

**Submission
No 65**

**INQUIRY INTO PLANNING PROCESS IN NEWCASTLE
AND THE BROADER HUNTER REGION**

Name: Mr Stephen Date

Date received: 16/10/2014

Partially Confidential

The Director,
 Select Committee on the Planning Process in Newcastle and the Broader Hunter Region,
 Legislative Council,
 Parliament House,
 Macquarie St.,
 Sydney, N.S.W., 2000.

Re. Removal of the inner-Newcastle Heavy Railway, from Wickham.
from Stephen Date

Dear Reverend Fred Nile,

History

In recent years, much of the Newcastle Foreshore land has been built out, with steel and glass high-rise structures. In the early 1990s, the Fahey State Government floated the idea of cutting the inner-city railway at Broadmeadow, and parcelling off the trackbed for sale, as the land is not subject to height-restrictions, as it isn't undermined. After a public outcry, the proposal was shelved, but was picked up again, in the early Twentyfirst Century by Minister for the Hunter, Michael Costa, with support from A.L.P. troubleshooter, Barrie Unsworth, and former Newcastle Lord Mayor, John McNaughton. Local opposition, from the Save the Rail group, and led by local State MP, Bryce Gaudry, halted this attempt until Bryce Gaudry was removed, via a factional manoeuvre, newsreader, Jodi Mackay, became MP for Newcastle. From then on, Jodi, out of her depth in State Parliament, flip-flopped over ripping out the inner-city railway, or leaving it as is. With the unpopularity of the Kenneally State Government, and widespread concern over the run-down state of Newcastle inner-city, Newcastle voted for Liberal, Tim Owen, in 2011, and subsequently put developer, Jeff McCloy in as independent Lord Mayor of Newcastle. It is significant that neither Mr. Owen, nor Mr. McCloy had mentioned removal of the inner-city railway on their published, and widely-distributed election how-to-vote literature, prior to both elections, although Mr. McCloy did mention favouring its removal at a face-off with other Mayoral candidates, as his own personal view, a few days before the Newcastle City Council elections. Both men have since been exposed, before the Independent Commission Against Corruption, as having acted corruptly, and both have since resigned their positions.

Undemocratic

There was NEVER, until now, any opportunity for people from inner-Newcastle (such as Stockton residents) to actually have a say on whether they want the heavy railway left where it is, or whether they'd prefer to have it removed. Likewise, no thought has been given to the people living in country areas who regularly use the railway to access Newcastle. A lot of young people travel down, in Summer months, to enjoy the beaches and ocean baths. Finding parking-spaces, in inner-city Newcastle, is, at best, chancy, and parking-fees are costly. A free bus service, operating from Gordon Avenue in to Scott Street, on weekdays, and back out, has cut down the electric passenger service patronage from Broadmeadow station, and both diesel railmotor, and electric passenger service from Hamilton, Wickham, and Civic railway stations. The decision, to remove the Newcastle inner-city line from Wickham, was put through the Legislative Assembly on party lines, then was forced on everyone by State Cabinet. It is interesting to note that the former State Police and Emergency Services Minister, Mike Gallacher, addressed a business lunch, in Newcastle last year, advocating closing the railway at Wickham - Mr. Gallacher has also had to resign over developer contacts. Two 'community consultation' meetings were held, with one (I attended it) at Newcastle City Mall, and the other, at Maitland Town Hall, where people, who'd intended to speak against removing the Newcastle inner-city railway were told that they could only speak about the plan to revitalize inner-Newcastle - Cabinet had already decided the fate of the railway. Speaker after speaker, at both meetings, decried removal of the railway. Interestingly, while that Newcastle meeting was told that the railway cut was at Wickham, according to the Newcastle Herald, the Maitland meeting were told it'd be cut at Hamilton.

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As I told the woman at the desk, as I left Newcastle City Mall, you will not rejuvenate the inner-city by tearing out an important means for people to access it. Surely the Government see it is a stupid move to remove the railway, as it will exacerbate existing parking problems, as more people will drive in to the city.

The Lie-Trail

It was Tim Owen that seized on the light-rail concept, to justify removal of the Newcastle inner-city railway. With a loud fanfare, the reality of the light-rail was plastered all over the media, and in Mr. Owen's periodic public bulletins. The money was to be acquired by the sale of the Port of Newcastle to overseas interests, and, without any public consultation - the deal was done, with the O'Farrell Government sitting on two reports that they refuse to make public, that, in all probability, were old A.L.P.-commissioned reports showing that any light-rail system, unless it is expanded into the outer suburbs of Newcastle, will end up as a financial burden to any future State Governments. On the front-page of the Newcastle Herald, we were shown Wickham railway terminus, as envisaged by an architect - a restatement, in all but size, of the ubiquitous carport, and no light-rail shown in the plan, indicating that the real motivation, for removing the railway, is a 'land grab'. Then, a committee of business people decided on a new route for the light-rail, running it up Munter and Scott Street, from Merewether Street, instead of the initially-promised route into Newcastle railway station. An unelected body has decided to literally make available the best prime building land, in the Munter, to developers, who will fill it with high-rise structures, doubtless, for their own benefit.

