

## **The Other Mirabel**

### **“Absurdity and tragedy” of Ottawa indecision**

*For 50 years, Transport Canada has been holding onto rich farmland for a potential airport on the outskirts of Toronto. After the Mirabel fiasco, the Pickering fiasco.*

That day, Charles Godfrey's silences and eyes alone radiated enough emotion to explain his frustration.

Frail and tenacious, the 104-year-old wanted to express his thoughts, nonetheless. The cause was still too important for him to stay silent.

“It's a bit as if a hostage-taking has been going on for 50 years,” he offered as an image. It would be easily understandable if Doctor Charles Godfrey, the oldest witness to this “hostage-taking,” preferred to sit this one out. But he made a point of speaking.

“It was political idiocy, it's still political idiocy,” he insisted.

Charles Godfrey doesn't remember everything. But he does remember the callousness and arrogance of the “kidnapper,” the federal government.

This respected Ontario physician has been a key figure in this story from the very beginning. He became the driving force behind one of the longest continuous protest movements in Canada.

A momentum of opposition that has never waned. Why? Because, incredibly, 50 years later, the fate of 35 square kilometers of farmland remains an unknown. No Canadian airport project has ever been put on hold for so long.

### **The fictitious airport**

The buildings spared by the federal bulldozers reveal a rich past. They bear witness to a vibrant community and agricultural life that had taken off in the mid-1800s, long before the shock that no one saw coming.

The storm hit on March 2, 1972. Like a derecho, without warning, tearing apart the social fabric of the region.

On that day, the government of Pierre Elliott Trudeau announced the construction of a second international airport for the Toronto area. Six runways would support Pearson Airport which, according to Ottawa's forecasts, would soon be reaching full capacity. That was three years before the opening of Mirabel.

In Pickering, 18,600 acres of farmland, or 70 square kilometers, were immediately seized by the federal government. 2,000 residents were expropriated, and most of the homes and barns were demolished.

Ottawa's political resolve to build an airport at all costs and the Ontario government's desire to push urban development to the east of the city led to this decision. Montreal would get its Mirabel, Toronto... its Pickering.

However, prior to the announcement, no technical study had supported the decision. Pickering had even been excluded from the list of some 50 other sites that were considered. Nothing to calm the discontent of those expropriated and those who were opposed.

As soon as it was formed, a group called People Or Planes headed to the front. Charles Godfrey led the fight to prevent the project from taking off.

"An undemocratic use of land!" exclaimed Dr. Godfrey. "How could we accept that? But we were smarter and more cunning than they were."

Demonstrations, stunts, and ploys. Three years of sustained pressure finally forced the minority provincial government of Bill Davis to refuse to build the infrastructure needed for the airport.

Forced to shelve its project, Ottawa held onto the land in the belief that the airport would eventually see the light of day. Transport Canada officials repeatedly claimed that without the airport, Torontonians would have to go through Montreal to get to Vancouver. A furious Pierre Elliott Trudeau had even declared at the opening of Mirabel that "Torontonians will soon be on their knees."

Although, along the way, Ottawa has transferred half the expropriated land to create Rouge National Urban Park, the debate over the remaining 35 square kilometers is still ongoing.

This is why, since March 1972, the idea of building an airport in Pickering has resurfaced at least once every 10 years. Each study conducted by Transport Canada to assess the need for the airport pushes the issue further into the future.

### **The battlefield**

A critical issue looms behind this story. And one particular number measures its extent.

On average, 9 square kilometers of farmland are lost every week in Ontario. Plots that vanish mainly for the benefit of real estate and commercial developers.

"I'm afraid for the future, I fear urban sprawl, I fear the loss of farmland. There's hardly any left around here. It makes me anxious," says Mary Delaney.

This fervent advocate for the protection and enhancement of agricultural land knows like the back of her hand the vast area reserved for airport purposes. She agreed to play guide for a day.

The land held by Transport Canada, which stretches for dozens of kilometers, has an important distinction. By the federal government's own definition, it offers the greatest potential for agricultural productivity. It is called "Class 1."

It is, in fact, the largest area of land of its kind between Toronto and the east coast; 35 square kilometres of land covering a territory larger than that of the entire city of Dorval, the location of Trudeau Airport, which seems so tiny in comparison.

"It's an absurdity and a tragedy, a human tragedy," protests Delaney. "This land must be re-established as an agricultural zone. In an era of food insecurity, where self-sufficiency is becoming increasingly necessary, why do we continue to hold these precious lands for an airport?"

Although Transport Canada allows the acres to be leased for agricultural activities, diversified agriculture has disappeared on this fertile land. The spectre of an airport ensures that they aren't used to their full potential.

