# **Expecto patronum: high-speed trains**

*Federal Labor’s announcement of its ‘plan’ for a high-speed train Sydney-Newcastle has but one saving grace – comic relief.*

## Start

Some recent articles started-off by saying stupidity is a big problem in NSW transport – motorways to CBDs, ‘bespoke’ infrastructure etc. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Add to those examples: senior officials boasting to a Parliamentary Inquiry that integrity and professionalism is demonstrated by misrepresenting – and doing the opposite to - what rail crash inquiries recommended. While complaining about ‘false narratives’.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The problem is bipartisan.

It infects the Commonwealth too. Waste of $5bn of Federal funds on a third-rate rail line in ‘Sydney’s Siberia’ - that doesn’t connect with anything - shows that.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Could the Federal Opposition do worse?

## Yes

Opposition Leader Mr Albanese furnished the answer: high-speed rail starting from somewhere in Sydney to somewhere closer to Newcastle. To:

*‘build on the work of the last Labor Government, which completed a feasibility study that found that not only was High Speed Rail viable, but that it would return $2 for every $1 of investment’.*[[4]](#footnote-4)

‘*Dangled*’ before the faithful - 2 January, 2022 - at Cooks Hill Surf Club. Newcastle.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Thankfully we have not yet been shamed with other details of whatever is to be dangled. Suffice to say, calling the ‘study’ a ‘work’ is apt.[[6]](#footnote-6)

## A work

Recall: its recommended route avoids the Gold Coast and Wollongong but does have stops at Casino, Lismore and Grafton in an effort to avoid bigger places like Ballina.

While Canberra is to be in a cul de sac it otherwise was the study’s favourite.

Almost as many passengers would catch the train to Sydney at a stop on the Canberra line – Mittagong - than from Newcastle and the Central Coast combined. In fact, Mittagong would generate nearly four times as many travellers as Canberra. Magic.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Such results naturally burnished the reputations of luminaries who endorsed the study. And retarded - successfully, in the eyes of the Canberra bureaucracy - the cause of sensible regional rail and development by more than a decade. Insulting Newcastle most of all.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Not merely by saying Newcastle and the Central Coast are unable to match magic patronage from Mittagong. Also relevant is the preferred Newcastle station site – Cameron Park, 20km or more west of the city – roughly an hour’s bus ride away. Near where the M1 goes to by-pass – get away from – any activity going on in Newcastle.

## A bigger offer

This time more of your money is on offer - $500m. Such a sum is somewhat short of the at least $145,000m cost of the full Brisbane to Melbourne high-speed dream. Yet this small down-payment is destined to wreak even more damage than the feasibility work - which cost a mere $20m.

## Damage

Here, the proposal includes buying land for ‘the vision’.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Perhaps the ‘preferred’ Newcastle station site? Forever undermining the prospects of civic revitalisation. [[10]](#footnote-10)

Those thinking this is an improvement on Labor’s last election offering – which was largely based on a trawl of bits and pieces wanted by local candidates, like a nation-building footpath in Wanniassa or the Woy Woy car park of Australian National Audit Office fame – should think again. High speed rail was the proposed monument then too.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Curiously, the up-to-250kmh Sydney-Newcastle train at Mr Albanese’s website seems 100kmh slower than his 350kmh dream for the rest of the country. Yet even with stops at Wyong and Gosford, 15 km apart, the trip will be just as quick. Magic, like at Mittagong.[[12]](#footnote-12)

A high-speed rail bureaucracy is to be set up to deliver the vision. Like Infrastructure Australia in recent years, it is likely to morph into a lobbying presence within the Government. To be ignored at leisure.[[13]](#footnote-13)

## A reception

Amazingly, the Opposition Leader’s ‘idea’ has not achieved the denunciation it deserves.

So far.

Local reactions were reportedly ‘*philosophical*’ i.e., disbelieving.

The Minister, Mr Fletcher, rabbited on about Mr Albanese being good at talking, not building. As if, in the case of high-speed rail, not-building was some problem. [[14]](#footnote-14)

Then again, he is the Minister who offered the unique perspective – in writing - that single and double deck trains can’t use the same track. As part of an attempted excuse for the Metro-in-Sydney’s-suburban-Siberia atrocity.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Someone from the Australia Institute was reported as calling Mr Albanese’s announcement smart – on SkyTV and News.com.

Shadow Infrastructure Minister Ms King followed up by praising the announcement because it is a big ‘plan’ that has been ignored.