As removal of any railway-line will negatively affect property-prices, it'd be very interesting to see who will snap up the derelict properties, if this plan isn't stopped. Newcastle West, generally, has been let go for years, with many of the shopfronts boarded up, and others housing artistic installations by T.A.F.E. students.

Were that Baird Government really serious about installing light-rail, an easier option would be the purchase of 'tram-trains', from Victoria - light-rail designed to run on old disused railway-lines. Years ago, when independent Newcastle Lord Mayor, John Tate took a delegation down to look at tram-trains, and they returned panning the idea. Likewise, if there's a delay of, say, a year, as Mrs. Berejiklian is proposing, from the removal of the railway, to the installation of light-rail, there could be issues of Right of Way - I know that when we had some disused coalmines in Newcastle, their owners occasionally ran steam locomotives down their tramways to preserve Right of Way. If the railway-lines are completely removed, this isn't able to be done, so it'd make perfect sense to leave one railway-line usable, to preserve Right of Way, and pull up the other, and lay light-rail on its trackbed. Yet there's been no offer to do this, only an ultimatum, from Mrs. Berejiklian, that the railway will be torn up on Boxing Day, 2014. We've since been told that Civic station will be closed first, but railway-staff, at other inner-Newcastle stations, have been told nothing, to date, and are worried about their jobs.

When the New South Wales Minister for Transport, Gladys Berejiklian, was asked to put a covenant on the land under the Newcastle inner-city railway, she refused, sparking a rumour that, even though the railway is still in use, residential units to be built on that very land, are currently being sold off-the-plan. Also fuelling this rumour is the fact that surveyors are currently surveying the land, under her orders.

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The State of Newcastle Inner-City

Over the past twenty-years, General Property Trustees (GPT) have bought up many inner-Newcastle commercial properties, at the same time that they were expanding their massive Charlestown Square shopping-complex. Late last decade, GPT produced a plan to revitalise the Newcastle inner-city, but made the plans go-ahead conditional on the State Government's approval of the removal of the heavy railway into Newcastle railway station. With Lord Mayor, John Tate, and local State MP, Jodi Mackay, firmly behind this proposal, and the Newcastle Herald on-side, momentum built up. But GPT had put a set time-limit on the implementation of the scheme, and, in Sydney, Labor Premier Kristina Kenneally realised that, due to her unpopularity, locally, Miss Mackay was facing a rerun, in Newcastle, of the 1988 State election, and dropped support for the plan. As a consequence, GPT walked out of Newcastle, and, it was said, began auctioning off properties in the inner-city, and Newcastle West, but not to any rival retail chains. It was always felt that, in expanding the Charlestown Square complex, GPT's motive was to prevent anyone setting up a rival shopping-complex in the inner-city, and this limitation would seem to illustrate this.

From when, in the mid-1960s, Jesmond Centre (now Stockland Mall) was opened, people were able to buy their necessities within a short distance of where they lived, which had the effect of lessening shopping trips to inner-Newcastle. Likewise, in a move that was by that time well-established, each suburb had its own commercial hub, along its main street. In Hunter Street, Newcastle, the biggest traders, in the pre and post World War II era, were Winns, and David Jones stores. There were also cinemas, well-patronised up until the videotape era. And there was the Royal Newcastle Hospital - it, and the Mater Hospital, were the only major hospitals in the Newcastle Area. Very few people protested when the Royal Newcastle Hospital was closed; demolished, and high-rise units were built where it had stood. In the Hunter Street Mall, a former trader, who has since sold his business, told me that GPT had increased the rents on its properties so that businesses struggled to keep going there. He moved his business to Mayfield CBD, as a consequence. Even though David Jones were paying a 'peppercorn' rent, for their Hunter Street premises, they still chose to move their business out of the inner-city. It is also interesting to note that Newcastle City Council haven't provided much in the way of 'free' parking, to encourage people to drive into Newcastle. Medibank Private, and two major banks, have moved out of their Hunter Street premises in recent years. With supermarket malls now being at the height of their popularity, and them offering free parking, for short shopping-trips, reviving Newcastle's city centre seems to be a remote possibility, unless the University of Newcastle is relocated from Shortland, to the inner-city. The facades of historic shops could be maintained, with courtyards; classrooms, and lecture-theatres hidden behind them. And the students would use the existing railway to travel to the University. For this reason, it makes perfect sense to retain the railway into Newcastle. It would also permit the alternate Port Waratah coal railway line to traverse the University's Callaghan property.

