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The Secretary,
House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Transport and Regional Services
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600.

Inquiry into the integration of regional rail and road freight transport and their interface with ports.

I wish to comment upon and express my views on aspects of the above inquiry.

As a person who lives a few kilometres from one of Australia's busiest ports, and certainly Australia's largest port for the export of coal I believe that the regional arterial road network around the Lower Hunter is grossly over-used for the transport of bulk commodities and the rail network under utilized. I base these opening remarks upon the numbers of large trucks, which use the F3 freeway north and south of my vantage point. Many of these heavy vehicles carry loads, which should be carried by rail. Not to do so is both inefficient and environmentally costly.

Successive NSW Governments especially and the Commonwealth Government, to a lesser extent, have been responsible for the lack of infrastructure funding to provide suitable rail networks to service the export of Australian grown and produced bulk commodities.

Spending upon regional rail infrastructure has been allowed to deteriorate at a rate, only exceeded by the loss of the rail network itself. Regional rail networks have become almost unusable or at most subject to load and speed restrictions which slow down the rate that bulk commodities like wheat and other grains can be removed from silos to the ports for shipping. As I am not as familiar with rail networks in other states I can only surmise that, if managed in a manner similar to NSW and starved of funds then they may be as moribund as those in NSW.

A typical example of the short-sighted management of our branch network was a decision to suspend three branch lines indefinitely and keep the Gwabegar to Binnaway line open long enough to remove grain in silos before it is closed. To quote from the report in the Sydney Morning Herald report of April 21 2005 the result will be that "thousands of extra truck movements will now be needed to compensate for the closure of the Gwabegar-Binnaway, Rankin Springs-Barmedman, Burcher-west Wyalong and Willbriggie-Yanco lines". To add insult to injury the Minister John Watkins believes financial nonsense that over a 20-year period the line maintenance would cost \$128.7 million while the road cost to upgrade the road system would be \$105.6 million. I defy the minister to defend a cost

estimate over the next 20 years that can be so precise. It certainly makes a complete mockery of the green credentials that the NSW government expresses. Rail would save more than the difference in fuel alone and would provide employment for its reconstruction in an area affected by the recent decision to preserve 348000 hectares of native vegetation/bushland (which I certainly approve of) and the closing down of a number of timber mills. The decision to close the branch lines demonstrates lack of any foresight whatsoever. This example illustrates the short-term horizon that most political decisions are floated over.

Rail should have dominance over road haulage of bulk freight to our ports. Such a position makes sense, economically and environmentally. By reducing road trauma through deaths and injuries associated with heavy transport, it makes sense as well from a human perspective.

I liken the attitude of the NSW Government over the past 40 years or so to that of the 19th century attitude to people suffering from leprosy. As each branch line calcifies due to neglect and lack of maintenance and care it is allowed to atrophy and fall off. From a Monty Python perspective, picture a trunk only! In terms of what the committee is considering then the closure of such regional rail infrastructure can only have a serious deleterious effect on the movement of freight to our ports.

Certainly figures that I have seen, indicate that freight carried by rail is 2 to 3 times more efficient in stopping additional greenhouse gas production than is road transport. In my opinion governments seem loath to properly account for the costs associated with additional carbon dioxide produced by road transport. They seem duly influenced by the trucking industry. In my view the committee should as one of its recommendations to the Federal Government seek to remove the country branch line rail system from the states and properly fund their reconstruction and long-term maintenance in order to ensure that an efficient rail system is maintained. Properly funded, almost all Australia's bulk freight could be transported by rail to our ports.

For too long the Commonwealth has held back on proper funding to update and modernise the antiquated, and in many cases the moribund branch network of the state rail system. Federal funds should be used to standardise our rail system, so that the branch lines that extend to state borders where possible are joined to the adjoining state. With such a programme commodities like grains, cotton coal etc could be railed to a number of ports rather than, as at the moment, only one or two. This would have the effect of, for example, allowing produce from Shepparton to be shifted through Finley to Newcastle or even Brisbane if required rather than just Victorian ports if it was more efficient and quicker to load at these ports.

While not on the present government's agenda it is my belief that over the next decade or two, worldwide greenhouse abatement will be mandatory, and so an early rationalisation and standardisation of rail lines should be negotiated and implemented without delay in order to meet such requirements.

Figures on the trade deficit published during last week showed that the deficit was increasing, with various government spokespeople, and private commentators acknowledging that the continued large imports of fuels, especially diesel, have a negative effect on the balance. This makes the transport of goods and freight by rail an imperative rather than simply a desirable objective.

I believe that properly funded and sited a number of intermodal freight hubs could be instituted across the country. With the containerisation of freight and with proper funding most of the freight to and from these hubs could be by rail, with road transport being used to distribute the containers the short local routes. In order to ensure that such hubs are efficient and economically viable the Commonwealth should fund the re-opening of the many branch rail lines closed by shortsighted State Transport Ministers.

A typical example might be Moree. With the re-opening of the line from Moree to the Queensland border and with the branch lines to Mungindi and Inverell upgraded and reopened, Moree could act as an important and busy freight hub. Local produce could be collected and transported from the silos to Moree while imported fuels and fertilisers distributed from Moree to local regional towns. Road transport would then be used to move freight away from the rail sidings.

Once wooden rail sidings were quite ubiquitous. With containerisation such sidings could be replaced with portable container cranes, which should be able to move along the rail system and thus be available to service the local delivery of rail freight to the railhead, by road transport. With freight hubs local trains could quickly move along the branch lines on a regular basis providing fast local movement of freight. Much larger trains assembled at the hubs would then move the goods to the required shipping port. From Moree for example freight could be moved to Newcastle or Brisbane or if the Inland Rail Line as mooted was constructed then to Melbourne, Adelaide or Perth.

Given the shortsighted nature of state rail decisions I have no problems with a combination of public/private monies being used to properly fund rail expansion. The recent outburst from the NSW State premier Bob Carr decrying the Inland Melbourne Brisbane Link simply typifies the lack of lateral thinking needed by governments. Should such a line be built then I believe that it will be incumbent for the Federal Government to re-open many of the atrophied branch lines to ensure that the inland line is efficiently used to haul freight to the ports.

Yours sincerely,

Bernard Griffin

