

**Submission
No 17**

INQUIRY INTO INTER-REGIONAL PUBLIC TRANSPORT

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The Committee Manager
State and Regional Development Committee
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Committee Manager,

Inquiry into inter-regional public transport

I wish to make a submission to the Committee's inquiry into inter-regional public transport. The sub-headings in my submission are the same as the inquiry's terms of reference.

Although I am a resident of Canberra I often use the train service to Sydney. I also work in the CountryLink ticketing agency operated by the Australian Railway Historical Society at Queanbeyan Railway Station. My submission relates mainly to the service to Queanbeyan and Canberra but some of the issues I raise are relevant to the wider CountryLink network.

How CountryLink services can be improved.

The biggest problem facing CountryLink is the poor quality of the track on which the trains operate. For many decades, governments at the State and Federal level have poured billions of dollars into the road network while investment on railways has been little more than basic maintenance. As a consequence, a road journey between Canberra and Sydney now takes just over three hours while the train journey is timetabled to take about four hours and twenty minutes (and in reality the journey often takes over 4½ hours).

This issue is beyond CountryLink's control. Overcoming the problem will take many years and a significant financial commitment by governments. However, I suggest that both CountryLink and the State and Regional Development Committee need to promote the benefits of rail over road, particularly for journeys between major regional cities and Sydney. These benefits include safety and the significant reduction in energy use and carbon emissions.

A more specific problem, and within the capacity of CountryLink to rectify immediately, is the frequency of the service between Canberra/Queanbeyan and Sydney. At present a day return journey between Canberra/Queanbeyan and Sydney (or vice versa) is only possible on Sundays, Monday, Wednesdays and Fridays. Through my work at Queanbeyan Railway Station I am aware that many potential CountryLink customers decide to use road coaches because they cannot make a day return train journey on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.

The cost of providing a thrice-daily service in each direction would not be great, as the train sits in Canberra for about 18 hours while the crew are either booked into a motel or return to their home base in Goulburn.

The absurdity of the timetable is highlighted in the week I writing this submission. Traditionally, the Thursday evening before Easter is the most popular time for travel, yet there is no Thursday evening service in either direction. CountryLink's train sits in Canberra railway yard from 11.30 a.m. on Thursday until Good Friday morning. As a result, passengers wishing to travel from Canberra/Queanbeyan to Sydney, or vice versa, after school and work on the Thursday before Easter are unable to do so because there is no evening train.

The train service to Griffith is also not very user-friendly. The train operates only once a week, on Saturdays from Sydney to Griffith arriving in the late afternoon. The return service to Sydney leaves Griffith early on Sunday mornings. Thus there is no opportunity for visitors to make a weekend train trip to Griffith. The service seems to be designed to discourage potential travellers, rather than encourage them.

These comments relate to the train timetable. I wish to record my appreciation of the service provided by CountryLink's employees. As one of the volunteers at the Queanbeyan ticketing agency, I regularly deal with the booking call centre in Newcastle and, without exception, the staff there are friendly, helpful and efficient. The on-board train staff are also excellent, although sometimes when delays occur the reason for and the likely duration of the delay are not adequately conveyed to passengers.

The potential for CountryLink services to carry light freight.

I cannot comment on the economics of this proposal but in principle it seems to me like a very good idea. In larger towns and cities, CountryLink may need to provide a door-to-door service if it is to compete with Australia Post and courier companies. In small towns, a central collection point may be adequate.

How CountryLink can be better utilised to increase tourism in New South Wales.

CountryLink already provides some very attractive tour packages to Sydney, the North Coast, Dubbo, Canberra and other places. I have made use of one of the Sydney weekend packages. There may be scope to expand these package tours. For example, a weekend wineries tour to Griffith could be attractive to Sydney residents but this would require a more customer-friendly timetable as mentioned above.

How the amount of inter-regional travel undertaken by public transport can be increased.

I am concerned that the carbon tax (to which I am not opposed in principle) will lead to an increase in public transport costs while having no impact on road user costs. If I understand correctly, petrol is exempt from the carbon tax and heavy trucks are exempt for two years with a permanent exemption under consideration. In contrast, public transport will be subject to the carbon tax with a likely increase of 6% in fares according to one study. While this issue is not solely a CountryLink issue, it has the potential to encourage private car use over public transport use. I am not sure what CountryLink can do to overcome this perverse outcome of the carbon tax but it will make the promotion of public transport harder.

The role local councils can play in improving inter-regional public transportation networks.

Local councils could be a potential source of publicity for CountryLink and also an ally when lobbying for increased rail funding by governments. Perhaps CountryLink could work with local councils to expand its excellent tour packages to country areas.

Canberra does not have a local council but the ACT Government undertakes many of the roles of local government. I am concerned about the ACT Government's lack of interest in, or outright opposition to, CountryLink's train service to Canberra. The ACT Government seems to consider the railway line and station in Canberra as impediments to real estate development rather than an important transport asset. Over the past few years the ACT Government has floated a number of proposals to truncate the current railway line and build a new station in the Fyshwick industrial area. The railway station is already a long way from the city centre and any proposals to move it even further from residential areas would make rail travel to Canberra less attractive than it is at present. I am not sure to what extent CountryLink has been consulted over these proposals but I suggest that CountryLink needs to be vigilant to ensure that the needs of CountryLink and its passengers are not ignored in any proposals involving Canberra's railway station.

The type of buses and trains that will be required for the provision of regional passenger services in the future.

The current XPT and Xplorer trains seem to be well suited to current and future transport needs, although I wonder about the need to buy trains that will travel at 160 km per hour when in many areas the quality of the track limits train speeds to less than 100 km per hour.

The XPT and Xplorer fleet is now around 30 years old and replacements will be needed within a few years. Whether the State Government will provide funding for new train fleets in the near future is unclear, but CountryLink should be thinking now about replacements and lobbying for funds to be provided in future State budgets.

I cannot see much scope to reintroduce passenger train services to towns which are now served by CountryLink coaches, but perhaps consideration could be given to an improved service to Griffith when new trains are ordered.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Charles Body