



Transport Administration Amendment (CountryLink Pensioner Booking Fee Abolition) Bill 2007

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Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Thursday 25 October 2007.

Agreement in Principle

Ms GLADYS BEREJKLIAN (Willoughby) [10.12 a.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now agreed to in principle.

I am pleased to introduce the Transport Administration Amendment (CountryLink Pensioner Booking Fee Abolition) Bill in my capacity as the shadow Minister for Transport and on behalf of the Liberal-Nationals Coalition. I hasten to add that this bill should not have been necessary, but the mean-spirited and arrogant approach of the State Labor Government and the Minister for Transport has necessitated it. The objective of this bill is to abolish the pensioner booking fee tax that was introduced in March 2006 by the New South Wales Labor Party. Labor's booking tax is charged when senior citizens use what are supposed to be free pensioner travel vouchers on CountryLink services. The booking tax is either \$10 or 15 per cent of the full adult fare for the equivalent journey, whichever total is the highest.

Item [2] in schedule 1 makes it clear that an order fixing charges for RailCorp services cannot impose a CountryLink pensioner booking fee, that is, a fee however described charged for or in relation to a New South Wales or Australian Capital Territory pensioner booking a railway service provided by CountryLink using what would otherwise be a free travel pass, a concessional travel pass for a pensioner travel voucher. Item [2] also provides that RailCorp must not charge any pensioner booking fee for travel on a railway service provided by CountryLink. All members of this House would agree that our senior citizens deserve respect and dignity. Labor's unfair booking tax has effectively rendered the so-called free travel voucher system meaningless by pricing such a large proportion of pensioners out of the CountryLink market.

It is already a matter of fact that New South Wales is the highest taxing State in Australia and not even pensioners are exempt from Labor's taxation addiction. In the first eight months of this unfair tax the Labor Government raised \$2.6 million, which equates to or is \$10,500 per day contributed by New South Wales senior citizens who use their free travel vouchers when booking a CountryLink fare. The State Government likes to deny the impact that this is having on patronage. The reality is that 53,000 fewer vouchers were used in the period from March to October 2006 than were used in March to October 2005. Some 53,000 fewer vouchers were used in the months after the tax was introduced, compared with the months before the tax was introduced.

According to documents provided under freedom of information legislation, 235,512 pensioner travel vouchers were used from March 2005, before the booking tax was introduced, compared with 182,397 vouchers used in March to October 2006, after the booking tax was introduced. Again, this drop of 53,000 vouchers used represents a massive drop of 22.6 per cent over those comparable periods. The 2005-06 RailCorp annual report shows that 1.74 million people made a journey on a CountryLink service last year—a fall of 30,000 passages compared with the year before. The 2005-06 figure is nearly 800,000 passengers below the figure posted in 1996-97 and the lowest CountryLink patronage figure recorded since Labor came to power. This represents a massive drop in patronage of 30 percent since 1996-97. We need to give people an incentive to use public transport, not put barriers and new taxes in their way.

Facts and figures aside, the lives of many pensioners have been detrimentally impacted by the tax. Many pensioners, especially those in rural and remote areas, rely on CountryLink to make important medical appointments. Many pensioners, whether in the city or the country, rely on CountryLink to visit family and friends and make it to important occasions. Families are being denied precious time together because grandparents can no longer afford to travel. The impact of the tax has meant that many senior citizens who have earned their right to use their vouchers have suddenly found their mobility restricted and their quality of life severely compromised. Lower patronage on CountryLink is undoubtedly also having a detrimental impact on regional tourism and the growth of small business in regional and more remote communities. Therefore, it is of concern that the Minister for Tourism has not raised these concerns with the Minister for Transport.

I thank the many community organisations, such as the New South Wales branch of the Australian Pensioners' and Superannuants' Federation [APSF] and the Council on the Ageing, which have been strong advocates for pensioners and their families in this debate. I also thank the thousands of concerned people who have sent letters and emails, and signed petitions highlighting their personal opposition to the tax. I am sure many members of this place will bring examples of what their constituents have said to them. Some of the stories that have been communicated are truly heart wrenching. Again, I am sure all members of this place can attest to that,

and members opposite can attest, whether or not they like to admit it. However, it is alarming that, in addition to the Minister for Transport, the Minister for Ageing appears to be totally oblivious to these concerns.

I was most disappointed to read part of the transcript of the Ageing, Disability Services estimates hearing held this week. When the Minister was asked about the impact of the booking tax on our senior citizens her response demonstrated a total disregard for the impact the tax is having on the very people on whose behalf she is supposed to advocate. It is alarming to think that either she has not consulted a number of stakeholders and key organisations within her portfolio or she has ignored the concerns that have been raised since the imposition of this tax.

The State Government has driven CountryLink Services into the ground. If the booking tax were not enough, the State Government has also axed the Casino to Murwillumbah passenger rail service—I note the presence in the Chamber of the member for Tweed—sacked CountryLink travel centre staff at Tamworth within days of their receiving an award for outstanding service, closed 11 CountryLink sales outlets across the State and sacked 100 CountryLink staff. Further, the Government has insulted North Coast commuters by advertising train services to Byron Bay, even though Labor axed them more than three years ago. It is also a matter of concern that the remaining services are less reliable than ever. In 2006 CountryLink trains met the weekly on-time running targets for only 15 weeks. For the first six months of 2007 the situation was much worse, with trains meeting targets for only two of 25 weeks. That fact is of even more concern when one considers the Labor Government requires only 78 per cent of CountryLink trains to run on time and that a train is deemed to be on time if it arrives at its destination within 10 minutes of the scheduled arrival.

