## Ground control to Canberra: corridor protection? We have problems

*This article deals with Infrastructure Australia’s latest reform report - corridor protection - and the resulting depressing high speed rail humbug.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Articles on an earlier ‘reform’ report - public transport franchising – questioned Infrastructure Australia’s understanding of what it said.[[2]](#endnote-1)

Previous articles commented on high speed rail in Australia. As with other pipe dreams, local infatuation with Japanese Shinkansen, European TGV/ICE or Chinese Maglev style rail virtually prevents consideration of useful, realistic ideas such as bringing places like Newcastle, Wollongong or Geelong to within a reasonable commute, say 1 hour, of the big cities. [[3]](#endnote-2)

Melbourne to Brisbane ultra-high speed rail and never-ever trivia like universal road pricing stops discussion about national goals like gauge standardisation and proper truck charging on highways. Meanwhile your national Government flails around looking for something to do but ends up wasting time and vast sums of your money in confecting curios for transport’s side-show alley.

Vision? Hardly.

It is a real concern when the two combine; when official reports create mirages of a high speed rail el dorado. Unfortunately, Infrastructure Australia’s report on corridor protection did so.[[4]](#endnote-3)

The report argued to protect a corridor for a high speed rail fantasy. One commentator noted the follow through:

*‘The Chairman of Infrastructure Australia, Mark Birrell, told the media (see* [*Act now on high-speed rail or pay heavy price later: Infrastructure Australia*](http://www.theage.com.au/national/act-now-on-highspeed-rail-or-pay-heavy-price-later-infrastructure-australia-20170706-gx63fz.html)*):*

*“No one is saying we won’t need high-speed rail in 20 years, but to do that you need preserve the corridor now”.[[5]](#endnote-4)*

Some considered that confusing comment (to do what no one is saying won’t be needed?) and the corridor protection report to be green lights for the ‘official’ – Melbourne to Brisbane - version of high speed rail. Why protect a corridor unless a project is to go ahead? Moreover, the report said construction on the first leg, Sydney to Canberra, could start soon.

Corridor protection can be a good thing if it is pretty certain a project will go ahead and if the right corridor is identified. Here corridor protection fails on both counts; it is irresponsible to argue for the ‘official’ version of Melbourne-Brisbane high speed rail and the proposed corridor is dumb.

The official version of high speed rail is from a ‘study’ by the Commonwealth Department of Infrastructure and Transport.

Aspects of the study were ludicrous; demand from NSW southern highlands to exceed that of Newcastle and the Central Coast combined; the route going into the centre of Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane at prohibitive cost yet bypassing other centres like the Gold Coast and Newcastle on the basis of time/expense; Canberra on a spur line like now - no direct connection with Melbourne; a hopelessly uneconomic cost north of $110bn (in 2012 terms); an inability to match the more efficient aviation mode etc. It was as if the study tried prove the stupidity of the idea.

If Australia is to ever have high speed rail, it must not follow the Department’s bizarre views. It must discard the ‘official’ version of high speed rail.

The best approach is to move gradually towards higher speed rail by incremental, relatively inexpensive, improvements around existing lines – like reducing curves.

Yet Infrastructure Australia’s report suggested spending around $5billion to protect the Department’s route.[[6]](#endnote-5)

As they say, ‘earth to Canberra: there is a problem’.

There is a further problem; conflict between the corridor protection report and recommended infrastructure priorities.

The report claims high speed rail was in the 2016 priority lists. However, it was not recommended by those lists or by the 2017 lists – in the parlance it is merely an ‘initiative’ not a ‘project’.[[7]](#endnote-6)

The reason high speed rail is not recommended? There has been nothing for Infrastructure Australia to assess. While high speed rail first appeared in Infrastructure Australia’s February 2016 national ‘plan’ it does not reflect the audit on which the plan is supposedly based. There remains no apparent business case.[[8]](#endnote-7)

The appearance is of Infrastructure Australia promoting spending on something it doesn’t recommend. Like in its public transport franchising report re Sydney metro and Cross River Rail.

What is to be made of this? Do the ‘reform’ reports offer a nod and a wink while the priority list is for posterity?

Earth to Canberra: there are problem**s**.

Others apparently agree; there are suggestions the Productivity Commission should assess some projects. The Prime Minister’s infrastructure financing unit will need to do some sort of project assessments.

Australia does not suffer from a lack of infrastructure boosters and lobbying; it would be regrettable for Infrastructure Australia to become associated with ‘that space’.

Australia lacks a sensible national transport plan – the Australian infrastructure plan has demonstrably failed to progress this. Australia also suffers from the absence of guidance on the proper role for its Federal Government – apart from when the High Court slaps down some Government excesses and bureaucratic arrogance.

All would be better off it Infrastructure Australia tried to fix these failures rather than seek applause from the business gallery or catch the next gravy train – however fast and well-funded it might be.

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1. *The author was an adviser to Infrastructure Australia until mid 2014.*

 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-does-infrastructure-australia-understand-its-ideas-for-public-transport-franchising/>; http://www.thejadebeagle.com/weird-scenes.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. <https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-high-speed-rail-where-to-competing-with-airlines-or-cars/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. <http://infrastructureaustralia.gov.au/policy-publications/publications/files/CorridorProtection.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
5. <https://blogs.crikey.com.au/theurbanist/2017/07/10/corridors-protected-hsr/> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
6. The corridor protection report does not present outlays but includes present value figures – discounted at 7%; for high speed rail corridor protection these are $4349m to $5151m. Against this some rental income might be achieved – the report assumed $1571m. Given the discount rate, actual gross outlays are likely to exceed $5billion. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
7. ‘Initiatives’ are: ‘*potential infrastructure solutions for which a business case has not yet been completed*.’ In contrast projects are ‘*potential infrastructure solutions for which a full business case has been completed and been positively assessed by the Infrastructure Australia Board*.’ That is, initiatives have not been positively assessed, and therefore cannot (yet) be recommended. The corridor protection matters are listed as initiatives. <http://infrastructureaustralia.gov.au/projects/infrastructure-priority-list.aspx>. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
8. The audit, published in 2015, did not mention high speed rail in its transport section or transport audit findings, not surprising since high speed rail does not exist in Australia – there is nothing to be audited.

The audit referred to high speed rail once, in the section on corridor protection (4.1.2), as follows:

*‘ As highlighted by Infrastructure Partnerships Australia in its report on corridor protection in 2010 , and the Australian Government’s High Speed Rail Study in 2013, the implications of inaction in this area are not benign’*

<http://infrastructureaustralia.gov.au/policy-publications/publications/Australian-Infrastructure-Audit.aspx>

However, it did appear in the Australian infrastructure plan priority list February 2016 which claimed protection of the Department’s corridor to be an audit identified gap. <http://infrastructureaustralia.gov.au/projects/files/Australian_Infrastructure_Plan-Infrastructure_Priority_List.pdf>.

The absence of a business case is inferred from the initiative not being included in the list of current business cases under assessment <http://infrastructureaustralia.gov.au/projects/infrastructure-priority-list.aspx>. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)