

**Submission
No 61**

INQUIRY INTO INTER-REGIONAL PUBLIC TRANSPORT

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Submission to NSW Legislative Assembly State and Regional Development Committee

Inter-Regional Public Transport Inquiry

Canberra - Sydney Rail Link 'You get out what you put in'

Purpose

To provide a submission on some of the particular issues the committee is considering for the *Inter-Regional Public Transport (Inquiry)*. Specifically:

- (a) How CountryLink services can be improved;
- (e) How the amount of inter-regional travel undertaken by public transport can be increased;
- (h) The type of buses and trains that will be required for the provision of regional passenger services in the future.

Background

The current rail link between Canberra and Sydney is an underutilised and underappreciated service, both by the community and Governments, which has great economic and environmental potential. However, its limited convenience (maximum of three trains per most days) and length of journey (nearly four hours) are artificially constraining its ability to generate revenue and business commuters.

The Sydney to Canberra rail link once offered a much more convenient service via a larger number of train services between the capitals. However, the previous Labor Government announced a policy to close the service down completely. Community action saw the proposed limited timetable revised but more as a token concession. The old saying “you get out what you put in” seems to be true for the service with numbers below what should be expected.

Proposal (Issues A & E)

At a recent international systems engineering conference in Brisbane a leading rail expert stated that “any trip less than 700km is completed faster by fast train than aircraft”¹. As the trip to Sydney from Canberra is less than 300km, a standard regional train operating an express service would still beat air travel for speed, convenience and cost. Not to mention the significantly reduced carbon footprint of rail travel compared to air.

I would like to propose to the committee that as means of increasing usage and revenue from the service from Sydney to Canberra (return) that an express service utilising current in-

¹ Dr. Owen Traynor, Vice President Engineering, Invensys Rail Asia Pacific

service rail infrastructure and Xplorer rolling stock be employed. This service would be targeted at the business traveller, but could still be used by all.

When business, government and commuters understand the benefits of a rail express service over air travel the result should be a positive one.

For example, consider air vs. rail vs. bus from Canberra to Parliament House in Sydney on a purely time metric.

Air

- Arrive 45 mins (min) before departure for check in and security screening then wait.
- 35 mins on ground both ends (i.e. waiting for takeoff, baggage collection etc).
- 40 mins in air.
- 25 min taxi ride from Mascot to the NSW Parliament House.

In total it would take approximately 2 hours 25 mins (weather and traffic permitting) to make the journey

Express train

- No arrival time before departure required (but let's say 5 mins).
- 2 hours (approx) train trip to Sydney Central.
- 8 min taxi ride to the NSW Parliament House.

In total it would take approximately 2 hours 13 mins.

Bus

- No arrival time before departure required (but let's say 5 mins).
- 3 hours 30 mins (traffic permitting) to Sydney Central.
- 8 min taxi ride to the NSW Parliament House.

In total it would take approximately 3 hours 43 mins.

Although the time between air and rail travel isn't too different the rail commuter has arrived in the centre of Sydney far more relaxed and ready and has done so through less expenditure in dollars and carbon.

Cost

A one-way, inflexible economy air fare costs approx \$109 (best air fare price found while researching this comparison). CountryLink one way fare was \$55.50, for First Class and fully flexible. Bus was approx \$32 one way. While the bus was the cheapest option it represented the longest journey, and arguably the least comfortable. For these reasons it will not be compared further against an express rail service or air travel.

Detail

The Express

An express service from Canberra to Sydney leaving Canberra at 7am and stopping only at Queanbeyan and Bungendore for Sydney Central will attract many government employees working in Sydney for the day, and vice a versa in Canberra. Given the recent austerity measures on travel for Federal Government employees, savings such as those offered by this express service will not only be attractive but could become mandatory.

The mirror trip would be similar in that the train could leave Sydney Central at 7am stopping at Strathfield only before proceeding to Bungendore (given the potential use of Defence

employees to access the Defence HQ at Bungendore) Queanbeyan and then Canberra (Kingston).

Return express services journeys

Leave Canberra at 4pm stopping at Queanbeyan, Bungendore, Strathfield and Central only.
Leave Sydney at 4pm stopping at Bungendore, Queanbeyan and Canberra only.

Business Wi-Fi Access

As on all European inter-city trains, passengers have individual access to both power supplies and internet via Wi-Fi. Passengers also have the room to work a laptop on tables / fold-down desks available to them. This service might be provided within the cost of a First Class ticket or purchased on the day. Potentially, the business passenger could be effectively working and connected for up to 92% of their journey; compared to 50% (working not connected) or less when travelling by air.

Better catering services on The Express

Nearly all Sydney - Canberra air commuters complain about airline food. One airline offers adequate meals for extra cost while the other offers inadequate 'snacks' with no option to buy. Thus better food services and a catering car with sit down dining would attract more customers who can enjoy a meal while travelling on The Express.

As an added incentive (as offered by the airlines) beer and wine could be made available for purchase from 5pm everyday on a travelling cart through the carriage, thus adding to the relaxing experience, as well as boosting revenue.

Information Campaign

An advertising campaign extolling the virtues of a relaxing yet fast and convenient train trip should also be part of any move to an express service. The aim would be to articulate the advantages and comfort of rail over air, such as: leg room, ability to stand whenever, room to relax, larger tray table space to conduct work before business meetings, uninterrupted use of laptops and portable devices such as iPods and smart phones throughout the journey, connection to the internet, better food etc.

Alternatively, a letter campaign to all Federal Government Department Secretaries and their respective Ministers extolling the cost savings should have the desired effect.

Supporting Infrastructure

To assist in establishing The Express parking space at Canberra, Queanbeyan and Bungendore would need to be marginally improved. More parking adds to the convenience of the service and should be provided on a no cost basis.

Future (Issue H)

New rolling stock would not be needed to grow an express service between Sydney and Canberra. This service can be achieved to no cost through a basic timetable change. However, some track upgrades might be required to speed the service and provide more safety.

Utilising the existing Xplorer rolling stock would be quite adequate to support the service into the foreseeable future. What would be required to attract business travellers is an upgrade to the carriages to provide 240 volt power outlets to seats for the use of electronic

devices by passengers on the journey. The addition of a Wi-Fi service for commuters, as either part of their ticket or purchased on board, would also provide an added incentive beyond what air travel could provide.

If successful (and the proposal can survive the lobbying by the airlines and airports corporations to negate it) then The Express could pave the way and provide a vital evidence base to justify future express/high speed rail travel services between other capitals.

Conclusion

The previous Government's attempt to close the existing line saw organised community action to prevent the loss of an important element of community transport infrastructure. However, the lack of commitment in the service through the new concession timetable has meant the service has stagnated (you get out what you put in).

Offering an express service between Sydney and Canberra should provide a boost for the link and achieve the aims of the inquiry through Issues A and E. Initially, this can be done on a cost neutral basis by rearranging the current timetable, given the line and rolling stock already exists. Outfitting carriages for the business traveller should then be a priority, which should pay for itself through higher passenger numbers.

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