borges of Transport Canada highlighted that enhancing the reliability of passenger rail services, particularly by improving on-time performance, could help boost ridership. On the other hand, transportation and energy consultant Richard Gilbert argued that higher-speed rail, similar to the HFR model, would deliver more consistent and dependable service (Figure 8). While this claim holds some truth, it warrants a critical perspective: such benefits in consistency and dependability are only achievable if all

other operational and infrastructural constraints are removed. He also contended that reliability, along with frequency and comfort, is more critical to attracting passengers than speed alone:

*"More important for travellers than the higher speed are frequency, reliability, quality of ride, and other aspects of service. It's more important for them to know there's a train every 30 or 60 minutes for most hours of the day on each of these three routes, and many trains on many other routes."* (Gilbert, 2009)

Similar to Gilbert's point, Martin Imbleau emphasized in 2023 the importance of reliability over speed when defining the project:

*"Reliability will be one of the major factors in convincing people to give up their cars."* (Imbleau, 2023)

This perspective points to a potential misalignment between policy focus on speed and public priorities centered on service dependability. Ultimately, the treatment of reliability within the HSR debate reveals a broader clash between competing visions: those prioritizing technological prestige and speed, and those emphasizing practical, user-centered performance, highlighting how different stakeholder narratives selectively frame what 'success' in HSR should look like.

## Technology

Technology, referring to the type of technical systems, equipment, and engineering standards associated with HSR infrastructure, remained minimally discussed among governmental stakeholders in both 2009 and 2023/2024 (Figures 6 and 7). Martin Imbleau noted in the 2023 study that the project's scope and technological framework had yet to be clearly defined. He emphasized the importance of relying on private sector expertise through a PPP model to help shape the project's technological direction, scope, and budget. This suggests a strong tendency of the public sector to rely on private actors for technical leadership, reinforcing the idea that the success of HSR implementation in Canada may depend heavily on the expertise and strategic/monetary interest private actors bring to the table. In addition, the limited discussions pertaining to technology within the governmental sector may showcase that the project's scope and vision may still lack the clarity necessary for these stakeholders to confidently engage with more technical considerations such as technology.

On the other hand, private sector actors and national/regional associations adopted a notably more technical discourse, with particular focus on available high-speed rail technologies (Figure 10 and Figure 13). This divergence may reflect the private sector's interest in showcasing expertise and positioning itself as a potential contributor to future project development. This also highlights a sharp contrast with the more politically driven narrative of governmental stakeholders compared to private sector actors. On the side of national associations, Cliff Mackay, president and chief executive officer of the Railway Association of Canada, argued in 2009 that:

*"Overall, the development of high-speed rail is a tremendous opportunity for our suppliers and engineers to showcase their expertise and further develop advanced technologies for the Canadian and global markets". (*Mackay, 2009)

This statement demonstrates how national associations, like private firms, framed HSR development not just as a transportation solution but as a strategic opportunity for industry growth, technological advancement, and global competitiveness.

Overall, operational discourses across both 2009 and 2023 remain limited among public sector actors, suggesting that the project's scope and vision may still lack the clarity necessary for these stakeholders to confidently engage with technical considerations such as safety, reliability, and technology. In contrast, the private sector stakeholders and national associations more explicitly centered technological aspects within their discourses to support the perceived feasibility of HSR development, often aligning these narratives with their own areas of expertise and interests. However, Mario Péloquin, who at the time was serving as Director of Siemens' Mobility Division, offered a more nuanced perspective during the 2009 study:

*"What I would like to state is that from experience, far too many people concentrate on the vehicle technology at the beginning of a high-speed discussion when evaluating the feasibility of such a system, instead of evaluating the basics first. What is needed first, in fact, is a vision or strategy before determining which technologies are appropriate for the project."* (Péloquin, 2009)

This statement highlights that even within technically oriented stakeholder groups, there is recognition that strategic clarity must precede technical decision-making. It suggests that debates over speed, ridership, or ticket costs remain premature in the absence of a clearly defined long-

term vision for the project. In addition, routing received notably more attention in 2009 than in 2023, indicating that, at the time, greater uncertainty prompted more debate, whereas increased clarity in later stages may have shifted the focus toward other criteria. Together, these findings suggest that operational discourses are shaped not only by institutional roles and expertise but also by the degree of project definition and the absence of a clearly articulated long-term vision for Canadian HSR. Without an established strategic framework focused on long-term objectives, government stakeholders may struggle to engage meaningfully with the project's technical dimensions.

## 4.8. System Integration

System integration refers to discourses concerning how different elements of the HSR project are designed to function as a cohesive whole. This includes the integration of HSR with existing rail and transportation networks, its potential impacts on other modes such as air, bus, and automobile travel, and its alignment with broader regional development strategies. The following section captures how stakeholders envision HSR not as a standalone project, but as a part of an integrated transport and development system, raising questions about connectivity, multimodal coordination, and the ability of HSR to support long-term socio-economic objectives, particularly related to regional development.

