

Auslink

Under Auslink, the Federal Government's National Land transport plan, the route Melbourne to Hobart has not been included as a "Corridor of National Significance". All other capital cities are connected. Australia should be entitled to be connected by an integrated interstate corridor, not just mainland states, as proposed.

For years, the Nation has an arguable moral and probable legal right to a further National Highway interstate link under the existing Australian Land Transport Development Act (ALTDA). Under the Act, the Commonwealth may be able to declare and then fund, toll free, National Highway access to Tasmania. The highway can be established virtually overnight by the declaration of Bass Strait ferries as part of the land-based National Highway that connects Northern Tasmania to Hobart. However, as part of the Federal Government's proposed national transport plan, this opportunity could pass as a result of adjustment to or rescission of the ALTDA.

Under the current Auslink proposals, all mainland states are to be connected by a system of corridors of national significance. Victoria is recognised as connected by two "corridors of national significance". These are Melbourne to Sydney and Melbourne to Adelaide. Regardless of whether the ALTDA continues, there seems a compelling argument based on sound equitable and economic grounds for Victoria and Tasmania to seek to have the full surface link between Melbourne and Hobart also recognised as a third corridor.

Access to Tasmania for travel with vehicles and some freight is already covered by two existing Federal Government funded Bass Strait equalisation schemes -The Tasmanian Freight Equalisation Scheme (TFES) and the Bass Strait Passenger Vehicle Equalisation Scheme (BSPVES). The schemes' very existence demonstrates the Commonwealth's will to go some way compensate for the lack of a land - based highway link. While in place for some years, these schemes are however not enshrined in legislation and their continuance can be subject to the political will of either of the major parties. Despite the uncapped funded nature of the schemes they are starting to, but do not yet guarantee the same personal mobility or access for all freight as on other national corridors. These schemes underpin Bass Strait transport and reduce and effectively equalise access costs for many Australians crossing Bass Strait with a vehicle and the cost of only some goods sold by Victorian companies to Tasmania. Many of these Victorian companies have regional or head offices based in Melbourne. The impact of these schemes should not be underestimated.

The schemes also allow the Tasmanian Government, indirectly a major operator in Bass Strait ferries carrying freight and people, a level of significant influence to control both price and scope of passenger and freight access.

Despite this, most consumer goods, including most grocery items and many building materials sent by sea from Victoria to Tasmania, are not covered by the existing schemes. This omission increases the cost of these goods when

landed in Tasmania. With a lack of full freight equalisation, many Victorian manufacturers sending goods south to Tasmania could well argue that they are disadvantaged and should receive the same treatment when accessing the Tasmanian market as Tasmanian manufacturers receive under the Tasmanian Freight Equalisation Scheme when sending goods to Victoria.

Tasmanian consumers may well argue that they should benefit from a competitive "level playing field" between consumables made in Tasmania and goods from interstate with a much higher un-equalised freight component.

The cost of moving some grocery items by road across Australia from Victoria to Perth is, on one estimate, just slightly more than moving goods a much shorter distance between Victoria and Hobart.

All Australians, regardless in which state they live, should share in a National transport system connecting all states which guarantees surface travel at the same cost per kilometre as on all parts of the corridor. Competition between mainland states is based on this principle as is the "TFES". Tasmania is not a remote state. It is about 400 km away from Melbourne by ferry and an arbitrary distinction can no longer be made between equitable land-based access including the crossing of mountains and rivers and the lower cost access over the waters of Bass Strait.

If the full route, Melbourne to Hobart, were accepted as a "corridor of national significance" funding under an intended National plan would presumably be equally applied to reflect equality of the cost of travel on all routes of national importance. This would equalise the cost of all freight crossing Bass Strait in both directions to the cost of road travel. It will also enshrine the right to personal mobility for all Australians who, in a spirit of federation, would be able to travel to every state, including Tasmania, at highway equivalent cost. The impact of this acceptance may be felt by a significant reduction in the sea fare applying to foot passengers, groups and families of three passengers or more who cross Bass Strait and those towing ancillary vehicles.

