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Subject: Consultation on the Application for Authorization of the Lac-Mégantic Rail Bypass Project

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Memoire submitted to the Canadian Transportation Agency for Review
What Thucydides Teaches Us About the Lac-Mégantic Rail Bypass

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Attachment 1

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When I read the thousands of pages that now surround the proposed Lac-Mégantic rail bypass—engineering studies, environmental assessments, legal filings, public memoranda—I do not read them only as a citizen, or even as a victim of policy failure. I read them through the lens of Thucydides, who taught that history is not about morality as it is proclaimed, but about power as it is exercised under pressure.

Thucydides warned us that states rarely act from virtue. They act from necessity—or, more precisely, from what they define as necessity when political responsibility becomes unbearable. The Lac-Mégantic tragedy of 2013 created exactly such a condition. A catastrophe occurred under federal oversight. Accountability followed. And once accountability could not be undone, the state sought closure.

That closure took the form of a promise: a rail bypass would be built.

Once promised, the bypass had to proceed. Once it had to proceed, it had to be justified. And once it had to be justified, every subsequent study, report, and consultation was forced—subtly, but unmistakably—to orbit around that predetermined outcome.

This is not corruption in the conventional sense. It is something far more familiar, and far more dangerous. It is the logic of power under constraint.

The Language of Necessity

Supporters of the proposed bypass speak of safety, healing, and the public interest. Yet the documents themselves tell a different story. They speak of uncertainty where certainty should exist, of monitoring where prevention is required, of mitigation where avoidance would be wiser. They acknowledge risks to groundwater, slope stability, wetlands, and drinking water, then ask citizens to accept those risks as manageable.

Thucydides would have recognized this pattern of behavior immediately. In *The Peloponnesian War*, he showed how necessity becomes the ultimate rhetorical weapon. When Athens confronted Melos, it did not speak of justice, but of realism: *the strong do what they can, the weak suffer what they must*.

Here, with the proposed rail bypass, the language is softer, bureaucratic, technical—but the structure is the same. The bypass must be built; therefore, the risks must be ‘seen’ as acceptable and those who live with those risks must endure and adapt.

But the people affected are not abstractions. They are communities who have already lived through an unspeakable tragedy, whose wells supply their drinking water, whose land anchors their lives, and whose consent has not been secured. Thucydides teaches that when power proceeds without consent (social acceptance), stability erodes—even if the project succeeds on paper.

Expertise in the Service of Outcome

I place great value on expertise and evidence-based decisions. Thucydides did as well. But he also warned that expertise, when subordinated to a political objective, ceases to be scientific inquiry and becomes justification.

Regarding the proposed rail bypass location, engineers describe marginal geotechnical conditions. Hydrologists identify uncertainty and reliance on permanent pumping. Environmental experts flag risks that cannot be classified as insignificant. None of this is hidden. Yet each warning is simply absorbed into a framework designed to proceed regardless of the risks—converted into monitoring plans, conditions, and commitments—that will likely not be respected as history has shown us.

This is a classic failure mode of governance. States do not fail because they lack information. They fail because they choose not to act on what they already know.

A railway bypass that depends on perpetual intervention—continuous drainage, permanent dewatering, constant vigilance—reveals not engineering prowess, but a fundamental incompatibility between the project and its location. Thucydides would have seen this clearly: prudent states avoid such a problematic location; impatient and imprudent ones find ways to rationalize it.

Alternatives That Threaten the Narrative

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of this dossier is not what it contains, but what it omits. Viable alternatives exist—options that reduce risk, protect water, and limit social harm. Yet these alternatives were never fully assessed.

According to Thucydides when leaders refuse to examine alternatives, it is usually because those alternatives threaten the story already chosen. The bypass is no longer merely a solution; it has become a commitment—one that cannot easily be abandoned without political cost. In the Lac Megantic rail bypass dossier, political image ‘trumps’ public interest.

What Thucydides Would Counsel

Thucydides did not offer comfort. He offered clarity.

If I apply his lessons here, three conclusions follow.

First, **pause is not weakness**. It is the only means by which necessity can be distinguished from convenience. A responsible decision maker would have paused this project in light of the concerning risks and would have evaluated more reasonable alternatives.

Second, **location matters more than intention**. A project that merely transfers issues, while creating new risks from one population to another invites future reckoning.

Third, **consent is not an obstacle to overcome**. It is the foundation of lasting stability and social reconstruction. Projects imposed on unwilling communities rarely deliver the peace they promise.

The Canadian Transportation Agency is not asked to rule if a rail bypass is needed; it must determine whether the location of the proposed bypass is reasonable for railway operations and in the interests of affected localities. Based on the evidence, the Agency must reject the proposed location as it presents: (1) unresolved and intrinsic geotechnical and hydrogeological risks affecting rail safety and citizens' drinking water (2) significant and irreversible environmental harm (3) firm and documented opposition with lack of social acceptance and (4) ineffective and insufficient measures to decrease documented risks.

History is unforgiving to those who mistake power for wisdom. Lac-Mégantic stands at such a moment. To proceed with the location of this bypass without resolving the contradictions already documented would not be an act of courage. It would be an act of faith—faith that history, this time, will look away.

Thucydides teaches us that it never does.