### Regional development

In 2009, several governmental stakeholders emphasized regional development as a key rationale for implementing HSR, as shown in Figure 6. This emphasis reflected the composition of the stakeholder group, which included city councillors and mayors from cities such as Vancouver, London, and Drummondville, each advocating for a station in their city to stimulate local economic development. In contrast, the 2023 discussions framed regional development primarily through the dichotomy of HSR versus HFR. However, these options are not necessarily always mutually exclusive. Indeed, stakeholders often approached the issue as a false dilemma, suggesting a trade-off between speed and service frequency or reliability, when in fact, a more integrated solution may be possible.

When questioned by parliamentary members on the comparative benefits of HFR, especially given its speeds comparable to conventional rail, Martin Imbleau responded with a European example:

> *"[…] I regularly take the train when I'm in Europe. In particular, I've travelled from Paris to Brussels and from Brussels to Amsterdam on the same high-speed train service, Thalys. We covered the 300 kilometres from Paris to Brussels in an hour and a half. That's very fast. However, we travelled the 220 kilometres to Amsterdam on the same train in two hours. Why? Because the train stopped more frequently in densely populated centres. The choice is based on environmental and economic gains and the populations served. The same is true in the corridor we're concerned with here. If you want to stop in Peterborough and Trois-Rivières, to create wealth, you have to have a train suited to the communities that'll be served." (*Imbleau, 2023)

Consistent with his broader argument against prioritizing speed for the sole purpose of improving time savings, Imbleau contends that HSR systems typically serve denser urban centers, such as Montréal or Toronto, while HFR offers a better match for smaller, less densely populated communities like Peterborough or Trois-Rivières. In this framing, regional development becomes not just a rationale for rail investment but a key determinant of the system's technology, revealing the trade-offs stakeholders are willing to make between speed, inclusivity, and economic impact.

## Intermodal network integration

Intermodal network integration refers to the extent to which the proposed HSR system will be designed to connect seamlessly with other transport modes, such as local transit, regional rail, buses, and airports. In 2023, findings from Figures 6 and 7 indicate a growing emphasis on intermodal network integration in the arguments put forth by public sector stakeholders, compared to 2009. This suggests a shifting narrative from the governmental side toward viewing HSR not merely as an isolated infrastructure project, but as a component of a broader, interconnected transportation system. In addition, stakeholders from the R&D sector in the 2023 study also highlighted intermodal network integration as a central pillar of their arguments in support of high-speed rail development. In 2024, Dr. Yonah Freemark, Lead of the Practice Area on Fair Housing, Land Use and Transportation at the Urban Institute, told the Committee the following:

*"It is absolutely necessary to ensure that the rail system is connected to effective urban transit solutions. In the case of the Toronto-to-Quebec corridor, obviously Montreal and Toronto have effective subway systems and metro systems that are able to connect people to the existing railway terminus. I would say cities like Quebec, Trois-Rivières and Peterborough do not have particularly effective urban rail services at the moment—or any urban rail services at the moment. Considering how those could be connected to a future intercity rail system seems very important." (*Freemark, 2024)

This perspective demonstrates the importance the research community and other stakeholder groups place on the success of HSR being dependent on its integration with local transit infrastructure. Without effective first and last-mile connectivity, inclusive regional development and widespread modal shifts would be limited in areas less well served by public transit.

## Impacts on other transportation modes

In 2009, considerable attention was given to the impacts on other modes of transportation, particularly air travel, by national organizations such as the Canadian Airports Council and the National Airlines Council of Canada (Figure 10). Jim Facette, president and CEO of Canadian Airports Council, stated the following:

*"Canada's airports have some concerns with the direction of the debate. Canada's airports believe there may be a place for high-speed rail in Canada. However, it will be difficult for us to support an approach to high-speed rail if it is pursued in a manner that disregards the importance of our aviation sector or severely risks our sector's prosperity […] The integration of transportation modes and the connectivity between modes needs further examination. The viability of the Canadian airline network depends on travellers being able to conveniently and seamlessly connect through a Canadian airport on to their final destination". (*Facette, 2009)

This statement reflects a protective stance as well as concerns from the aviation sector around potential competition from HSR. It also points to the strategic importance of designing HSR in a way that complements, rather than undermines air travel and other existing transport networks.

In contrast, and not surprisingly, VIA Rail consistently supported HSR development in both 2009 and 2023. When questioned by Parliament about the implications of operating a HFR line

within the busiest segment of its existing network, Mario Péloquin, president and CEO of VIA Rail, reaffirmed the organization's long-term commitment to national service provision:

*"Look, my vision for Via Rail is to continue to provide, and hopefully increase, an affordable, accessible, environmentally friendly, sustainable and diverse service across Canada. The fact that the corridor is going to look different than it does today doesn't impact what my vision for Via Rail is—it's to continue or enhance the service in all of the regions that we serve now. Let's not forget that some of those regions are not only long distances, but they're also remote, where access to transportation is very challenging without the train […] I believe the arrival of HFR will not really change the way we operate the long-distance and regional parts of the railway."*

*(*Péloquin, 2023)

This statement reflects VIA Rail's strategic discourse, which frames the HFR project as a complementary initiative rather than a competing one by emphasizing VIA Rail's ability to provide long-distance and regional services. This framing seeks to reassure policymakers and political leaders that HFR will not come at the expense of VIA Rail's existing services or more remote, underserved regions that may not be directly served by the new HFR corridor.