Overlooking the possibility that plans – if they aim at bad objectives – can lead to disasters. If plans are big enough, catastrophes loom. Recall Fall Weiss and Unternehmen Barbarossa? – well implemented, but might have been best avoided.

All, except that possibility, reported in the Australian, of course. Talk about bi-partisan![[16]](#footnote-16)

## A professor professes

A professor-authored article in the Conversation offered muted support.[[17]](#footnote-17)

After stating the obvious – Newcastle-Sydney is the logical route to start developing modern regional rail services– it offered some caveats.

A first: while such a scheme for a Newcastle route might have potential, the vision of Brisbane to Melbourne is ridiculous and does not.

A second: the trains etc. should not be made in Australia. The offshore acquisition fixation of the NSW Government – trams with cracked frames, trains that don’t fit into tunnels, ferries of asbestos offering decapitation at high tide - are not reason for buying Australian-made.

Those caveats need some caveats.

## Caveats on the caveats 1

On the scheme: a high-speed 350kmh+ rail service Sydney-Newcastle lacks merit. The scheme of Mr Albanese’s previous ‘work’ is appallingly bad, especially for Newcastle. The reasons involve absence of benefit, presence of disbenefit and obscene costs.

The idea of placing a station way west of Newcastle, to save money, while incurring the cost of tunnelling vast distances under Sydney’s suburbs to reach its CBD is an insult to every Australian, particularly those residing in the Hunter.

It might also attract the attention of a future Federal corruption commission.

Proposing a completely new 350kmh system for a 45minute transit (after an hour bus ride to the well-west-of-Newcastle station!), when a standard train with a speed of say 220kmh can do the same job - taking a few minutes longer - is idiocy.[[18]](#footnote-18)

While Federal Labor claims to share a regional vision with the NSW Government (!) the extent of sharing apparently hasn’t got it a copy of the Sydney-Newcastle rail study. The study - not likely to be ‘a work’ – was completed for the State around three-year years ago by a bona fide fast rail expert.[[19]](#footnote-19)

*Apparently hasn’t got a copy*, because the State-sought study doesn’t rate a mention by the Opposition leader. Nor, rating a mention, was the Federal-State interaction that led to it. Perhaps not surprising, as apart from apparently spasmodic flutters – of the

‘*people said it couldn’t be done’*

chutzpah characteristic of the then State leadership - there remains silence from the NSW Government.

Meanwhile, the heir to the Newcastle Flyer – the Hamilton Dawdler – mopes along. [[20]](#footnote-20)

Even the locals don’t deserve to be mocked like this again.[[21]](#footnote-21)

## Caveats on caveats 2 – manufacturing

On manufacturing: it may be true that Australia will never be able to make a complete high-speed rail system. High speed trains are the nuclear-submarine equivalents of the transport world. The Concorde of railways.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Australia has a demonstrated ability to make good standard trains – think Goninans (UGL) at….Newcastle - some of which have top speeds approaching the necessary mark. Demand for such vehicles is many orders of magnitude greater, more predictable and regular than high speed trains.

True, Australian-made might not be list-price competitive. Yet, as the Berejiklian legacy in NSW amply demonstrates, the cost of a transport vehicle etc. is not just the list-price.

There are compelling reasons – perhaps unappreciated by academic economists – to consider buying locally made standard trains.

First, the fundamental need is to be an informed buyer. In transport, especially rail, proximity to making and maintaining assists in being informed. Some call this skills/knowledge transfer. It is the reason the NSW rail crash Commissions recommended rail asset owners be responsible for maintenance.

Clearly, the NSW Government in recent years became an uninformed buyer – but as such it could have saved much pain from buying local.

To put it crudely: even if a government can’t bother working out whether it is buying trains that fit tunnels, a local manufacturer certainly would – if for no reason other than to avoid enduring public shame.

Second, it is easier and faster to design, modify and to rectify problems of the machines made nearby.

## Summing up

Mr Albanese’s pitch for high-speed rail with reference to his earlier ‘work’– is a tired repeat of discredited stupidity. The attempted re-fresh through promises to build a railway-Concorde in Australia is worse yet.

Australia will not have high speed rail anytime in the distant future.

It will not manufacture any high-speed trains for local use.

As one comic put it: this needs Harry Potter’s wand, not just his glasses.

Cruel, but fair.

