

## Mayor delivers fireball whistle stops | Your online newspaper for North Bay, Ontario

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by *Rob Learn*

Cochrane Mayor Peter Politis made a rousing speech at each whistle stop along the route.

THE NORTH – Peter Politis was on a mission on Friday.

The sense of purpose of the Cochrane mayor was palpable every time the train coming south from his northern community slowed as it pulled into each of the stops on the line to Ontario's capital.

Though dressed in a suit, he looked more like a prizefighter than a politician as, nearing each stop, he shifted his weight with the sway of the train, eyes straightforward in contemplation, nervous energy pouring from his hands and face.

And then he stepped down onto the platform and unleashed to the throngs who came to the stations in the dozens in some places, and the hundreds in others.

"This railroad has survived devastating fires, floods, plagues, recessions and depressions, horrible accidents for the past century. The real shame is it couldn't survive the Dalton McGuinty government," said Politis, to rousing cheers at more than one stop.

If there is a divide between Northern Ontario and the current government, with only two urban seats north of Barrie, Politis is at the front of it.

"This whole term (in office) it feels like we are fighting for who we are," said Politis in interview. "...Northern Ontarians, we are a whole race of people who share a culture, a dialect and a history. We are a race of people who don't feel, for the most part, we are being treated equally. This is about equality."

Politis has been the most vocal politician to object to the March 23 announcement from the provincial government to shut down passenger rail service to the North and sell off the rest of the Ontario Northland Transportation Commission in pieces.

In Cochrane, Northland means 154 jobs, which have been at risk since Minister of Northern Development and Mines Rick Bartolucci held the March 23 press conference in Sudbury.

Since that day, Politis has tried to arrange a meeting with him.

"He has not extended me the courtesy of speaking with me yet," said Politis. "The minister we're relying on to represent us as Northern Ontario and make decisions for Northern Ontario, he has not bothered to speak to us once. I would suggest to Minister Bartolucci there are better ways of doing things."

For Cochrane, the loss of passenger rail service means a direct public transit connection has become sitting inside a motor coach for up to 14 hours, provided the highway stays open and Mother Nature isn't delivering a hard blow to drivers.

"This is the only resemblance of dignity that we have. And now they're taking the train away from us and replacing it with buses. That's a 1930s form of transportation. Thank you very much for your, 'enhancement,'" said Politis.

Politis' anger was genuine as he spoke on Friday at each stop, going for as long as it took to load passengers behind him as he spoke off the cuff about the perceived injustice of removing the passenger train service from the North.



“To get into office they promised us they would not divest ONTC. Instead they have not only divested it, they have missed the opportunity to build a rail system here that is vibrant and viable. We don’t ask truckers to pay for roads. Why would we ask companies to pay for rail?” asks Politis.

The real shame, besides loading the elderly and medically fragile into buses for necessary services offered only in the south, is the lost potential, he said.

“Cochrane has a booming economy and we will keep going forward... but we aren’t going to reach our full potential without the key tool that is rail.”

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