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Catch-Phrases

The moves to destroy Newcastle's inner-city railway have been dominated by catch-phrases, all designed to marginalise the campaign to preserve it as the valuable piece of public infrastructure that it is. During Mr. Costa's GPT-backed attempt, Mr. Costa kept referring to the electrified railway as a 'branch-line' into Newcastle, and the Newcastle Herald began to use the term; a British term, denoting one of many small rural one-track railways, many opened during the Nineteenth Century, and many of that number closed, after Dr. Beecham's inquiry, in the 1960s. While it runs off the Great Northern Railway, a railway that serves a city such as Newcastle is NOT, in any sense, a 'branch-line', and nor is it underpatronised, as the Beecham inquiry found the British branch-lines were - yet critics of the Newcastle inner-city railway seem to be obsessed with a few people, leaving Newcastle station on a train to Sydney, yet totally overlook a packed 'Oscar' railmotor coming down the same easement, from the north. Likewise, they bemoan being held up, at a level-crossing, for a Sydney train with a few people travelling into Newcastle, but remain silent over the packed Maitland service trains they're held up for, at the same gates.

At any rate, State governments, generally, are the enemy of branch-lines. In Newcastle, in the 1940s, there were passenger services to Morpeth; Cessnock; Belmont; West Wallsend; and Toronto, as well as 4 colliery-railways, capable of forming part of a future Newcastle suburban railway network, in operation. State government parsimony saw opportunities evaporate - passenger services to Morpeth ceased in 1953; to West Wallsend in 1968; to Cessnock, and Belmont, in 1973, and Toronto, despite Toronto having passable patronage, in 1990. With the closure of the Merewether (1954); Wallsend (1954); Jesmond (1962), and Belmont (1987) coalmining operations, the trackbeds of the Merewether, and Wallsend railways were developed.

In cities overseas, where hasty decisions to remove heavy rail into those cities were steamrolled through parliaments, people today bitterly regret that this was done, and is irreversible, as the former trackbed was developed. The so-called light-rail plan, which few of us believe will actually materialise, doesn't take into account a long list, on the web, of light-rail systems, throughout the world, that are in financial difficulty.

The former New South Wales Minister for Planning, Brad Hazzard, on a visit to Newcastle, described the inner-city railway as a 'Berlin Wall', and, when the 'Save the Rail' group presented a petition, with thousands of signatures on it, dismissed them as the 'loony left', according to the Newcastle Herald reports. The term 'Berlin Wall', years after it was removed, conjures up visions of repression, as the wall was put there to keep Western ideas out, and East Germans from crossing into West Germany. Yet, the inner-city railway is not as much of a 'Berlin Wall', dividing the landscape as the waterfront high-rise unit-blocks are. Over the years, due to some secret master-plan, two pedestrian overhead bridges - one near Worth Place, and the other at Wickham - were removed, and not replaced, and, when, in AD2000, the old Mannell Street level-crossing was replaced, the long-promised overhead railway overpass, at Stewart Avenue, wasn't proceeded with, and, instead, a level-crossing was built. Yet, with the Stewart Avenue-Munter Street traffic-lights coming up, in one half of a small city-block, traffic would still be held up at Stewart Avenue, were the level-crossing closed.

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Nothing attracts attention to any railway like a steam locomotive coming along its tracks, yet, for some reason, the spur, that allows a steam loco to run around its carriages, at Newcastle railway station, was removed, and not replaced.

As to Mr. Mazzard's assertion that the opponents of the removal of the Newcastle inner-city railway are all members of the 'loony left', nothing could in fact be further from the truth. Most of us either use the railway on a regular basis, or are concerned at the haste, and lack of consultation, with the public, over what we all see is an ill-advised scheme to benefit a few property developers. We note that, although Mrs. Berejiklian has announced that the Newcastle inner-city railway will close on Boxing Day, 2014, no announcement has been made regarding any extra Government buses, to compensate for the loss of the railway from Wickham station. When asked, in State Parliament, about placing a covenant on the trackbed of the Newcastle inner-city railway, Mrs. Berejiklian refused to do so, instead giving her word that only kiosks, and small cafes, would be built on the trackbed between Merewether Street and Newcastle station. Her word counts for little should she be replaced, in the Transport portfolio, by another Minister, or her Government be defeated next March, or subsequently, at another election. The State Opposition are not to be trusted, either, as the then New South Wales Transport Minister, John Robertson, assured the then Newcastle State MP, and Minister for the Hunter, Jodi Mackay, that the inner-city railway line could be cut. The Labor Party are qualifying their position - that, if it isn't terribly damaged, by the Baird Government's efforts to destroy it, they will continue to run trains into Newcastle. But the reality is that, unless this decision is reversed, or a judicial order (very costly to obtain) is put in place, to protect the Newcastle inner-city railway, the damage will begin to be done on 27th December, 2014, likely in the early hours of the morning.

A Referendum

With the nearing New South Wales state elections, what the Government should do is put a referendum, to the people living at towns with stations serving them, along^N Western and the Northern railway-lines; the Central Coast; Newcastle city, and suburbs, and Stockton, to find out what they want, rather than forcing everybody to accept their plan

Yours Truly,

Stephen Date.