Overall, discourses from both 2009 and 2023 consistently emphasize a key recurring narrative across nearly all stakeholder groups: the need for an HSR system that is seamlessly integrated into the broader transportation network. While stakeholders representing airport authorities and the air travel sector were more concerned about the project's direction, their support was contingent on strong network integration, particularly with airport connections. In contrast, VIA Rail consistently emphasized that HSR would not replace conventional services but function as a complementary component within a wider, coordinated intermodal system. Overall, these perspectives reinforce the view that HSR should be planned as part of an integrated mobility network that advances both regional accessibility and national connectivity.

## 4.9. Economic dimensions

This section examines how economic dimensions within stakeholders' discourses have framed issues related to life cycle costs, anticipated economic benefits and opportunities, and funding models. These themes reflect not only the perceived financial feasibility of HSR but also the

broader economic narratives used to justify or question public investment in such large-scale infrastructure.

## Economic opportunities

Economic opportunities associated with HSR development, including job creation, industry growth, and tourism, emerged as the most frequently cited rationale across all stakeholder groups in both 2009 and 2023/2024. This reflects a broadly shared belief that a HSR project has the potential to stimulate the Canadian economy. Several stakeholders emphasized that improved connectivity and rapidity of time travel between major urban centers like Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto could enhance labour market mobility and stimulate overall economic competitiveness. Economic opportunities-related discourses were especially popular among stakeholders representing cities, who advocated for an HSR stop in their region to promote business activity, industrial growth, and regional development. Notably, in 2009, Grant Hopcroft, Director of Intergovernmental and Community Liaison, introduced the concept of housing affordability and property value as a rationale for selecting London as a station stop:

*"[…] Currently the average price of a single-family resale home, as of the last quarter of last year, was $383,000 in Toronto. It was $204,000 in London. I think one of the benefits of high-speed rail is that it gives people the opportunity to enjoy a higher quality of life within something similar to or better than the commute they face now, without having to pay the high cost of living, for example, in the GTA or the greater Montreal area. It helps our regional economies survive."* (Hopcroft, 2009)

This perspective highlights how HSR is not only viewed as a transportation investment, but also as a tool to redistribute economic activity and ease housing pressures in major urban centers. This reflects a broader discourse strategically employed by municipal stakeholders to justify the inclusion of their cities as a stop on the proposed HSR route. In contrast, by 2023, some stakeholders expressed concern that the fragmentation of VIA Rail and VIA HFR, coupled with the adoption of a PPP model, could undermine the broader economic potential of HSR in Canada. Jennifer Murray, director at Unifor, emphasized:

*"This fragmentation of HFR and Via already shows that the focus of providing service to the entire Canadian public has been undermined. These services cannot be determined in isolation.*

*[…] Because they are costly, we must also make sure the wealth created by building and operating these systems stays right here. Rail is about nation building and economic development—not just the products and people who roll across the tracks, but the building, maintenance and work done to keep it going. If we continue to privatize these services to companies outside of Canada, or anywhere, we forgo a significant part of the economic benefits of building rail and further divide our rail system." (*Murray, 2023)

Murray's statement reflects a broader concern among labour unions who view rail not only as a service to improve mobility but also as a tool for domestic economic empowerment. When dealing with external partnerships, potential decisions from private partners to prioritize cost efficiency may outweigh the long-term national economic value of operating without a partial privatization of the system. Overall, while there is a consensus that an HSR system will generate economic benefits for Canada, concerns remain among few stakeholders about the implementation pathways, which may hinder long-term national benefits.

## Lice cycle costs

While it may appear surprising that Figures 6 and 7 do not highlight life cycle cost as a central concern among governmental stakeholders, this can be attributed to a generally favourable stance these actors expressed toward HSR/HFR development in both 2009 and 2023 studies. As a result, public sector witnesses may have strategically downplayed discussions of the substantial public investment required. In contrast, elected parliamentary members from the standing Committee placed considerable emphasis on life cycle costs in their discussions, reflecting the role of political actors representing public interests and investments, therefore framing their discourse around economic responsibility and feasibility. In contrast, as illustrated by Figures 12 and 13, stakeholders from the R&D sector, as well as non-profit and advocacy groups, placed much greater emphasis on life cycle costs in 2023. Their discourse often highlighted cautionary tales of budget overruns and escalating expenses associated with large infrastructure projects. Notably, Ryan Katz-Rosene, associate professor in the school of political studies at the University of Ottawa pointed out the following:

*"Transport megaprojects, especially rail projects, are notorious for spiralling into a break-fix cycle in which time is diverted toward trying to fix small mistakes that continue to arise as a result of a lack of planning." (*Rosene, 2024)

Further supporting Katz-Rosene's concerns, Dr. Yonah Freemark also highlighted cost as a major risk factor in 2024, emphasizing that unclear goals for the advanced HFR proposal could lead to substantial budget overruns. He stated:

"*I've spent a while trying to understand the government's proposals, which, as others have said, are not super-clearly defined. Based on that, I would assume that there are going to be a number of years of additional planning, so it would be a minimum of 10 years to implementation and probably more like 15 years. If you're looking at mechanisms to reduce cost, I would suggest that early land acquisition is one mechanism to substantially reduce cost if you know where the corridor is going to be. That, however, requires a lot of planning in advance*."(Freemark, 2024)

This reinforces the narrative that without a clearly articulated vision and long-term planning, cost escalations can become embedded early in the project's development, causing further uncertainties and risks of delaying implementation. The divergence in the emphasis of life cycle costs and economic benefits between the public and R&D sectors illustrates how stakeholders' institutional roles and positions shape whether these concerns are prioritized or downplayed in discussions about advancing HSR.

## Funding model

Concerns around cost overruns and planning deficiencies feed directly into broader discussions surrounding PPPs, raising questions about the risks, responsibilities, and governance structures best suited to manage HSR development in the Canadian context. In both 2009 and 2023, there were recurring discussions around the use of the PPP model to deliver and oversee the project. While no clear distinction across different types of stakeholders can be made, it is evident that the PPP model generated considerable polarization among opinions. Indeed, several participants explicitly voiced opposition to this approach. Jennifer Murray, Director of Unifor (Atlantic Region), Canada's largest private sector union representing workers involved in rail infrastructure, stated the following:

*"Unifor is very concerned about the use of public-private partnerships, especially when it comes to transport. No matter how many attempts there are to call these structures "modern", they are simply subsidies to commercial interests that end up costing taxpayers more money to get a service rather than doing it in-house. Report after report has shown this, and yet here we are again saying it will be different this time. P3s for operations are a leftover from the previous era of ideologically driven privatization. Decades of failures of this model show there is no magic to be found and no actual competition resulting in higher-quality services, because transport like this is a natural monopoly."* (Murray, 2024)

This quote reflects broader concerns raised by labour unions and advocacy groups that a PPP approach may undermine public accountability, inflate costs, and prioritize profit over long-term service quality. Other stakeholders emphasized the importance of maintaining transparency if opting for a PPP model. Freemark emphasized the following statement:

*" […]. I agree with my fellow panelists that the key issues—more than who is ultimately building or managing the line—are transparency, and assurances from the government that the government is controlling the day-to-day project design, planning and construction. Without high levels of capacity coming from the public sector, you're likely to see some major problems with cost escalation and major problems with design changes over time."* (Freemark, 2024)

On the other hand, Martin Imbleau, CEO of VIA HFR, strongly advocated for collaboration with private partners even in the face of repeated scrutiny and questioning by members of Parliament:

*"I don't think it'll cost more because we're operating within a public-private partnership. Costs are costs: management alters the actual cost situation, and capital cost tips the balance somewhat, but it's the model itself that will essentially be the decisive factor regarding costs in this case."* (Imbleau, 2023)

Martin Imbleau's view, representing VIA HFR (Alto), reflects a framing of PPPs as a structural solution to project delivery, emphasizing the importance of good project management. Taken together, contrasting viewpoints from various stakeholders, as well as the growing discussions regarding life cycle costs and financial feasibility between the 2009 and 2023 study, reflect possible learned lessons from previous infrastructure projects. Debates surrounding funding

models, particularly the use of PPPs, further reveal a fragmented discursive landscape in which ideological divisions and risk perceptions shape support or opposition. Accordingly, these findings suggest that while economic dimensions are frequently used to legitimize HSR development, they can also be a source of skepticism and contention, especially given the long history of planning for HSR in the Canadian context.

## 4.10. Sustainability and environmental considerations

This section explores stakeholder discourses related to environmental impacts, focusing on potential benefits and drawbacks associated with HSR development, and how these have been framed over time. Key themes such as greenhouse gas emissions, land use impacts, and modal shift from higher-emitting transportation modes are explored through stakeholders' narratives over time.

Environmental considerations were present across all stakeholder narratives in both 2009 and 2023. In 2009, Helena Borges, representing Transport Canada, emphasized that evaluating environmental impacts of HSR was a key component of the EcoTrain study particularly because they had been neglected in the 1995 study. She further noted that the EcoTrain study compared the environmental footprint of HSR to that of other modes, including private automobiles. Additionally, environmental concerns drew considerable attention from Members of Parliament during the 2009 hearings. In 2023, similar narratives were shared across several stakeholders, emphasising the project's potential to reduce emissions and promote sustainable travel behaviour. Notably, Pierre-Olivier Pineau, Chair in Energy Sector Management at HEC Montréal, tied his discourse supporting HSR development to both environmental imperatives and a broader national vision, linking sustainability to a sense of Canadian identity and nation building:

> *"Trains are essential. Canada was built on the strength of rail. We think of rail as part of our glorious, proud past, but, in fact, trains must become the backbone of transportation for Canada's future. Trains will enable us to live in Canada and all its regions in an environmentally friendly way, by helping us reduce our use of energy, and economically, because trains costs less." (Pineau, 2024)*

