# High speed rail – where to

*This article proposes a change in focus for the high speed rail debate. Rather than seeking to outpace airliners, rail should contribute to settlement that eases pressures on capital cities. This does not require ego stoking thousand kilometre distances at 350kph plus speeds, but trains for comfortable commuting between second tier cities and capitals. Costs would be lower, demand higher. Newcastle-Sydney is the obvious candidate.*

## The present idea

Train buffs and infrastructure spendathon proponents periodically excite themselves about high speed rail in Australia. They dream of thousands of kilometres of modern rails and latest technology trains averaging speeds over 250 kph. Enthusiasm can be infectious when possible spoils appear: advisory fees; finance and construction contracts; a killing in real estate.

The current bout was triggered by a lengthy study overseen by the Department of Infrastructure and Transport. Its scheme of a steel speedway Melbourne-Brisbane via Sydney, starting with Canberra-Sydney, was lauded by some commentators and those who believe rail spending is intrinsically good.

Some see the subsequent call for a high speed rail authority as signalling ‘this time it’s for real’; others see it as a more a deferral tactic than a stepping stone.[[1]](#endnote-1)

There are doubters aplenty. They point to a cost well north of $110billion, our low population and the failure of previous proposals.

The doubters are right about the proposed scheme. Despite the detail and effort in the study, the price tag and seeming eccentricities hardly promote confidence in the future. Building confidence requires more than money for further studies, a public authority or an implementation plan. A first need is to challenge apparently strange ideas like:

* Canberra being on a dead end rather than on the route Sydney-Melbourne;
* Stations at small rather than large towns, or at unusual locations like 20km west of Newcastle;
* Implausible claims of patronage on the NSW southern highlands.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The common thread: the ‘debate’ in Australia assumes competition with intercapital aviation to be the main purpose of high speed rail. Such an assumption flows easily from a Department that sees interstate aviation as central to its role.

*If so* it would make sense to look at routes with high airline demand; Sydney-Melbourne has one of the highest in the world. Sydney-Canberra, part of that route, would seem a logical start. It would make sense to look at super-fast trains, offering times and fares competitive with air travel. Stations would be near the centre of capital cities, with large regional centres like Ballina or the Gold Coast bypassed to reduce costs or cut travel time. Assessments would look at travel times. All this is in the study.

Post study ‘strategic advice’ about high speed rail would hinge on aviation capacity. As capacity is to expand, eg. Badgery’s Creek airport, advice today would not recommend high speed rail.[[3]](#endnote-3)

All of which is based on a big if: *‘if the purpose is competition with aviation*’. I think this assumption is wrong for Australia.

## A different idea

A different picture emerges if rail is seen as a tool for access rather than just mobility, with potential to influence settlement, population and employment as per the cities agenda and ‘value capture’.

Then the places to consider are large centres near the biggest cities. Rail would compete against cars rather than aircraft. Train technology would aim to match city commuting times; a place would be ‘near’ a city if it was within a 1 hour train ride.

Higher speeds than now would be needed, but not immediately the extremes sought overseas. Tracks could be improved to high speed capability, tackling the hard part of a larger intercapital system if Australia ever became so inclined.

Among candidates: Gold Coast-Brisbane; Wollongong-Sydney; Newcastle-Sydney. None are served by aviation, all suffer from road congestion, all have growth potential, all could be the start to an intercapital route.

Of these Newcastle is the most logical. It seems a better bet than the study’s choice, Canberra. It is closer, and the area (Hunter) has more people than Canberra. Costs would be lower than Canberra-Sydney. Such factors would be reinforced by discarding some of the apparently strange ideas in the study.

Perhaps, indeed probably, higher speed rail Newcastle-Sydney is not economically justified today. But that is no excuse to exclusively push Canberra-Sydney. One risk: high speed rail for Canberra may again prove to be a straw man, negating progress for years to come; a sad outcome for Australia.

## Where to?

The debate needs to be fundamentally changed away from competition with aviation, super-fast trains, capital cities only, ultra-long distances and incredible costs.

The study overseen by the Department, while containing some value, should not be the strategic starting point. There is no point to a further similar study.

If the Coalition is re-elected the Commonwealth should seek to negotiate (through NSW) a ‘city deal’ for the Hunter area including higher speed rail.

If Labor takes office, the Commonwealth should instruct the high speed rail authority to immediately investigate and report on prospects of higher speed rail Hunter-Sydney.

A final point: since cessation of rail services to Newcastle, the Hunter lacks a significant or terminus railway station. The proper location of an appropriate major station for the area is a matter that should be raised by whoever wins the election.[[4]](#endnote-4)

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1. High speed rail studies available at <https://infrastructure.gov.au/rail/trains/high_speed/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The phase 2 study report suggests:

   Canberra should be on the end of a spur line as is presently the case. The alternative, Canberra on the Sydney-Melbourne route, would significantly increase cost;

   Stations for Casino (pop. 10,000) and Grafton (pop. 19,000), but not for Lismore (pop. 45,000) or Ballina (pop. over 42,000, airport for Byron Bay);

   The station for Newcastle is proposed to be on the outskirts of the urban area; over 20km south west of the CBD and away from a proposed major transport hub at Glendale. (The equivalent for Canberra would be railway station near Murrumbateman NSW);

   Demand for travel with Sydney at a station in the southern highlands eg. Mittagong (area pop. around 50,000) would be substantially more than for Newcastle which is a similar distance and has at least 10 times that population (phase 2 report table ES-5 or 2-17). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The study ‘base case’ explicitly assumed no second airport for the Sydney basin. It also assumed an inability of airlines to permanently reduce airfares as a competitive response, eg. continuing cabotage. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Train services stopped running to Newcastle terminus in late 2014 and now terminate at a minor station, Hamilton. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)