

Waiting on train that moves with the times



Phillip O'Neill

COMMENTS on the federal government's report on the feasibility of high-speed rail along Australia's east coast close today. You'll find a submission form on Infrastructure Australia's website. Let me be clear about my view of high-speed rail. The idea of high-speed trains running from Brisbane through Newcastle to Sydney and on to Canberra and Melbourne is a wonderful idea.

My concern is that the viability of high-speed rail is based on some pretty wild assumptions, and if the proposal falls over, Newcastle and the Central Coast will remain in a railway swamp. The government's report estimates the likely cost of the Newcastle to Sydney link at \$18 billion in today's prices. This would pay for a new line, and about 35 kilometres of tunnels to bypass the Hawkesbury's sandstone gorges and Sydney's north shore real estate.

The proposal speculates that by 2036 the line will have a service every 15 minutes with a one-way ticket priced (in today's dollars) at \$16.50 for Newcastle to Sydney, and at \$14.25 for Gosford to Sydney.

The report predicts that 4500 commuters and about 15,000 other passengers will travel daily to Sydney from Newcastle on the high-speed service. In addition, about 15,000 (overwhelmingly commuters) are predicted to travel from Gosford. The Newcastle to Sydney journey would take 40 minutes.

This is an astonishing scenario. Last year I was fortunate to spend some time in Bologna, in central Italy. From there we could travel the 215 kilometres to Milan on a Eurostar rail service in 65 minutes. But there was only one service an hour and a one-way ticket cost the equivalent of \$60.

The Newcastle to Sydney proposal reckons we'll get four times the frequency of the Bologna to Milan service, with tickets a quarter of the price. Waiting on a freezing Bologna railway platform, we observed the build-up of passengers from the old but still reliable train services that run throughout the towns and



CHANGE OVERDUE: The current Newcastle-Sydney connection is slow, unreliable and infrequent.

villages of the Bologna region. You don't drive to Bologna to get the train to Milan, or Rome. You catch a local train.

In contrast, the high-speed rail proposal proposes giant parking stations for the Newcastle-Gosford-Sydney traveller. Which left me wondering, if you were starting your journey at Maitland - or Swansea, or Kincumber, or Kariong - wouldn't you rather stay in your car all the way to your Sydney destination?

What then are our circumstances now? If you want to arrive in Sydney by 8am, you need to catch the 5.03am from Newcastle station. Your train will average 57 km/h. The trip is cheap at \$7.80 one way, but that's probably all it's worth.

But be thankful. The person travelling in the opposite direction for an 8am meeting in Newcastle will have boarded the train at Central at 4.47am and will be chugging northward at a very humble average of 51 km/h.

Doing something about this slow,

unreliable, infrequent service is long, long overdue.

In November 1998, the then premier Bob Carr announced "fully funded" plans for a high-speed upgrade of the Newcastle-Central Coast-Sydney railway line.

The upgrade was to be completed by 2007. The promise was reiterated by Labor's then transport minister Carl Scully in July 2002. But nothing happened.

My view is that a major upgrade of the existing Central Coast-Newcastle rail service is needed irrespective of the outcome of the high-speed inquiry.

What should this entail? First, there is a here-and-now need for frequent commuter services between the Central Coast and Sydney - with regular, faster services from Newcastle, although these don't need to be at commuter frequencies. The benefits to business, government and workers are obvious. And better rail services take pressure off an increasingly congested F3.

But a second reason for a better rail service linking Newcastle and the Central Coast is emerging.

By 2031, when coal has done its bit, when the costs of road transport have escalated, the lower Hunter and the Central Coast regions will be home to 1.1 million people.

By then, according to the state government plans, Newcastle CBD will need to provide 10,000 more jobs and there will need to be an additional 45,000 jobs along the Central Coast.

Wouldn't it make sense to underpin this growth with an efficient rail service linking Newcastle, Cardiff, Morisset, Wyong, Tuggerah, Gosford and Woy Woy, with jobs and services along the route, in a range of sectors? A wonderful, sustainable, integrated, economic corridor beckons.

Professor Phillip O'Neill is the director of the Urban Research Centre, University of Western Sydney.