This statement illustrates how environmental arguments can be intertwined with economic pragmatism and national pride, reinforcing the idea that HSR is not only a green alternative, but a

strategic investment in Canada's long-term socio-economic objectives. On the other hand, while there was a general consensus across all stakeholder types that HSR development would bring environmental benefits to the country, Jim Facette, president and CEO of Canadian Airports Council, argued in 2009 the following:

> *"Much has been made about the environment as the raison d'être for high-speed rail in Canada. However, high-speed rail is not necessarily an environmental answer all the time. At the distances needed to travel most of Canada, rail could be less environmentally responsible than aviation. Even in short-distance corridors in which rail may represent an environmental improvement, diverting air passengers to trains would have little overall impact on the environment. Aviation represents just 3% of emissions worldwide." (*Facette, 2009)

This statement reveals a more cautious framing of HSR's environmental benefits, particularly from the perspectives of stakeholders representing competing modes of transportation. Overall, these contrasting perspective highlight how environmental narratives are strategically deployed by different stakeholders, reflecting the stakeholder's broader institutional interests. This reinforces the importance of critically assessing how sustainability is framed in transport policy discourses.

## 4.11. Takeaways

Overall, findings from the discourse analysis conducted over stakeholder narratives across operational factors, system integration, economic dimensions and sustainability reveal both continuity and important shifts between 2009 and 2023/2024. The following key insights emerge from this analysis:

- Operational concerns, particularly around routing and reliability, were more pronounced in 2009, reflecting the project's early and undefined stage. By 2023, stakeholder discourse had become more strategic, increasingly focusing on issues of governance, delivery models and funding mechanisms.
- System integration was more central to narratives in 2023, with stakeholders increasingly placing importance on HSR development as part of a multimodal, integrated network rather than a standalone infrastructure project.

- Several stakeholders emphasized the importance of engaging in a long-term, wider vision for HSR rather than diving into technological aspects too early in the project's natural development process.
- By 2023, several stakeholders expressed growing frustration with the project's shifting direction, particularly with the adoption of the PPP model, the focus on the QCWC rather than the Edmonton-Calgary route, and the prioritization of HFR over true high-speed system.
- The importance of transparency has been evoked by several stakeholders as key to a successful HSR project implementation, particularly if going forward with a PPP governance and funding model.
- Environmental considerations remained a key factor of support, though they have also been contested by a few stakeholders, who were questioning the extent of HSR's environmental benefits.

Together, these findings demonstrate how stakeholder narratives do not merely reflect personal reflections or positions but actively shape the perceived political legitimacy, direction, and feasibility of HSR in Canada. From the initial 1970 study proposing specific technologies and routes to subsequent reviews 55 years later, the discourse surrounding high-speed rail in Canada has followed anything but a linear trajectory. Yet, despite persistent frustrations over the lack of concrete political action, it would be inaccurate to suggest that stakeholder narratives have remained static. Instead, they have evolved in response to shifting institutional contexts, technological developments, and changing public expectations and perceptions. Shifts in narratives and discourses also reveal growing areas of tensions, such as diverging visions for speed and frequency and debates surrounding public-private collaboration. A better understanding of how these stakeholder narratives evolved and interacted is crucial not only for interpreting the past and present of Canadian HSR debates but also for shaping more inclusive future policy outcomes in transportation planning.

# 5. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

## 5.1. Summary

This research aimed to investigate how stakeholder narratives, interests, and concerns surrounding HSR development in Canada have evolved and how these narratives have influenced decision-making processes. The historical overview of Canadian passenger rail, along with the review of key studies from 1970 to 2011, laid the groundwork for understanding stakeholder discourses from 2009 to the present. The discourse analysis conducted over the 2009 and 2023/2024 HSR/HFR parliamentary studies reveals that the Canadian HSR debate has consistently extended beyond technical feasibility or cost concerns. Examining evolving stakeholder narratives through lenses of operations, system integration, economic opportunity, and sustainability, this research finds that many of the core questions shaping HSR development today echo those first raised in the 1970 study. This recurrence suggests that barriers to HSR implementation lie not in technical shortcomings, but in the socio-political terrain within which infrastructure decisions are made. As such, HSR must be understood and studied not simply as a transportation project, but as a political and discursive space shaped by historical legacies, national identity, and competing visions of development and environmental responsibility. To move the conversation forward, governmental commitment must be anchored in a coherent long-term vision. Recognizing HSR as both a technical and deeply political endeavour is essential for advancing meaningful, inclusive, and actionable decision-making in the Canadian context.

## 5.2. Study limitation

While this work contributes to the literature by offering critical insights on the evolution of HSR discourse, it has a limitation. Due to time constraints, no stakeholder interviews were conducted, despite their value in enhancing the depth and validity of narrative-based research. Future studies would benefit from incorporating interviews to capture first-hand perspectives and further substantiate findings.

