

BACK ON TRACK REPORT TABLING

MONDAY 4 JUNE 2001

PAUL NEVILLE MP

Mr Speaker, the report I have just tabled, *Back on Track*, contains the results of a review by the House Transport Committee of recent progress in interstate rail reform.

In April last year, the Government issued its response to *Tracking Australia*, an earlier report from the Committee on the same subject. In its response, the Government acknowledged the considerable economic and social advantages that would flow from an efficient interstate rail network. It also noted that at present, the interstate rail network is not managed efficiently and that further reforms are needed.

To encourage these reforms, the Government proposed a series of benchmarks aimed at facilitating access to the interstate track for rail operators, ensuring mutual recognition of accreditation and harmonising safety standards.

Moreover, the Government committed itself to considering legislative intervention to achieve these aims if the States and the industry were not able to achieve them by mid-2001.

Mr Speaker, it is now mid-2001 and the reform benchmarks have not been achieved.

We conclude in *Back on Track* that further reform will not be achieved without direct and forceful Commonwealth Government action.

If the community is to reap the rewards of an efficient interstate rail system, the Government must now move to take the action foreshadowed in its response to *Tracking Australia*.

We believe that four actions are imperative;

- first, the Government must declare the existing standard gauge rail line from Brisbane to Perth to be a 'National Track';
- second, the Government must establish a National Rail Network Manager to ensure a consistent access regime for operators;
- third, the Government must establish a National Rail Transport Commission to ensure coherent cross-border planning for the future of the industry; and
- finally, the Government must fund a significant infrastructure redevelopment program to overcome chronic deficiencies in rail infrastructure.

Declaration of a national track is the cornerstone of this package.

It would act as a springboard for an integrated series of further reforms in the industry, in much the same way as declaration of the national highway resulted in significant reform of the road transport industry. Specifically, it would:

- allow more integrated and efficient management of track access than at present;
- provide a harmonised operating environment for private sector rail operators;
- provide a stable, consistent regulatory environment for private sector investors; and, importantly
- define government funding responsibilities with a clarity they lack at present, thereby providing rationale and opportunity for targeted Government investment at a rate which reflects rail's potential contribution to the national transport task.

There is also a desperate need for the Commonwealth to fund a major below track infrastructure re-development program.

We are deeply concerned that the rail industry attracts a relatively small proportion of government funding for transport infrastructure. I do not quibble with the need for continuing high levels of road funding (indeed the Committee support such a commitment in its 1997 report *Planning not Patching*), but I do believe that a better balance needs to be achieved in funding the development of our national transport infrastructure.

I was very pleased to note that the recent national infrastructure audit from the Australian Rail Track Corporation has provided a 'blueprint' of infrastructure investment options, along with assessments of the scope, feasibility and cost of such works.

A genuine opportunity now exists for the Government to take advantage of the momentum that is building in the reform process:

- the community and the industry want better interstate rail services;
- *Back on Track* has mapped out the regulatory and management reforms that are needed; and
- the ARTC has revealed a coherent set of national investment priorities.

The benefits of further rail reform are significant and enduring. All that is needed now is the political will to confront the challenges of reform: the will to cut through the parochial concerns, vested interests and red tape that bind the industry to its past.

I am hopeful that the Government will accept this challenge and deliver the reforms it has foreshadowed.

I commend this report to the House.

END

4 June 2001