

INQUIRY INTO INTER-REGIONAL PUBLIC TRANSPORT

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The Committee Manager
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SUBMISSION – INQUIRY INTO INTER-REGIONAL PUBLIC TRANSPORT

My area of interest specific to the above named enquiry is the Sydney > Canberra Xplorer service currently provided by the Rail Corporation NSW under the CountryLink brand.

I note the announcement this week by the Minister for Transport, the Hon Gladys Berejiklian MP, of the government's decision for the operations of this service to be undertaken by NSW Trains following the abolition of the Corporation.

Over the past three years I have become a regular passenger on the above named service while consulting in the Australian Capital Territory. The Canberra Railway Station terminus is adjacent to my Kingston residence and this convenience often meets my travel needs.

The Sydney > Canberra Xplorer service can best be described as pedestrian. The quality of the service, the professionalism of the station and train crews and the general appearance and maintenance of the rolling stock is good and cannot be faulted.

However I am less enthusiastic about the journey time, on-time running, frequency, price and pointless two-class service.

Seemingly frequent weekend delays, where track work either slows journey times or requires trains to be replaced by coaches, is sub-optimal.

This is not a passenger-focused outcome. It is highly inconvenient where the passenger is not put first.

The service may be adequate for leisure travellers whose journey is not defined by time. But on time and cost considerations it cannot, and does not, meet the need of business passengers. By world standards, for business travellers requiring a transport link between Australia's most populous city and Australia's national capital city it is inadequate.

Leaving aside the physical location of Canberra Railway Station at Kingston – disconnected from the heart of the central business district and from cultural and political facilities and integrated transport options – the Sydney > Canberra Xplorer is significantly more expensive than competing coach services operated by Murrays and Greyhound who also have a journey time shorter by at least one hour. These also travel direct to Civic.

Clearly the service is less expensive than options provided by Qantas Airways and Virgin Australia that are faster and also reward loyalty.

But a return ticket on the Xplorer is of similar cost compared to running a private motor vehicle. Plus a car adds to the personal travel options in either city and reduces journey time by one hour.

When compared against similar services provided in Victoria by the State Government under the V/Line brand it is hard to understand why CountryLink continues to apply seasonal pricing regimes to the service. Similarly, given the minute differences between Economy and First class travel – since abolished by V/Line on the introduction of V/Locity intercity railcar services – it is equally hard to understand the reasoning behind this being maintained.

From my experience the seats are marginally more comfortable but that is it. Passengers still purchase the same passable standard of pre-packaged food but gain no discernible additional benefits.

Comparisons with Eurostar services between London and Paris are unfair because the intent is different. As is the journey time.

Given track condition and alignment, plus enforced restrictions through the Molonglo Valley, it is a challenge to reduce journey time to be shorter than four hours and twenty minutes.

The 1995 test of the Swedish Railways tilt train power cars on the line proved it is possible to reduce journey time to just under three and a half hours. Then track conditions through the Southern Highlands and on the Canberra branch line were of a lower standard than existing today. This test demonstrated faster journey times are possible on the existing alignment if adequate technology, rolling stock and infrastructure are available.

Pondering why the Buffet is not open for the entire length of the journey – thereby maximising potential income to CountryLink and in turn the NSW Government – defies logic. That it is closed before reaching the destination, and at other times for crew breaks, is also puzzling. It's a shop. Up selling is a lost opportunity, as is the opportunity to provide a higher standard of pre-prepared food to at least airline quality.

Regional food, regional wine should be showcased. But also the value of a decent hot scone and a nice cup of tea cannot be underestimated as an income stream.

Qantas has Neil Perry inspiring its menus. Who does CountryLink have?

And why Buffet stock must be removed from the train at Sydney Terminal, and then reloaded, cannot in any way be efficient with electronic systems. Surely it is possible to manage inventory and stock control in other ways?

While placing the parallel inquiry by the Australian Government into High Speed Rail to one side, planning for new rolling stock should present the opportunity to consider dual diesel/electric railcars. To do so would allow the Sydney > Canberra service to be routed via the Airport and East Hills Line to assist Canberra passengers departing from, or arriving at, the domestic and international terminals.

While I am not aware of the breakdown between full fare and subsidised fare passengers it does seem, from my observations and conversations with crew, that the service is well patronised between Sydney and Canberra. Yet it is my estimation that at least one extra service in each direction every day with a reorganised timetable would be profitable.

Whether this could exist as a shuttle service connecting Canberra > Goulburn with XPT services is an opportunity worth exploring. Subject to availability of rolling stock whether a direct express Sydney > Canberra service is achievable is also worth investigating.

Yours sincerely

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