## 5.3. Looking forward

Looking forward, stakeholder narratives should be viewed not merely as retrospective reflections but as tools for guiding future decision-making. They provide essential insights into the

political, institutional, and economic forces that continue to shape how HSR in Canada is envisioned, debated, and redefined over time. These discourses reflect shifting priorities and offer clues about the future of the Alto project, especially regarding whose voices will influence its direction and how competing visions of mobility, nation-building, and sustainability will be reconciled. However, as the project advances, its path will be shaped not only by internal debates over these concerns but also by wider geopolitical and economic uncertainties, including evolving U.S. leadership priorities. In this context, it remains to be seen whether the project will stall due to economic uncertainty and fragmented political visions. Alternatively, it could inspire Canada to embrace HSR as a nation-building effort by viewing it as a unifying investment in sustainable mobility, regional equity, and national identity. This also raises important questions: To what extent can a megaproject concentrated in eastern Canada be considered a true nation-building effort if western Canada is excluded? Might such exclusions risk deepening regional divisions rather than bridging them? Ultimately, the success of HSR may rely not only on technical and financial feasibility but on its ability to cultivate a shared national vision that transcends regional boundaries.

Discussions at the 2025 Canadian Urban Transit Research & Innovation Consortium (CUTRIC) Smart Rail Innovation Conference held in March 2025 offered valuable insights into how stakeholders are currently framing the conditions under which the Alto project will proceed. Pierre-Yves Boivin, Chief Communication and Engagement Officer at Alto, provided an overview of the project and addressed concerns raised by attendees. However, many questions were met with a response that it was "*too early to tell*", as the project remains in the very early stages of development, despite over five decades of national discussions around HSR. On the other hand, Boivin emphasized that meaningful engagement, particularly with Indigenous communities, is a priority in Alto's current planning efforts, aiming to ensure that concerns are heard and addressed. He also noted a recent shift in public sentiment, stating: "*Our interactions with officials, media and the public have revealed a strong preference of emphasizing speed over frequency. This has led to a shift in increased support towards the project*," which he estimates to be at around 70% in Québec and Ontario. Terrence Johnson, president of the advocacy group Transport Action Canada and a witness in the 2023 study by the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, voiced renewed frustration over the Alto project's direction: "*We keep studying this and not doing it*" he remarked, highlighting his concern with the federal government's shifting

stance: rejecting HSR in favour of HFR service in the past, only to now reembrace HSR at significantly greater costs. Johnson criticized what he sees as a lack of transparency and consistency in federal decision-making, pointing to the billions spent on repeated studies while local transit associations are forced to implement service cuts. Although a strong advocate for HSR in Canada, Johnson stressed the urgent need for Alto to begin delivering concrete progress and move beyond endless planning cycles.

These recent stakeholder narratives suggest that while the Alto project marks a renewed opportunity to fulfill Canada's long-standing HSR ambitions, its success will depend on increased federal transparency and sustained engagement with a broad range of stakeholders, especially those whose voices have historically been sidelined. Whether Alto becomes a transformative moment in Canada's mobility future or yet another deferred ambition will rely on the government's capacity to balance a long-term, integrated vision with timely action, despite the quickly evolving and uncertain geopolitical and economic context Canadians are currently facing.

## 5.4. Policy recommendations

Although the notion of a "lack of political will" has frequently been cited by stakeholders as a key barrier to HSR development in Canada, this argument alone is insufficient. Political will has, in fact, enabled the funding of numerous studies since the 1970s and, more recently, the selection of a consortium to advance the Alto project. Yet, despite these developments, a coherent and sustained long-term direction remains unclear. This raises the following question: is political will truly lacking, or is it simply not anchored to a long-term national vision? While this research does not aim to resolve this normative discourse, it encourages reflection on the limitations of short-lived political enthusiasm. In addition, this study puts forward three policy recommendations that attempt to shift normative discourses towards context-specific solutions designed to address the structural barriers that have historically hindered HSR implementation in Canada.

### Recommendation 1 - Define long-term objectives of HSR implementation

Framing HSR in terms of environmental benefits and economic gains, as stakeholders and decision makers have continuously advocated for since 2009, constitutes an overly simplistic and insufficient basis for long-term strategic planning. Rather than pursuing an ambiguous set of goals, it is essential to clearly define the primary objectives of the HSR infrastructure: whether that be

maximizing passenger travel between major urban centres, fostering regional development in peri-urban areas, or reducing reliance on high-emission modes of transport. While each of these aims has merit, attempting to achieve all simultaneously may prove unrealistic, as they often entail conflicting priorities and trade-offs that require deliberate policy choices. At present, Alto has yet to articulate a clear strategic vision for the proposed HSR project, despite having already identified station stops in seven cities: Toronto, Peterborough, Ottawa, Montréal, Laval, Trois-Rivières, and Québec City. When questioned at CUTRIC's 2025 conference about the rationale behind selecting these seven urban centres, Pierre-Yves Boivin, Chief of Communications at Alto, stated: "*It is a mandate from the government. I understand it might be previous legacy from the Via Rail HFR project.*" This response underscores the extent to which decision-making appears to be politically driven rather than rooted in a coherent, long-term planning framework. Prematurely determining station locations without first establishing overarching project objectives or system technology risks undermining the legitimacy and clarity of the initiative in the eyes of the public. To ensure credibility and coherence, Alto must urgently define its long-term goals for HSR development, as well as improve its transparency in decision-making processes.