The effect of the Coalition's funding of the Bass Strait Passenger Vehicle Equalisation Scheme ("BSPVES"), with the subsequent introduction of the two ferries, now capable of offering up to 4 crossings a day, with effectively equalised costs of travel for one and two passengers and a vehicle, without cabin accommodation, but still offering limited capacity at these fare levels, has recently demonstrated the success, importance and wisdom of the Coalition's introduction of well-funded equalised National links between Victoria and Tasmania. With the recent introduction by the Tasmanian Government of two fast mono-hull vessels crossing the Strait, it would seem likely that there is sufficient capacity and Commonwealth funding to offer all-year highway equivalent connections between the two states.

With the emergence of the importance of service industries within western democracies, including Australia, greater emphasis needs now to be given to maximising personal mobility rather than just the traditional emphasis on the

movement of freight. Access to people is just as vital an economic ingredient for the service industries as raw materials are to the manufacturing sector and both people and freight carriers are able to share National Highways equally.

Some in Victoria may also expect, given the success of the Nationally funded BSPVES, that a national corridor would be operated to draw the maximum numbers of highway travellers from other states through Victoria on their way to and from Tasmania. Victorians may not continue to be the principal source of Tasmanian tourism. As many passenger and vehicle access costs to Tasmania reduce further under non-seasonal highway equivalence, Victoria may reap the same degree of commercial benefit as New South Wales enjoys when Victorians travel on holidays by car through that state to and from Queensland.

A well funded Commonwealth - Tasmanian study recently found that the principle barrier to crossing to Tasmania was the price of travel with a car and that the level of demand was price elastic. With cars now being carried free across Bass Strait for about 45 weeks or the year under the BSPVES, the effect of lower fares has been already demonstrated by a substantial increase in those crossing. No significant adverse impact on air travel has eventuated. With an integrated link incorporating lower access costs, greater use of existing capacity may eventuate, increasing numbers crossing by sea and increasing air travel to service a growing economy more significantly.

There are many significant opportunities for South Eastern Australia that can flow from Victoria and Tasmania's proper integration within a national transport network under national supervision. With a significant growth corridor to Tasmania in place, Victorian manufacturers can reap the benefits of serving a growing Tasmanian population rather than declining one. Tasmania will be able to stand on its two feet as an equal State of the Federation, not through handouts, but through equal links offering the business certainty of all year consistently priced interstate access pegged to the cost of other interstate road travel.

Victorian industries also could do well to look south rather than just focus on the corridor to Sydney. It should be remembered that just as Melbourne was first settled from Tasmania that route may again bring unexpected benefits.

If Tasmania does not seek the corridor, it can expect that its existing part of the National Highway will fall within a corridor of regional significance. It will need to continue to rely on existing equalisation schemes without a national corridor. If these schemes are not modified, or changes made by Tasmania to its passenger fare or freight schedules to reflect highway equivalence, the price of many goods from the mainland including groceries and building materials will not fall. Access for both freight and passengers will continue, skewed in a manner not seen on any other interstate highway link, and Tasmania will then need to cast its lot with regional Australia.

Regardless of the position taken by Tasmania under a Federated Australia, surface access to Tasmania needs to be integrated under national

governance reflecting equally the interests of the many stakeholders on both sides of Bass Strait. These interests include the largest stakeholder of them all, the people of Australia and their equal right to personal mobility between all States. Auslink can provide the ideal opportunity to do just that.

Peter Brohier is a lawyer, Chairman of the former National Sea Highway Committee and catalyst and lobbyist behind the Commonwealth's introduction of the Bass Strait Passenger Vehicle Equalisation Scheme. The Scheme has played a substantial role in the introduction by the Tasmanian Government's of two new Bass Strait ferries and a consequential Tasmanian economic revival.

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