PANEL 1: Lac-Mégantic Three Years Later: Perspectives from Lac-Mégantic

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Five citizens of Lac-Mégantic, representatives of the Coalition for Rail Safety, who were affected by the deadly train derailment, gathered for a conference at the University of Ottawa more than three years after the disaster. The collective sentiments of the panel were of anger and discontent—a testament to the fact that time does not heal all wounds, especially not those left untreated.

Robert Bellefleur was particularly concerned with the lack of meaningful government attention paid to the community in the wake of the disaster. A public inquiry has been denied by both Liberal and Conservative governments despite pleas made by the people who remain “traumatized at large.” Two years after the derailment, then-Conservative Minister of Transportation Lisa Raitt recognized that there were significant administrative problems within Transport Canada at the time of the disaster, but refused to open an investigation into her department.

The issue persists under Prime Minister Trudeau, as the current Minister of Transportation—Marc Garneau—has done little to address the concerns and grievances of the Lac-Mégantic people. This has been particularly confounding given the disaster being one of the deadliest in Canadian history. Mr. Bellefleur called particular attention to the fact that, in recent years, train disasters of lesser impact have received far greater government attention than Lac-Mégantic. This is particularly troubling since the town is still exposed to significant danger. The railway leading into the town is placed precariously atop a dangerous slope upon which hazardous materials are still transported. His biggest plea to the government was for dialogue—with the hope that this could lead to the establishment of a rail bypass so as to protect the people of Lac-Mégantic from further harm.

Andre Blais spoke next, drawing attention to the perplexing placement of blame in the aftermath of the disaster. Montreal, Maine and Atlantic Railway (MMA) was the freight railroad company that was responsible for the track that ran though the town. MMA and its management had been under scrutiny for their policies and practices prior to the disaster, and...
had received more than 1,600 fines over ten years—none of which were levied by Transport Canada, however. Blais believed that MMA and “its cronies” were protected by the Canadian government.

Ignoring safety standards, they had instructed their train drivers not to use the crucially important automatic safety system and had delegated only one single driver on trains carrying dangerous materials. Blais believes that this in itself amounts to criminal negligence on MMA’s part and accountability for those who allowed it.

Jacques Gagnon, a representative of the Citizen Committee of the Lac-Mégantic region, wants reform. He called into question the lack of substantive regulations placed on railway operators within Canada. When 40% of derailments are due to defects in the railways, and because there has been a substantial increase of oil being transported by trains, Transport Canada and the Minister of Transportation must take a more careful approach to the use of railways and develop more stringent industry standards. Thus far, the government has made vague proposals and acted minimally following the disaster. Gagnon pleads for the government to make changes (to get out of the pockets of the railways) and avoid future disasters.

Nicole Jetté, from St. Hyacinthe, who lives adjacent to a Canadian National Railway (CN) line that delivers crude oil to New Brunswick, believes that a public commission of inquiry into the disaster is still as relevant and necessary as ever. She complained that the responsibility for investigating the current state of the railway infrastructure has been placed on the shoulders of concerned citizens. While it is easy to determine from a visible inspection if a track is in disrepair, Jetté points out that this should be the duty of experts within the industry. However, thus far, communication between certain municipalities and CN—a railway giant in Canada—has only resulted in a few “timid proposals” for change.

Gilles Fluet is a resident of Lac-Mégantic and a survivor of the disaster, after being severely burned in one of the explosions. He spoke of how people were re-victimized after the disaster when the residents were not allowed to re-build as a community. The residents of Lac-Mégantic were displaced, kept in the dark, and many were prevented from re-entering their homes. Fluet holds that this re-victimization, along with the disaster itself, was responsible for
severe impacts on the lives of and mental health of the residents (e.g. increased divorces and depression).

Liette Gilbert, the last speaker of the panel, originally from the adjacent town of Nantes, is a professor and associate dean for the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University. She expanded on the continued victimization of the people by the government with her discussion of ‘creative destruction’ in the wake of the rail disaster. Professor Gilbert drew attention to Bill 57 passed by the Parliament of Quebec (*An Act in response to the 6 July 2013 railway disaster in Ville de Lac-Mégantic*), which was meant to be an effort to aid in a “return to normal life” for the people of Lac-Mégantic by expediting planning decisions. It turned out to do quite the opposite when the act allowed attempts to demolish more buildings than necessary (six buildings were truly compromised, but thirty-nine were targeted for demolition). Demolition, apparently, is the “oldest trick in the book” when it comes to creative destruction, as it allows for new buildings to be built in the place of old ones as a method for creating new forms of capital. The destruction of their home by the government eroded the links between citizen and government in this community and, according to Professor Gilbert, more damage was done to the downtown core of Lac-Mégantic by subsequent government action than by the actual rail disaster.

In conclusion, the first panel was a plea for more dialogue with the government. The overall sentiment was that the people of Lac-Mégantic want answers, change, and accountability. They hope to work with the government in the future and anticipate that a public inquiry will finally be held regarding the tragedy that struck this small Quebecois town three years ago.