## Recommendation 2 - Develop an integrated national transport policy

From 2009 to 2024, findings from the stakeholder analysis conducted have increasingly highlighted the critical need for HSR infrastructure to integrate seamlessly with Canada's broader transportation network. However, true integration cannot be reduced to simply linking HSR with airports or existing transit hubs. Instead, it requires a cohesive national transport policy, which would facilitate meaningful public transit coordination and foster intergovernmental collaboration across provinces. Currently, transportation planning in Canada remains fragmented, as provinces must navigate a complex web of different governmental agencies responsible for different transport modes and levels of governance. This siloed approach results in piecemeal development rather than a unified, strategic vision for mobility. The recent launch of the Canadian Public Transit Fund (CPTF), in July 2024 provides a good opportunity to work in tandem with a national transport policy plan. Indeed, through CPTF, the Government of Canada recognizes the importance of transport integration: "*The development of Integrated Regional Plans is a key element to receiving long-term funding commitments under the Metro-Region Agreements stream. Local governments and transit agencies within or adjacent to a Census Metropolitan Area, as identified by Statistics*

*Canada, in partnership with their Provincial government, will develop and share their Integrated Regional Plan, detailing capital transit planning over a ten-year horizon while also considering impacts on transit use, housing supply and affordability, as well as climate resilience and social equity*" (Government of Canada, 2025). This initiative marks a step toward recognizing the importance of integrated planning. However, such efforts should not remain confined to funding frameworks. Instead, they must evolve into a long-term, cohesive national vision supported by a binding national transport policy. While *Transportation 2030,* introduced in 2016, offers a *"Strategic Plan for the Future of Transportation in Canada,"* it falls short of being a fully integrated policy, despite introducing a high-level strategic framework for improving national mobility. Without a unified policy framework to guide infrastructure decisions across jurisdictions, projects like HSR risk being delayed, diluted, or misaligned with broader mobility, sustainability, and equity goals.

### Recommendation 3 - Prioritize comprehensive planning before initiating construction

As Rosene emphasized in 2024 during his appearance before the Committee, there is a need to "think slow and act fast" when it comes to major infrastructure initiatives. This does not imply another half-century of feasibility studies, but rather a call for deliberate, strategic planning before entering the construction phase. Katz-Rosene warns that transport megaprojects, particularly rail, often fall into a "break-fix" cycle, where poor initial planning leads to cascading technical issues that divert time and resources toward reactive problem-solving. Recent Canadian examples, such as the Ottawa O-Train and Montréal's Réseau express métropolitain (REM), illustrate the consequences of inadequate planning, with frequent operational issues. Applying this lesson to the Alto project underscores the need to prioritize thoughtful, long-term design over rushed implementation.

## 5.3. Final remarks

If building HSR in Canada were simple, it would already be a reality. Yet, the country now stands at a pivotal juncture, faced with decisions that will shape the mobility landscape for generations to come. Defining that future requires more than technical studies or economic forecasts. It demands meaningful dialogue among policymakers, engineers, stakeholders, and

engaged citizens alike. These conversations must extend beyond questions of feasibility to confront deeper issues of values, national vision and political commitment. This research, through an examination of 55 years of discourse and a focused analysis of stakeholder narratives from 2009 and 2023/2024, reveals that without an integrated, forward-looking strategy, HSR in Canada will remain trapped in an endless cycle of studies and contentious debate.

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# Appendix

*Table of stakeholders from the 2009 and 2023/2024 parliamentary studies.*

| 2009 study stakeholders (42 total) | 2023/2024 study stakeholders (33 total) |
|---|---|
| Government Stakeholders | |
| **Transport Canada**<br>Helena Borges, Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Policy, Gateways and Infrastructure<br>Kevin Lawless, Senior Strategic Policy and Special Project Officer, Surface Transportation Policy | **Transport Canada**<br>Chantale Côté, Director General, Policy and Governance, High Frequency Rail<br>François Camiré, Director General, Technical, Engineering and Impact Assessment, High Frequency Rail<br>Luis Miguel Izquierdo Martin, Acting Director General, Commercial and Procurement, High Frequency Rail<br>Vincent Robitaille, Assistant Deputy Minister, High Frequency Rail |
| **City of London, Ontario**<br>Grant Hopcroft, Director of Intergovernmental and Community Liaison, Chief Administrative Officer's Office | **VIA Rail**<br>Mario Péloquin, President and Chief Executive Officer<br>Rita Toporowski, Chief Service Delivery Officer |
| **City of Kingston, Ontario**<br>Harvey Rosen, Mayor<br>Jeff Garrah, Chief Executive Officer, Kingston Economic Development Corporation | **Villes de Trois-Rivières**<br>Jean Lamarche, Mayor |
| **City of Vancouver, B.C**<br>Geoff Meggs, City Councillor | **VIA-HFR**<br>Graeme Hampshire, Project Director<br>Marc-Olivier Ranger, Corporate Secretary<br>Martin Imbleau, Chief Executive Officer |