Mary Delaney is head of Land Over Landings, the citizens' group that took over the reins from Dr Godfrey's People Or Planes. Their plea: stop the airport project and transform the Transport Canada lands into a permanent agri-food hub for Toronto and the metropolitan area.

But this place, which has become an oasis in a vast sea of urban sprawl, remains a battleground. One where two visions disagree on the definition of "a unique opportunity."

### **The dream of the aerotropolis**

A new kind of airport city, radiating out for miles around, has been appearing for some time all over the world. Dubai, Guangzhou, Incheon, Kuala Lumpur...

The idea has rapidly spread in Asia and the Middle East. The concept has a name: aerotropolis.

Advanced by American academic John Kasarda in the early 2000s, this urban development model maintains that the airport of tomorrow should be the very core of the city.

Dubai World Central in the United Arab Emirates is a typical example of an aerotropolis, which is often synonymous with "gigantic sprawl."

Now the term aerotropolis has appeared in the vocabulary of some municipal governments east of Toronto. Many are convinced that the arrival of an aerotropolis in Pickering is the perfect recipe to help the regional economy reach new heights.

“This is an opportunity to do something bold and exciting,” John Henry replies to those who would like to think that a Pickering airport is dead and buried.

John Henry is the Chair of the Regional Municipality of Durham. Eight municipalities are grouped under this government, including Pickering. Elected officials who sit on the regional council have already expressed support for the development of such an airport.

“If you live east of Toronto, it can take up to two hours to drive to Pearson Airport on a good day. Imagine what it will be like in a few years’ time.”

John Henry and the proponents of an aerotropolis play the demographic card to the hilt to justify building an airport on the federal land in Pickering. Projections indicate that Durham Region’s population is expected to double by 2051. It is expected to reach more than 1.3 million people.

Promoters compare this “future airport” to a magnet whose powerful magnetic field would make it possible to attract high-value-added companies. The aerotropolis would specialize in freight transport but could also offer domestic flights. A “necessity” to relieve Pearson International Airport.

Thirty-five square kilometers of rich farmland sacrificed for airstrips and for airport and industrial infrastructure?

This isn’t about ignoring or rejecting agriculture on the site, explains Henry. “We need to encourage advanced agricultural practices and focus on vertical farming. Greenhouses to optimize production.”

But those who promote this avenue face the wrath of opponents who see it as an environmental charade [greenwashing] to gain support.

“Think about it, putting greenhouses on some of the best farmland in Canada is sheer madness,” responds Mary Delaney. “We can no longer afford to sacrifice any land, let alone this land, especially in an era of food insecurity where self-sufficiency has become more than necessary.”

Frustration is running high among opponents. You should know that the Regional Municipality of Durham has just given the green light to a controversial proposal by Ontario’s real estate lobby.

Developers will be able to turn 9,000 acres of farmland into residential neighbourhoods in the Region. Those 9,000 acres are the equivalent of the 35 square kilometers that Transport Canada retained for a potential airport.

## **Entangled in contradictions**

Founded in 1850 by Quakers, Uxbridge has all the trappings of a picturesque town. It is one of the municipalities bordering the lands seized by Ottawa half a century ago.

Many people here are still scarred by the storm that swept through Ontario and Quebec in May. It's easy to understand why. A force 2 tornado invaded the derecho as it passed through. The rare weather phenomenon left over 4 km of destruction in its wake in Uxbridge.

Five minutes of horror witnessed by resident Sarah Reid. "I hope there are no more skeptics. We have to stop the denial. There's no doubt that climate change had something to do with it."

Sarah Reid is not associated with any environmental cause. But she's not thrilled that the federal government is still holding onto farmland for an airport, just in case.

"We have to realize that we can't fly planes forever. I don't understand why this government doesn't reject the airport idea for good."

She exposes a reality that could also be conveyed this way: Canada's three largest airports – Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver – together emit more greenhouse gases than the country's biggest polluter, the oil sands producer Syncrude.

That's the striking finding of the International Council on Clean Transportation, after calculating the total carbon dioxide emissions from commercial flights departing Canada in 2019.

Sarah Reid has her own idea of why Ottawa hasn't made a decision after 50 years. "I think this indecision is due to the fact that they want to cover all bases. Politically, they get votes from both sides, those in favor of an airport and those against."

She isn't alone in making this argument. Not wanting to displease is one thing. But holding onto 35 square kilometers for a potential airport puts Ottawa completely at odds with its ambition to address the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss.

This huge area is home to nearly 200 rare plant and animal species.

## **The report, another...**

Just as the pandemic hit, Transport Canada quietly released the highlights of a report by the firm KPMG.

