# Austral obscura: national rail policy?

*In 2015 Australia’s transport Ministers joined together to develop a national rail policy. That this has gone unnoticed is unsurprising and appropriate.*

*A national rail policy, faithful to the nature and history of federal Australia is needed. It is a simple task. The critical and first step is removal of the distorting obstacle that stops progress in national transport matters; the Commonwealth-State Transport and Infrastructure Council.*

**Introduction**

Australia’s peak transport body is the Transport and Infrastructure Council. It comprises Commonwealth and State Ministers and is served by a Commonwealth Department secretariat and various officials committees.

In 2015 it decided there is to be a national rail ‘policy agenda’. The result, more than 12 months later, is a ‘vision’ statement and ‘work program’: <http://transportinfrastructurecouncil.gov.au/publications/files/National_rail_vision_and_work_program.pdf>.

**The offering**

At 6 pages long, conforming to bureaucratic templates and agreed by all Ministers, some might consider the ‘vision’ etc. to be an achievement.

Consider:

*‘Through collaboration between governments and industry, rail reform will support the Directions of the Transport and Infrastructure Council by enhancing productivity, competitiveness and liveability by:*

*• Integrating rail with other transport modes to enhance the functionality of the transport network,*

*• improving rail’s efficiency, capacity and environmental performance;*

*• accessing sustainable funding and delivery models;*

*• capitalising on new technologies; and*

*• improving rail safety.’*

Who could object to such lofty sentiments? I could and do. It reflects much that is wrong with national transport policy. It threatens to set rail back years.

It is just platitudes. The ‘vision’ offers nothing to see; nobody could discern what Australia’s railways should look like.

The public who pay the bills of the Council and its caravan would recoil if they saw such formulaic drivel.

It would have brought the Council into disrepute if it was noticed. Fortunately it was ignored - the media ‘stayed away in droves’. Like most ‘outputs’ of the Council it will soon be forgotten. But in the meantime, bureaucracies will stultify progress on rail matters by pointing to the possibility the Council might come up with something. As they say: ‘as if’.

**What the policy should be**

A rail policy should aim at:

* The right amount of rail services;
* The right type of rail services.

A national rail policy requires an overlay to deal with essential national characteristics. For Australia the outstanding characteristic is the break of gauge in railways that should link settlements. Resolution of this was among the motives for, and actions expected of the Commonwealth after, federation. Australia’s national aim for railway types should be: interoperability of a linking railway.

There remains the question of the amount of rail services. The right amount would reflect the situation of rail beneficiaries - and beneficiaries of competing services such as roads - bearing the costs they cause.

This is not the case at present and the scant prospect of this changing is being further minimised by Council attempts to advance universal road pricing and deny the fact of enormous subsidies to east coast highways. Happily, for the purposes of moving towards the right amount of rail services, these can be ignored. It is possible, and simple, to estimate the right amount of rail services *as if* rail and road beneficiaries bore the costs they cause.

The issue, rail or road (or air etc.), arises only where there is a (possible) railway. It is a question about the real costs of road use for the very few routes where a rail-road comparison makes sense.

An example: the main intercapital route in Australia is the Hume Highway. Costs and use of the adjacent railway are known. The necessary information is: truck use of the highway; costs of the highway including ‘sunk’ capital. While this information is known it is not readily available.

It is possible to increase the sophistication of analysis by considering emissions etc. However, Australia is not at first base in national transport analysis because it has not considered the ‘as if’ scenario for the Hume Highway or any other road.

The pivotal rail issues have been known for, but have not started to be addressed after, at least a quarter of a century of Council’s existence. Governments implicitly acknowledge the problem by seeking to shore up the rail industry via taxpayer funded spending on rail ‘corridor strategies’ to try to offset the impact of the vast public monies spent on competing roads.

The Transport and Infrastructure Council, by promoting a rail ‘work program’ that ignores this singularly critical issue – and topical matters such as higher speed rail, rail plans for capital cities, rural branchlines, skills, value capture etc. – preferring to rerun red-herrings addressed years ago, virtually announced it stands in the way of progress.

The unwillingness to advance a highway-rail analysis will destroy any chance for a national rail policy and the credibility of those in government who argue for any transport ‘reform’.

**Why has it gone astray?**

The problems lie with the Transport and Infrastructure Council.

The kindest interpretation is that Council is confused.

Its interest in ‘regulatory reform’ is addled by the fact while all road use is regulated – any road ‘reform’ must be regulatory – this is not the case for rail. Its stubbornly held view of ‘rail reform’ is unable to advance the national consistency expected by the public and indeed history.

It does not display adequate comprehension about many matters it promulgates such as pricing or the matters in the rail work program. Many of its activities appear to be ‘make work’ ideas. It ignores ports.

It has proven incapable of maintaining a consistent or coherent approach. Not only has it been unable to define or explain what any national transport policy might comprise, ignoring the one cogent exposition adopted in the early 2000s, it frequently drops without explanation – forgets - what it has done. Under its guidance key parts of the national transport field periodically become terra incognita.

It seems to resist independent advice – counsel from outside self-interested bureaucracies. The infrequent advice it is given includes cries of frustration over the key issues Council ignores. Indeed the idea of a national rail policy arose out of such a plea.

The Council has not apparently considered the implications of the Williams decisions which should have fundamentally altered its character and operation. Commonwealth representation and support arrangements for the Council should have changed and the Parliament should be much better informed about the Council’s activities.

This attempt at a national rail policy should signal the end of the Council. Yet nobody important is paying attention.

Even so, even if nobody presently cares what it does, it is important for advisers to know the Council acts like an obscura – creating images that are indistinct and sometimes reversed and inverted. The result is delay or prevention of national progress. No wonder interested groups sometimes propose new advisory bodies or write their own versions of national transport policy.

The Council’s problem is structural, governance related. That it is not party political, personalities or procedural is demonstrated by its recurrence under different Commonwealth and State Governments, many different Ministers and officials and attempts to get a real agenda. It is time for the Council to be abolished and for Australia to look at reality.

To those who argue that for its retention on the grounds that Commonwealth-State Ministerial Councils have some intrinsic value: what has the analogous Ministerial Council on energy *done* to ensure Australia won’t face electricity and gas crises?

Without the Council there would be an opportunity for real national progress on rail and other transport matters. A revival of the Constitution’s Interstate Commission might assist.

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Tags: infrastructure; railways, Commonwealth-State relations.