It is evident from CountryLink's long-term performance that Labor has continued to neglect regional rail services throughout New South Wales. CountryLink services have not met the yearly on-time performance targets since 2003. It is a disgrace. These poor on-time running figures are a direct consequence of the Labor Government's neglect of rail services in country New South Wales. Labor has shown time and again that it is running CountryLink into the ground rather than fostering regional rail services and encouraging commuters to use CountryLink throughout rural and coastal New South Wales. As to CountryLink's performance over the past four years, the picture is even grimmer. Again, CountryLink has not met its yearly on-time performance targets since 2003. Yet in this climate of declining services and the imposition of an unfair booking tax New South Wales Labor has the audacity to increase CountryLink rail fares. CountryLink fares rose by 4.8 per cent from 1 September this year, resulting in standard economy one-way travel from Sydney to Dubbo costing an extra \$3.60, from Sydney to Albury an extra \$4.70 and from Sydney to Coffs Harbour an extra \$4.34.

In addition to the fare increases, the Minister for Transport is reducing the discounts offered by CountryLink for travel during the shoulder and low seasons. That will be a further disincentive to use CountryLink trains. The rise in fares will also result in an increase in the unfair booking tax charged to pensioners when booking "free" train travel. This bill aims to eliminate that tax. At a time when the Government should be promoting public transport as a viable alternative to car usage and increasing transportation between city, rural, regional and remote areas of this State, the Minister for Transport is going out of his way to ensure that regional New South Wales turns its back on CountryLink. This is evidenced, as I described, not only by the imposition of this unfair booking tax but also by the number of CountryLink services that have been slashed by the State Government over the past decade.

Public transport options in regional New South Wales are already limited. The Government's failure to support CountryLink—often the only form of transport linking metropolitan areas to country New South Wales—has resulted in a further decline in the provision of public transport services in the country. By closing sales centres, sacking CountryLink staff and reducing rail services to regional towns the Labor Government is directly impacting upon the vitality and livelihood of regional New South Wales. Regional areas require and deserve a high-quality rail service that provides an efficient and reliable service linking the country with the city. Through years of neglect and mismanagement, however, rail services to rural New South Wales are in serious decline. It is a matter of particular concern that pensioners in rural and regional New South Wales are now required to pay a tax when booking "free" travel on CountryLink services. It is common knowledge that regional New South Wales does not enjoy the services offered in metropolitan areas. Often, elderly persons are required to attend larger centres to access medical care not offered in their country town. By imposing this pensioner tax the Minister for Transport has ensured that to receive such care pensioners must pay more. That is an injustice no matter how you look at it.

The utter hypocrisy of the Labor Party on issues relating to pensioners is breathtaking. Pensioners deserve to be shown respect and dignity. They deserve to have their rights preserved, not eroded. They should not face the indignity of a callous State Government that has the nerve to impose such a mean-spirited and unnecessary booking tax. I suggest Government members look deep into their consciences and question why they allowed the Minister for Transport, the Deputy Premier, to impose such an unfair tax. They now have the opportunity to redeem themselves by supporting this bill. It is the right thing to do.

I want to put a human face to this issue by showing the impact of the imposition of this tax on ordinary people. It has had a huge impact in rural and regional areas, where older persons and pensioners rely on CountryLink services to attend medical appointments and visit family and friends. They need these services for a better

quality of life. This tax has also impacted on pensioners in the city. I am amazed at the number of pensioners living in metropolitan Sydney who have contacted Coalition members to tell them of the angst the imposition of this tax has caused them. I bring to the attention of the House some examples. One of the most heart wrenching examples is an elderly couple in their seventies who previously visited relatives in the southern part of Queensland via CountryLink services. After the imposition of the booking tax, they did their sums and determined it was too expensive for them to use CountryLink services. Following the birth of a new grandchild they were forced to drive the journey to visit their family. For a couple in their seventies that is a long and perhaps unsafe journey, but it was their only option.

Another example is of a woman in her late sixties who was asked to attend a reunion for a friend for whom she had been bridesmaid. She made the booking with CountryLink. Later she discovered she had cancer and had to stay in Sydney for treatment. She rang CountryLink to change the booking. CountryLink charged her not only for the initial booking but also for the change in booking. That is not acceptable. We cannot tolerate an unfair booking tax that impacts on and hurts potentially the most vulnerable in our community. Not only has it been detrimental to rural, regional and city rail services, it has cruelly impacted from a social perspective on the lives of so many senior citizens. I ask the State Government to explain why the booking tax should continue, given the worsening reliability of CountryLink services. Trains are few and far between, services have been cancelled and staff have been sacked. In the current environment, the Government should be boosting public transport patronage. The booking tax is proving to be a further impediment to that end.

I call on members on both sides of the House to read the correspondence they have no doubt received from pensioners and pensioner organisations in their communities. I call on them to look to their conscience when considering the merits of this bill. The bill will simply remove the booking fee, a booking tax that should never have been imposed in the first place. If members are not persuaded by the letters, emails and representations from concerned constituents, they should look at the figures. In the first six months following the introduction of the tax, 53,000 fewer vouchers were used. The figures on patronage speak for themselves. The figures on the decreased mobility of pensioners speak for themselves. An audit of small businesses in rural and regional communities who have been impacted by fewer people using CountryLink services would show that the economic loss to the State is significant. The Government has absolutely no basis to continue this tax. I urge the Minister for Transport to contribute to this debate. He has a bad habit of not debating public transport issues.

In the estimates committee hearings the Minister chose to take every single question on notice; he refused to answer questions in that forum. He now has an opportunity to come to the Chamber and explain to the people of New South Wales, to pensioner groups and to the broader community, why he imposed that tax and why it should continue. The Minister and his Government now have the opportunity to redeem themselves by abolishing the booking tax. I urge all members to support the bill, for the sake of their pensioners, for country and rural rail services and for the future public transport needs of the State.