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| **VIA Rail**<br>André Gravelle, Project Advisor, Capital Programs, Strategy<br>Gerry Kolaitis, Director, Strategy and Financial Planning, Strategy<br>Paul Côté, President and Chief Executive Officer | **City of Drummondville**<br>Stéphanie Lacoste, Mayor<br>Thomas Roux, Director, Mayor's Office |
| **TransLink**<br>Robert Paddon, Vice-President, Corporate and Public Affairs | **Metrolinx**<br>Phil Verster, President and Chief Executive Officer |
| National and Regional Associations' Stakeholders | |
| **Railway Association of Canada**<br>Cliff Mackay, President and Chief Executive Officer<br>National Airlines Council of Canada<br>Joseph Galimberti, Representative<br>Mike McNaney, Representative | **Canadian Urban Transit Association**<br>Marco D'Angelo, President and Chief Executive Officer<br>International Transport Worker's Federation<br>Bruno Dobrusin, Manager, Urban Transport Department<br>Joel Kennedy, National Rail Director, Unifor |
| **Teamsters Canada**<br>Mike Wheten, National Legislative Director, Teamsters Canada Rail Conference - Locomotive Engineers<br>Phil Benson, Lobbyist<br>William Brehl, President, Teamsters Canada Rail Conference, Maintenance of Way Employees Division | **Unifor**<br>Graham Cox, National Representative<br>Jennifer Murray, Director, Atlantic Region |
| **National Airlines Council of Canada**<br>Joseph Galimberti, Representative<br>Mike McNaney, Representative | **Chambre de commerce d'industries de Trois-Rivières**<br>Patrick Massicotte, President |

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| **Cement Association of Canada**<br>Michael McSweeney, Vice-President, Industry Affairs | **Chambre of commerce of Metropolitan Montreal**<br>Michel Leblanc, President and Chief Executive Officer |
| **Canadian Bus Association**<br>Stuart Kendrick, Treasurer<br>Sylvain Langis, President | **Quebec Employer's council**<br>Karl Blackburn, President and Chief Executive Officer<br>Norma Kozhaya, Vice-President of Research and Chief Economist |
| | **Railway association of Canada**<br>Marc Brazeau, President and Chief Executive Officer |
| | **Chambre de commerce et d'industrie de Québec**<br>Steeve Lavoie, President and Chief Executive Officer |
| Private Sector Stakeholders | |
| **Bombardier**<br>Dan Braund, Director, Business Development and Sales, Bombardier Transportation<br>George Haynal, Vice-President, Government Affairs, Bombardier Inc.<br>Paul Larouche, Director, Marketing and Product Planning, Bombardier Transportation North America | **Civity Management Consultants GmbH & Co.**<br>Friedemann Brockmeyer, Director |
| **Siemens**<br>Mario Péloquin, Director, Mobility Division | **Amtrak**<br>Robert Eaton, Senior Director, Government Affairs |
| **CN** | **CN**<br>Eric Harvey, Assistant General Counsel, |

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| Paul Miller, Chief Safety and Transportation Officer | Policy and Legislative Affairs<br>Hoang Tran, Senior Director, Regulatory, System Safety, and Passenger Operations |
| **Alstom**<br>Ashley Langford, Vice-President, Alstom Transport | |
| **Thales Canada Inc.**<br>Guy Baruchel, President<br>Kevin Fitzgerald, Vice-President, Business Development, Thales Rail Signalling Solutions | |
| **Greater Toronto Airports Authority**<br>Toby Lennox, Vice-President, Corporate Affairs and Communications | |
| **Alberta High-Speed Rail**<br>John Chaput, Vice-President, Operations<br>William Cruickshank, President | |
| **As an individual**<br>Allan Rowden, Consultant<br>Richard Gilbert, Consultant | |
| R&D , Non-Profit and Advocacy Groups' Stakeholders | |
| **Van Horne Insitute**<br>Teresa Watts, Associate | **As an individual**<br>Pierre-Olivier Pineau, Professor, Chair in Energy Sector Management, HEC Montréal<br>Pierre Barrieau, Lecturer, Faculty of Environmental Design, School of Urban Planning and Landscape Architecture, Université de Montréal |

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| | Ryan Katz-Rosene, Associate Professor, School of Political Studies, University of Ottawa<br>Yonah Freemark, Lead, Practice Area on Fair Housing, Land Use and Transportation, Urban Institute |
| **The Conference Board of Canada**<br>Mario Iacobacci, Director, Transportation and Infrastructure Policy | **Transport Action Canada**<br>Terence Johnson, President |
| **High Speed rail Canada**<br>Paul Langan, Founder | |
| **Transport 2000 Canada**<br>David Jeanes, President | |
| **Cascadia Institute**<br>Charles Kelly, Chairman | |
| **EKOS Research Associates Inc**<br>Francis Graves, President | |