# High speed rail again? – CLARA

Another proposal involving high speed rail Sydney-Melbourne recently surfaced; from CLARA (Consolidated Land and Rail Australia).[[1]](#endnote-1)

Extensive media reports noted an advisory board including former Trade Minister the Hon. Andrew Robb AO, ex Premiers the Hon. Barry O’Farrell and the Hon. Steve Bracks AC, and former US Transportation Secretary Ray Lahood. A figure of $200billion was mentioned, with a claim it will not rely on government investment.[[2]](#endnote-2)

So far the outline is sketchy; there are 4 website pages and a sub 3 minute video. The idea seems to be to create a series of new cities in inland NSW and Victoria linked to the state capitals by high speed rail. It is a decentralisation plan of which high speed rail is one aspect. Decades could pass before such a plan came to fruition.

High speed rail is to be funded by ‘value capture’. One media claim is that rural land worth $1.2billion would become residential lots worth $180.0billion, providing a source of infrastructure funds. Subdivision and high speed rail works would be concurrent.

Stage 1 would be Melbourne to the Shepparton region with a high speed rail cost of $13.0billion. It could commence within 5 years, with a rail connection and a first stage of two cities within 10 years.

CLARA has a ‘political mandate’ as an early step. I presume this is the essence of the proposal.

The decentralisation motive has a subtext of rejuvenating rural Victoria. While this may be a worthy aim, and with all due respect to those involved, questions should be *publicly* answered before the proposal for a mandate is taken seriously. Some starters are:

* The nature and ownership of the CLARA organisation;
* The location (and size) of new cities;
* The proposed route;
* Why Canberra, Wagga and Albury are on spur lines;
* Financial risks eg. of rail spending undertaken concurrently with land subdivision;
* Whether tax concessions are sought eg. for capital gains;
* Above all, the content of the ‘political mandate’.

Already some fear the proposal is ‘a potential trainwreck’.[[3]](#endnote-3)

It would be a national tragedy to delay or rule out relatively modest higher speed rail proposals with reasonable chances of success because of national attention or ‘mandates’ restricting consideration to grand ideas.

This is especially the case if practical higher speed rail prospects such as Sydney to Newcastle are ignored because of decisions to limit proposals (yet again) to high speed rail as an attempt to populate Australia’s interior or to compete with airlines.

In the foreseeable future, large coastal cities like Newcastle, Wollongong, Geelong, Gold Coast offer an approach to higher speed rail and decentralisation easier and more consistent with historical trends than intercapital long hauls. They have better prospects of helping to address capital city issues that exist today.

In any event, consideration of a ‘political mandate’ for CLARA or any privately generated proposal should be the subject of Parliamentary debate informed by expert advice and extensive public consultation. No ‘mandate’ should preclude other ideas.

Hopefully CLARA will soon reveal much more so a debate can supplement media stories.

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1. http://www.clara.com.au/index.html [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-14/high-speed-rail-linking-sydney-and-melbourne-one-step-closer/7627990 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.afr.com/business/transport/land-boom-deals-to-fund-200b-fast-rail-smart-cities-corridor-20160714-gq5q1w [↑](#endnote-ref-3)