

Additional comments by Labor Senators

Labor Senators recognise the need for and support policies which will provide an integrated national transport policy for Australia.

Whilst Labor Senators agree in the main with the Committee's report, including recommendations regarding the passage of the Bills, some issues require further clarification.

It is important that the funding appropriated to AusLink be used in a transparent manner to deliver integrated national transport infrastructure which will serve the national interest.

However, in the wake of the highly politicised and questionable use of Regional Partnerships funding in the lead up to the 2004 election, the lack of transparency surrounding the assessment of AusLink projects approved in the same period and evidence heard by this committee, Labor Senators remain concerned that AusLink funding has the potential to become another part of the National Party's electoral slush fund.

National Highway Funding

The creation of an integrated land transport network has the potential to improve strategic infrastructure planning.

In the view of Labor Senators however, the implementation of an integrated land transport network is threatened by the change to the funding mix by the Howard Government in the first five year AusLink plan.

By abandoning its full responsibility to fund the construction and maintenance of the former National Highway System and requiring matching funding from the States, the Howard Government's AusLink policy threatens to force State governments to divert funds away from other important State road and rail infrastructure.

The Howard Government's decision to cap road maintenance funding at \$300 million per annum for five years coupled with a lack of ongoing commitment to maintenance foreshadows a significant threat to the condition of the former National Highway in future.

In the view of Labor Senators, the change to the funding mix must not foreshadow a future withdrawal or reduction of the Howard Government's responsibility to adequately fund both construction and maintenance of important national transport links, including all roads formerly fully funded by the Commonwealth.

Removing Politics from the Strategic Regional Projects Program

The Committee heard evidence that demonstrated the Howard Government had manipulated the Strategic Regional Projects program for political purposes during the 2004 election campaign.

Originally the program was to make available \$120 million, on a competitive basis to regional groupings, over five years.

However, prior to the development of guidelines and in many instances prior to receiving applications for funding, the Howard Government committed \$93 million of the available \$120 million in funding under this program in the lead up to the 2004 election.

It is now unclear whether a number of projects promised to date by the Howard government under this program will proceed given some funding commitments were made based on matching State/Territory Government funding without adequate consultation with or approval of funding by the relevant State or Territory Governments.

Recommendation

To avoid the perception or reality of the use of Strategic Regional Projects program funding for political purposes, the Howard Government must ensure all projects announced to date and all future projects are rigorously and transparently assessed, following the development of appropriate guidelines, and in consultation with all other funding contributors.

Such guidelines should be developed and publicly available no later than 1 July 2005.

National Transport or Infrastructure Advisory Council

In addition to the overwhelming views of stakeholders, the experience prior to the 2004 election of politically-driven decision-making in relation to Strategic Regional Projects illustrates the importance of independent industry, expert and consumer input into the development of strategic infrastructure priorities.

Recommendation

The Howard Government must provide national leadership and work with the members of the Transport Ministerial Council to design and establish an appropriate advisory council to provide input from independent industry, expert and consumer organisations into the development of strategic land transport, and where appropriate national infrastructure priorities.

Senator Geoff Buckland (Deputy Chair, Labor Senator for South Australia)

Senator Kerry O'Brien (Labor Senator for Tasmania)

Senator Ursula Stephens (Labor Senator for New South Wales)