**High speed train to Newcastle?**

*Federal Labor’s announcement re a high-speed train Sydney-Newcastle suggests a problem – indifference.*

**The vision**

Opposition Leader Mr Albanese recently made headlines by promising a high-speed train starting in Sydney to somewhere closer to Newcastle. To:

*‘build on the work of the last Labor Government, which completed a feasibility study…..’.*

The ‘vision’ on the [Labor website](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5CJohn%5CDocuments%5CLabor%20website) has a 350kmh train eventually running along the East Coast. Sydney towards Newcastle is to be the first stage.

The ‘vision’ at Mr Albanese’s [website](https://anthonyalbanese.com.au/our-policies/sydney-to-hunter-fast-rail) has the Newcastle high speed train 100kmh slower – yet doing the trip in the same time, 45 minutes. In an interview Mr Albanese referred to a first step –a [two hour trip](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-01-02/anthony-albanese-pledges-sydney-newcastle-fast-rail-funds/100734900).

The Commonwealth is to provide $500m as a down-payment, t0 [buy land for ‘the vision’](https://anthonyalbanese.com.au/our-policies/sydney-to-hunter-fast-rail). Trains are to (potentially) be built in Australia. It is to be overseen by a High-Speed Rail Authority. The supposed reason for the vision: growth.

The announcement is embarrassing.

Prior to discussing that, some views on what should happen.

**What should happen**

1. NSW should publish the study conducted in 2018 by Prof [McNaughten](https://www.nsw.gov.au/a-fast-rail-future-for-nsw) for fast rail between places like Newcastle and Sydney.

2. There should be proposals for a passenger rail system allowing a 1-hour transit time from the centre of Newcastle to a major centre in Sydney – CBD, Chatswood, Parramatta etc.

3. The Commonwealth might support a Newcastle faster train proposal if a public inquiry proves it has economic and social merit - but only as part of a ‘city deal’ with NSW.

4. The purpose of the deal would be adjustment of the area from reliance on coal in a manner that eases pressures in Sydney. Other elements of the deal should include support for education and training, revocation of the restriction on Newcastle Port, and (re)location of Commonwealth and State supported services into Newcastle.

5. The Commonwealth might also consider similar initiatives for other second tier cities – Geelong and Wollongong.

**Reasons**

1. Professor McNaughten is a world authority on fast rail. His study, while unpublished, will be far more credible than the Departmental ‘feasibility’ report done for Mr Albanese when Infrastructure Minister.

2. The right concept is to bring Newcastle and a centre in the Sydney basin within each other’s commuting catchment. The relevant transit time is 1 hour.

3. There have been several ‘fast-train to Newcastle proposals’. None have been properly assessed. Proper assessment requires a public inquiry, not a behind-closed-doors review such as by organisations like Infrastructure Australia.

4. Commonwealth objectives in contributing to transport infrastructure should relate to [formal responsibilities](https://johnmenadue.com/car-parks-certainly-corrupt-and-probably-illegal/) – in this case international trade, (climate) treaties. Achievement of such objectives requires State cooperation.

5. The purpose of the commuting catchment is to facilitate future structural adjustment while reducing growth pressures in Sydney. Only places with the proximity, size and latent capacity of Newcastle – or Wollongong - can credibly do so. Issues beyond rail need to be addressed. The restriction preventing a Newcastle container facility [must be removed](https://johnmenadue.com/newcastle-port-decision-overreach-misunderstanding-or-both/). Support for training and knowledge transfer is important. Provision of Commonwealth and State supported services such that people outside the Sydney basin will not need to travel there - because facilities are available in Newcastle etc. – is critical.

**The proposed policy**

Mr Albanese is yet to recognise the 2013 high-speed rail report - he ordered when Minister - was [a ‘work’](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kayfabe), dudded Newcastle and put back the cause of regional development-fast rail by years.

[For example,](https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-fast-rail-apologies-please-from-perpetrators/) it had Mittagong (region population 0.05 million) generating roughly the same number of passengers for Sydney as Newcastle and the Central Coast combined (population 1.2 million). Its preferred site for the ‘Newcastle’ station was over 20km – an hour bus ride – from the CBD.

The more recent history is also unfortunate.

In 2017, Prime Minister Turnbull, frustrated at how high-speed rail mirages play into the hands of obdurate road-dominated bureaucracies, offered funds for studies into realistic faster rail between capitals and second tier cities – e.g 1 hour transits Sydney-Newcastle.

The NSW bureaucracy, sensing this as a credible threat, arranged a test run of an existing Sydney-Newcastle train. The result – a 2-hour trip - was reported to then Premier Berejiklian who initially agreed that should be (mis)represented as a challenging target. As soon as NSW realised the public might see this as a con it hired Professor McNaughten to conduct a bona fide study – using Federal money.

After policy responsibility in the Commonwealth moved to the Infrastructure Minister, subsequent NSW comments like ‘*we won’t wait for the Commonwealth’* were met with indifference. The bureaucracies apparently went back to sleep content McNaughten’s work remains secret.

Then came Mr Albanese’s [cringeworthy](https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-high-speed-rail-bite-the-bullet-please/) high-speed rail commentary in the last election campaign. In Newcastle.

The key fact is a 1-hour Sydney-Newcastle target time does not need a high-speed train. A fast train – up to 220kmh – could do. The differences are: a fast train would be much less expensive, less risky and could involve significant local manufacturing.

A high-speed rail system – the railway equivalent of Concorde or nuclear submarines - would be extremely costly, risky and could not be manufactured in Australia at a competitive price.

As such, using $500m to buy land for the high-speed corridor identified in the 2013 Departmental study - like the station site over 20km from Newcastle - would be idiotic and worthy of investigation by a Federal corruption commission.

Further, a Federal High Speed Rail Authority is not needed and potentially is a backward step of further institutionalising infrastructure lobbying.

**Conclusion**

The January 2022 announcement:

* has Labor ‘building on’ a 2013 study almost designed to show it is stupid;
* offers different proposals on Labor’s and Mr Albanese’s websites;
* failed to mention the McNaughten study for NSW;
* reiterated a 2 hour interim target - abandoned by the State as a con job.

It was a virtual repeat of Mr Albanese’s high-speed rail offering of [the last election campaign](https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-post-election-infrastructure-review/%20%20https%3A/johnmenadue.com/car-parks-certainly-corrupt-and-probably-illegal/), leaving the same impression of indifference.

That it was in Newcastle, the city singled out for bizarre mistreatment in the 2013 study, is particularly embarrassing.

There is a better approach – examining proposals for a 1 hour transit from a centre in Sydney to central Newcastle, as part of a wider city deal to facilitate structural adjustment while easing pressures in Sydney.