Even Master Potter’s spells couldn’t conjure a high-speed train from the vision here. But, with a bit of practice, the Opposition Leader could, like Harry, be among first to do a reasonable *expecto patronum*. Even if it does consign the cause to its rightful place.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Unlike the Harry Potter series, this is not harmless make-believe. Such fatuous fantasy, parading as policy, can only prevent what can - probably should - be done: standard, faster trains between the big State capitals and second tier cities. Sensible proposals to connect second tier cities and State capitals by faster – not high speed – trains.

To those cities, not some paddock over 20 km away.

The ‘announcement’ is worse than useless. It distracts from priorities: overriding the Newcastle port restriction; transport interoperability throughout Australia, including within cities and across States; proper urban planning; road pricing; technology transfer and skill development in things Australia needs. Etc.

Perhaps something else will reveal Labor – or the Coalition - has done more on infrastructure since the last election than be duped by the bureaucracy and watch Harry Potter re-runs?[[24]](#footnote-24)

J Austen

16 January 2022

1. <https://johnmenadue.com/policy-wreck-were-being-told-two-contradictory-stories-about-nsw-trains/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.thejadebeagle.com/policy-spad-update-2-jan-2022.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://johnmenadue.com/the-curious-case-of-the-new-airports-metro/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.alp.org.au/policies/high-speed-rail-authority> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-01-02/anthony-albanese-pledges-sydney-newcastle-fast-rail-funds/100734900> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A ‘work’ is *‘the portrayal of staged events…as "real" or "true"’* – in professional wrestling: ‘<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kayfabe> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.thejadebeagle.com/high-speed-rail---a-note.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-fast-rail-apologies-please-from-perpetrators/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://anthonyalbanese.com.au/our-policies/sydney-to-hunter-fast-rail> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-fast-rail-apologies-please-from-perpetrators/> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-post-election-infrastructure-review/> <https://www.thejadebeagle.com/road-to-woy-woy.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Compare <https://anthonyalbanese.com.au/our-policies/sydney-to-hunter-fast-rail> with note 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-time-to-call-time-on-infrastructure-australia/> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/albaneses-highspeed-rail-plan-criticised-for-lacking-detail/video/4cc739b47b91ad2d7d25c5fcd02edc40> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. <https://www.thejadebeagle.com/uploads/2/9/6/9/29699183/commonwealth_ministers_rsponse_to_austen_may_letter.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. <https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/politics/smart-announcement-labor-pitches-highspeed-rail-between-newcastle-and-sydneys-cbd/video/b9de65b05cee5181511f77e93b5a72be>

    <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/labor-will-get-on-with-vital-works-coalition-has-ignored/news-story/14601a0ec2109584b40d3eabf41fde0c> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. <https://theconversation.com/vital-signs-sydney-to-newcastle-fast-rail-makes-sense-making-trains-locally-does-not-174341> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. <https://www.thejadebeagle.com/rail-gun---the-hamilton-dawdler.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. <https://www.nsw.gov.au/media-releases/fast-rail-network-to-transform-nsw> [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. <https://www.nsw.gov.au/media-releases/fast-rail-network-to-transform-nsw>;

    <https://www.thejadebeagle.com/rail-gun---the-hamilton-dawdler.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. <https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-fast-rail-apologies-please-from-perpetrators/> [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. <https://uic.org/IMG/pdf/high_speed_brochure.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *‘The Patronus Charm is a powerful projection of hope and happiness that drives away Dementors; a corpeal Patronus takes the corneal respective animal form of the caster, while a non-corpeal appears as a wisp of light; at 13, Harry Potter was the youngest known witch or wizard to prouduce a corpeal Patronus’.*<https://www.oprahdaily.com/entertainment/a32598018/harry-potter-spells-list/> i.e. don’t blame me for the spelling. And dementors? *‘"soulless creatures... among the foulest beings on Earth": a phantom species who, as their name suggests, gradually deprive human minds of happiness and intelligence.’* [*https://www.google.com/search?q=harry+potter+dementors&rlz=1C1CHBF\_enAU754AU754&oq=harry+potter+dementors&aqs=chrome..69i57j0i512l9.6646j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8*](https://www.google.com/search?q=harry+potter+dementors&rlz=1C1CHBF_enAU754AU754&oq=harry+potter+dementors&aqs=chrome..69i57j0i512l9.6646j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8)Maybe not such a good spell for those wanting high-speed rail. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. <https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-post-election-infrastructure-review/> [↑](#footnote-ref-24)