



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILLS

High Speed Rail Planning Authority Bill 2016

Second Reading

SPEECH

Monday, 2 May 2016

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Albanese, Anthony, MP

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Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler) (11:05): I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

Inspirational author Helen Keller, the first sight-impaired person to earn a university degree, once made a critical observation about vision.

She said:

The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision.

The proposed high-speed rail link between Brisbane and Melbourne via Sydney and Canberra is a project that requires vision.

It is big—more than 1,700 kilometres long.

It is challenging—it will involve the construction of tens of kilometres of tunnels.

It is complex, necessarily involving the governments of Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory as well as dozens of local councils.

Making a project of this scale a reality requires vision.

We must imagine a better future and take actions to create that future.

We have done the research.

We know that the project is viable.

What this parliament needs to do is commit to the next step required to make it a reality—the creation of an authority to advance detailed planning and work with other jurisdictions and begin to acquire the corridor before it is built out by urban sprawl.

That is the thinking behind this bill.

A long road

This is the third time this bill has come before us.

I first introduced it in December 2013 as the first private member's bill before the parliament this term.

However, a lack of political will from the government meant the bill lapsed, requiring me to reintroduce it in October last year.

But once again, this bill lapsed last month when the government prorogued the parliament in extraordinary circumstances and then reconvened it for a special fresh sitting staged to allow it to contrive reasons for the double dissolution of the parliament.

So I reintroduced this bill on 19 April.

We could have debated it back then. Indeed, at one stage it was literally the only piece of legislation that was before the House of Representatives.

Yet this government showed no vision, despite the fact that people like former trade minister Andrew Robb, have come out as strong supporters of high-speed rail.

Mr Robb has stated that he could produce the names of international companies that had told him they could deliver the project in full.

Last month someone in the government floated the idea in a national newspaper that the entire project could be delivered using value capture.

This, I do not think, is realistic.

Any politician who tells you that they can fund an entire rail line using value capture is pulling your leg.

And like most of the government's thought bubbles, the idea collapsed within hours when the parliamentary secretary for cities ruled out support for the project.

This is indeed a shame.

It is another lost opportunity from a government that had a plan to win government but no plan to govern.

The project

As transport minister in the former Labor government, I commissioned a two-part study involving extensive consultation with industry and international operators of high-speed rail, as well as significant community input.

The study, published in April 2013, included the business case for the project, consideration of environmental issues, projections of patronage, the proposed route, proposed stations and proposed time lines.

It found that high-speed rail down the east coast of Australia was indeed a viable proposition.

For example, it found that high-speed rail would return, for the Sydney to Melbourne section, \$2.15 in economic benefit for every dollar invested.

The report found that once fully operational across the Brisbane to Melbourne corridor, high-speed rail could carry approximately 84 million passengers each and every year.

At speeds of 350 kilometres per hour, people would be able to travel from Melbourne to Sydney, or Melbourne to Brisbane, in less than three hours. Of course, new technology is seeing speeds in excess of that.

The report found that Commonwealth leadership and coordination would be essential, given the number of jurisdictions involved.

High-speed rail would also be an engineering challenge, requiring at least 80 kilometres of tunnels, including 67 kilometres in Sydney alone.

But despite these challenges, the experts said that high-speed rail had huge potential, particularly if we consider where our society is headed over coming decades.

We can anticipate significant population growth over coming decades along the route of this proposed line.

We can also anticipate that growing pressure for a carbon-constrained economy will drive the economics of this project ever more positively over time.

We can also anticipate that if we fail to act soon, delivery of high-speed rail will be made more difficult and more costly because parts of the corridor will be built out by urban sprawl.

That is why this bill proposes to create an 11-person high-speed rail authority to bring together all affected states and territories as well as rail and engineering experts to progress planning and, critically, focus on the corridor.

Members would include:

One member from each of the jurisdictions affected—Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory;

One member representing the Australian Local Government Association;

One member nominated by the Australasian Railway Association; and

Five members appointed by the minister for infrastructure on the basis of qualifications or expertise—to make sure there is engineering and other expertise on the authority.

The authority's roles would include consideration of:

Land use planning relating to the corridor;

Safety;

Measures to minimise environmental impact;

Public consultation; and

Intervention to purchase the corridor.

This is not an idea that I came up with. We had proper process, and I appointed a High Speed Rail Advisory Group that included people such as the former Deputy Prime Minister Tim Fischer, the Business Council of Australia's chief executive, Jennifer Westacott, and Australasian Railway Association chief executive Bryan Nye.

It was chaired by the deputy secretary of my former department, Lyn O'Connell.

Serious people having a look at a serious issue and coming up with serious suggestions about the way forward, and a way forward that should have been bipartisan.

That is why the former Labor government embraced these recommendations, which were unanimous, and allocated \$54 million to establish the authority and begin the process of corridor acquisition.

But in 2013 the incoming coalition government scrapped this allocation and turned its back on the project.

Vision

To best understand the potential of high-speed rail, we need to look well beyond 2016 and consider where this nation will be in coming decades.

We know that our population will be larger.

We now that this growth will be concentrated precisely on the route of this high-speed rail proposal.

We can also expect the world will have moved in terms of economic options as it is doing in Asia and Europe towards rail. Rail is the transport of the 21st century.

According to the high-speed rail study I referred to earlier, travel on the east coast of Australia is forecast to grow by about 1.8 per cent every year over the next two decades and to increase by 60 per cent by 2035.

The study said east coast trips would double from 152 million trips in 2009 to 355 million trips in 2065.

There is another compelling reason to proceed with high-speed rail, and that is the boost to regional Australia. That is why this bill will be seconded by the member for Newcastle.

Stations are proposed for the Gold Coast, Casino, Grafton, Coffs Harbour, Port Macquarie, Taree, Newcastle, the Central Coast, Southern Highlands, Wagga Wagga, Albury-Wodonga and Shepparton.

This project will position these centres to take some of the population growth pressure off our capital cities, which will no doubt be a key issue in the future.

Importantly, it will also provide for uplift value by the economic improvement that will occur in those regional centres to be factored into the funding, building and construction of the high-speed rail line.

It could also deliver a massive improvement in liveability.

Imagining living in Newcastle or the Southern Highlands and being able to commute to the central business district of Sydney in under an hour. It will transform those centres and facilitate new business.

Conclusion

Vision is one of the obligations of leadership.

Today's leaders will best serve those who follow us if we think ahead.

True leaders do not just sit around waiting for the telephone to ring. They act.

This parliament should show some genuine leadership by acting on high-speed rail, starting today by debating and supporting this bill.

I fear this is unlikely, given the government's refusal to debate this issue over the last three years.

But there is light at the end of the tunnel.

In the general election in July, the people of Australia have the ability to take this issue out of this visionless coalition government's hands.

A Shorten Labor government will act where the Abbott-Turnbull government has failed.

We will establish a high-speed rail authority.

We will ask the authority to move quickly towards calling for expressions of interest from international rail companies that have shown a capacity to deliver real projects.

Labor is prepared to think ahead.

Future generations will be the beneficiaries.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Broadbent): Is there a seconder to the motion?

Ms Claydon: I second the motion and reserve my right to speak.

Debate adjourned.