



NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard

Transport Administration Amendment (Travel Concession) Bill

Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Tuesday 6 June 2006.

Second Reading

Mr JOHN WATKINS (Ryde—Deputy Premier, and Minister for Transport) [7.30 p.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

New South Wales has the most generous transport concessions scheme in Australia. In 2004–05 we spent almost \$800 million to provide transport concessions—more than any other jurisdiction. In fact, as part of the bus reform process, our concession arrangements have extended even further. For example, people living in those parts of Sydney serviced by private operators are now able to access concessions previously only available on government services, and we are in the process of ensuring that similar arrangements are in place in outer metropolitan areas such as the Central Coast, Wollongong, and the Blue Mountains. In particular, the New South Wales Government provides wider eligibility and more concession entitlements to assist access to education and training, recognise low income status, assist in promoting a healthy and active lifestyle for pensioners and seniors, and assist persons who were disabled while serving in Australia's defence forces.

While New South Wales has the most generous transport concession scheme in Australia, concession resources have to be targeted. To this end, there is a range of policies, eligibility criteria and administrative processes to ensure that concessions are available to those most in need. For example, apprentices now receive concessional travel on private bus services as a result of our private bus reforms. But if our policies were challenged and additional costs in other areas were incurred, that arrangement may be threatened and those concessions could be withdrawn. Full fee paying international tertiary students were not considered a priority for concessions by the previous Liberal Government, which deemed them ineligible for concessional travel. In obtaining the requisite visa to study here, full fee paying international students have already indicated to the Federal Government that they are fully self-sufficient and able to meet their own living expenses while in Australia.

They then pay up to \$40,000 to the Federal Government to undertake their degree, and in the process declare themselves ineligible for benefits such as Medicare, Newstart Allowance or Austudy. Why then should hardworking New South Wales' families be expected to foot the bill for providing them with half fare travel on public transport? I do not think anyone would suggest this should be the first priority for our limited concessions dollar, unless of course the Federal Government reconnected with the States on urban transport issues and provided funding to our capital cities to advance transport issues.

Perhaps then, the Federal Government may wish to provide concessions to the international students it enrolls in prestigious university courses. Providing these students with half fare concessions will cost an estimated \$13 million per year, not to mention the associated administrative costs and the threat of retrospective travel claims. This is money that could otherwise be directed to providing increased transport options to those in the community with greater need—such as pensioners, isolated families, veterans, or people on low incomes.

To enable the Government to continue to determine its own transport concessions policy, including the targeting of its limited concession resources, a small amendment to the Transport Administration Act is required. The Transport Administration Amendment (Travel Concession) Bill 2006 seeks to enable the making of regulations that prescribe the classes of persons who are not entitled to subsidised travel under any scheme administered by the Director General of the Ministry of Transport and approved by the Government, or to a free or concessional travel pass issued by a government transport authority; to preserve existing eligibility criteria in relation to full fee paying overseas students and enable the Government to continue to target its concession resources to those it considers most in need; and, to provide for transitional arrangements so that current eligibility criteria in respect of full fee paying overseas students continues to apply while necessary regulations are made.

These are minor legislative amendments involving changes to section 39 and section 88 of the Act, which will mean that government policy concerning who is not eligible for transport concessions can be written into law. This is a necessary step that simply preserves the status quo. On these grounds, I do not believe it will have a detrimental effect on the number of international students coming to Australia, and specifically, to New South Wales, to study. Despite not being granted transport concessions in New South Wales, international tertiary students are definitely not being deterred from our higher education institutions. On the contrary, available evidence suggests that, despite such students not being able to access half fare concession in this state, New South Wales experienced an 11 per cent increase in numbers of overseas students from 2004 to 2005. While we welcome such students to New South Wales, we do not intend to start providing them with taxpayer funded

public transport assistance that could be better directed elsewhere. I commend the bill to the House.