Being free to believe is part of democracy

Religious people have a right to speak out, writes Bruce Robertson.

ONE thing I love about Australia is the great sense of freedom that we have in this nation.

Having spent much time travelling to nations that don't have the liberty and egalitarian lifestyle that we take for granted, I am protective of our freedoms.

One freedom that has been increasingly under scrutiny and attack is the concept of freedom of religion.

There has been a subtle, but no less dramatic shift, in the apparent world view of our communities on this issue.

One of the common themes espoused is that we have a legal basis of separation of church and state.

Thus for some people it follows that there must be no religious involvement in any official activities or community groups.

We experienced the more bizarre nature of this debate when as a church we partnered with other churches and community and business leaders to build a classroom for a local school last year.

It was simply the donation of a room for an overcrowded school which the school now uses and controls.

But for various secular minority groups this was tantamount to the establishment of a religious beachhead on what should be "secular" state grounds.

Never mind the fact that there are hundreds of religious students in the school.

We see a similar problem when a politician is criticised for having a

religious background and daring to express their world view.

Meanwhile an atheistic or secular world view which is no less based on faith is expressed within the same context with impunity.

Herein lies the dilemma. In what sense are we really a secular society? Is this the law, that only a secular world view is to be allowed into any state context?

Is it only atheists who should be allowed to vote or to express an opinion?

Should we only have secularists in public office?

Heaven forbid that a Christian or a Muslim or a Buddhist should be allowed to express their belief in their state role.

And let's make sure that no faith-based views are permitted in the media; let's keep the media as unrepresentative as possible.

We are actually a representative

society both politically and socially, and respect for the views of others that differ to us is part of the way we do life.

In fact there is no legal statement in our constitution that demands that we be a secular state, nor is there any specific demand for the separation of church and state, as there is in the United States.

We must not underestimate the impact that such views can have for the freedom of religion in this nation.

Their goal is not freedom of religion but freedom from religion. And our nation will be less blessed and less free as a result.

Bruce Robertson is the senior minister at Globe Church, Newcastle and Eastlakes. Article is submitted by the Churches Media Association.



The money pit

THE report that Newcastle City Council may spend up to \$20,000 on an inquiry into its handling of the Laman Street fig saga (having already spent more than \$750,000) won little support among readers.

I can tell the council what went wrong. The problem is it let a minority tell it what to do. Plus it let the hypocritical greens off the leash. Just stop wasting money and get on with the job of getting rid of the trees.

stef

Listening to vocal minorities and worrying about re-election is where it went wrong. Pretty simple really.

Howie

It is time for Newcastle City Council to admit it made a major mistake about the figs. In Thursday's high winds the figs proved they can stand up to high winds. If NCC wants to cut anything down it should go after the pine trees that came down in the wind.

Back off

It isn't that hard to figure out what went wrong. It was normal arrogant council management practice, with the typical "we know better than anyone" approach, even though there was significant community objection from the start.

DMA

A cost estimate between \$10,000 and \$20,000 represents between 1.3 per cent to 2.6 per cent of the total costs to date. Any good businessman would see this as a wise investment.

James Evatt

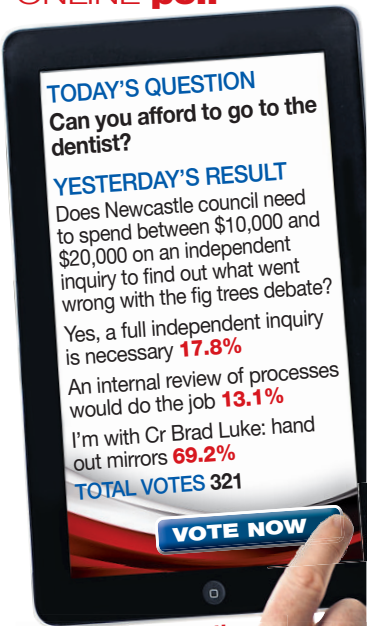
The consultants must be rubbing their hands together over this debacle. Next there will be a consultant engaged to review the advice provided by consultants.

Richard Jennings

Bureaucracy gone mad. If a TV comedy series was made featuring our council, maybe we could recoup some of the wasted money.

Greg

ONLINE poll



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