For the umpteenth time, the federal government had commissioned an analysis to determine when an airport might be needed on the Pickering lands.

However, even if the KPMG study cost no less than \$800,000 to produce, its results can leave room for different interpretations. Thus, opponents find sufficient evidence to conclude that an airport will never be built. They also conclude that modest increases in the capacity of existing airports in the region will be sufficient to meet future demand.

But the opposing camp clings to the fact that the document doesn't reject the possibility that the southern Ontario airport system could be saturated by 2036 and that it "does not exclude the need for a new airport." For the advocates of an aerotropolis, it demonstrates the importance of entering into thoughtful planning now.

In an economy called to turn its back on carbon, the civil aviation sector will need to reduce its emissions if it wants to avoid a collision with Canadian objectives. Would building a new airport in Pickering jeopardize this? KPMG's analysis takes no account of this factor or of Ottawa's commitments under the Paris Climate Agreement. Objectives that were known before the contract was awarded.

Since then, it's as if the file of the Pickering federal lands had been placed in a vault in Ottawa, and the Liberal government had double-locked the door. One wonders if they even threw away the key.

"The absence of a decision only perpetuates the controversy," laments Durham Region Chair John Henry. "It will always be a hot potato. Make a decision, for heaven's sake!"

In fact, this is the only point on which supporters and opponents of the airport project agree. Mary Delaney of Land over Landings is even more direct.

"Enough, Justin Trudeau. 50 years is enough. Step out of your father's shadow. Prove to us you can be the Prime Minister for the environment."

### **Yes or no?**

Navigating the twists and turns of government indecision can only put Jennifer O'Connell in a odd situation. She is the MP for Pickering-Uxbridge.

The huge area in question is in the heart of the riding she represents... under the Liberal banner.

"My position is clear. I see no need for an airport in this area. I don't believe there is a need. There have **been a series of pressures** from my colleagues and myself on this government."

Four ridings bordering hers are also held by Liberal colleagues since the Trudeau government took office in 2015. Some, like Mark Holland, have also already publicly expressed their opposition to keeping this farmland for a potential airport.

But clearly, their influence hasn't tipped the balance, even given the country's obligation to reduce its carbon footprint and their government's desire to be seen as an effective leader in the face of the climate crisis.

How does Jennifer O'Connell feel about the fact that no government, not even her own, has had the courage to make a decision?

"I don't think any government wants to make the decision to vacate the land. What if an airport became necessary and your government was the one that said no? Nobody wants to make the wrong decision, do they? I think that's the honest truth."

But meanwhile, this reality makes for a particularly strange situation.

Unable to make a decision, Transport Canada must in the meantime manage a housing stock in the heart of the area destined to host the airport. It rents more than sixty residences that had managed to avoid the peak of the demolitions. Properties maintained at taxpayers' expense.

Gord McGregor and his wife are tenants of the house they once owned. With a growing family, the couple had just renovated it in 1972 when they learned it was no longer theirs.

Unlike at Mirabel, [in Pickering] 50 years later and despite the absence of an airport, none of the land seized by Ottawa has yet been returned to those who were expropriated or to their estates.

Somehow or other, the non-existent airport, officially known in Ottawa as the Pickering lands, has easily cost Canadians more than \$1 billion.

On three occasions since last May, we requested an interview with federal Transport Minister, Omar Alghabra, to discuss the intentions of his government, half a century on.

The offer was declined by his office, which insisted on issuing a brief written statement.

"Any decision on the future of the Pickering lands will take into account several factors, including the need for airport capacity, current land use and the availability of other parcels of land. When a decision is made, it will consider all relevant factors relating to the Pickering Lands."

- Office of the Federal Minister of Transport

## **The last time**

Dr. Charles Godfrey will not see the outcome of the battle he started. Shortly after our interview, he passed away at his home, on the eve of his 105th year.

A life of being “concerned about the fate of humanity and dedicated to eliminating the evils that overwhelm it,” was said of the man on the day he was invested into the Order of Canada in 1989.

His legacy is a rich and impressive one: a soldier in the Second World War, a volunteer physician in more than 20 Third World countries, and, of course, a leading environmental role against Pickering Airport.

Charles Godfrey will also have seen nine prime ministers parade at the head of the country since the abrupt decision of March 2, 1972.

“From Trudeau senior to Trudeau son, the political idiocy continued,” he said again. “It is even worse and more deplorable today, given what we know.”

That day, it was as if Charles Godfrey wanted to leave a legacy of words. Words of action that reflected his life.

The discussion was drawing to a close. Rummaging through his memory one last time, he made his diagnosis of political power:

“A government that does not decide is not a government. 50 years!” he sighed. “Then imagine everything else, everything that isn’t decided.”