

Additional Comments – Australian Democrats

Introduction

In principle, Australia's transport systems should be accessible, safe, integrated and efficient. They should contribute less to our greenhouse gas emissions, utilise less fossil fuels and generate significantly less air pollution now and in the future.

The impact of transport on our environment is substantial, accounting for 14% of national greenhouse gas emissions in 2001 – an increase of 25% over 1990 and this figure continues to rise. The freight load is forecast to double by 2020.

Urban planning and transport funding has favoured road over rail and private cars over public transport, walking and cycling. Australia has one of the lowest rates of utilisation of public transport in the OECD. Excise on fossil fuels has reduced in real terms and there are almost no incentives to shift transport to cleaner alternative and renewable fuels or to more energy efficient vehicles.

AusLink was an opportunity to address these transport issues and while the Australian Democrats support the commitment of extra funding to construction and maintenance of Australian transport infrastructure, we are disappointed that this is not the promised comprehensive, strategic, long-term plan of Australia's transport infrastructure needs.

According to the Government:

"AusLink will revolutionise the planning and funding of Australia's national roads and railways by taking a long-term, strategic approach to our long-term future. It represents the most significant change since Federation in the way we tackle the national transport task.."¹

These are well-meaning words, but they are empty and fundamentally misleading. Firstly, the program is not comprehensive, focussed exclusively as it is on major roads and railways. Urban congestion is dealt with only insofar as it concerns barriers to freight movement and public transport services are entirely missing. It also fails to address the long-term problems inherent in continuing to rely on national highways as the primary mode of regional freight transport, ignoring the economic and environmental advantages of shifting freight to rail.

The program has been funded for five years (with most of the money already allocated), with plans to continue AusLink in future five-year packages. Aside from the empty rhetorical flourishes about 'transforming' Australia's transport infrastructure, there are no clearly defined aims and verifiable objectives of the AusLink program

¹ "AusLink – At A Glance" – Department of Transport and Regional Services fact sheet, available at <http://www.dotars.gov.au/auslink/factsheets.aspx>

that is said to inform its development and priorities in years to come. It is impossible to take a long-term, strategic approach without a comprehensive national transport infrastructure plan. Rather, this is a patch-up of existing road and rail systems. By concentrating solely on regional freight networks, ignoring whole areas of infrastructure need such as urban public transport, and by failing to articulate a clear vision for what AusLink is to achieve in the long-term, the Government has failed in its objective before it has even begun.

In respect of this Inquiry into the AusLink bills, we support the general conclusions of the main Committee Report, but believe that they do not go far enough.

Funding Infrastructure – Getting the Balance Right

Across all levels of Government in Australia, roads receive the bulk of all transport infrastructure funding, many times more than the amounts allocated to rail. Funding for infrastructure for bikeways and pedestrian safety, amenity and access remains minuscule. AusLink, which pools road and rail infrastructure funding remains heavily weighted to road transport - \$10.9 billion for roads and \$1.8 billion for rail - and focused entirely on freight.

The Australian Democrats believe that this balance needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. The fact that AusLink focuses almost exclusively on regional freight transport means that critical issues such as urban passenger transport and public transport to alleviate congestion are essentially ignored.

Further, the balance of funding priorities within the AusLink pool needs to be shifted, to reflect that the environmental impact of transporting freight can be reduced if the focus shifts from road to rail. Currently 85% of freight on the eastern seaboard is transported via our road networks. One Melbourne-Sydney freight train replaces 150 semi-trailers and rail uses only one third of the fuel per tonne hauled. Unfortunately lack of investment in modern infrastructure has made it hard for rail to be cost competitive as access charges for rail are 30% of operating costs compared with 5% for road. We believe that there should be a rail-specific fund for modernising rail infrastructure, with an emphasis on the east coast route, multimodal exchanges, rail links into ports and nationally consistent regulations, codes and communication systems.

The Democrats support road and rail user charges but note that there is no intention that these will reflect the full externalities, such as air, noise and water pollution, greenhouse emissions, habitat destruction and traffic congestion.

Making AusLink Transparent, Accountable and Strategic

The Australian Democrats are seriously concerned about the extremely broad discretion that has been granted to the Minister in terms of determining funding allocations through the AusLink program. Without wishing to cast any doubts about the sincerity and professionalism of Transport Ministers in general, a system of broad

and unfettered Ministerial discretion is inherently problematic in that it may raise suspicions about the integrity of the program and the principle of merit-based funding allocations. We believe that the scheme must be run according to clearly established and well-publicised criteria, and the funding decisions must be transparent and accountable.

It is a fundamental point that decisions on the 'worth' of projects should be made according to a triple-bottom-line assessment - that is, not merely on economic criteria. While the economic cost-benefit analysis of any particular project is obviously very important, the established criteria for selection of projects for funding must also take into account the social and environmental impacts of the proposal. Decisions about transport infrastructure funding by their very nature have a major impact on communities, and on our natural environment, and a bottom line that only recognises the monetary aspects will fail to take these essential considerations into account.

We support the proposed concept of a National Transport Advisory Council to assess the merit of projects and make recommendations to the Minister according to the established criteria. Members of this Council must be appointed on merit through a transparent process, and should be chosen to represent the broad basis of interests in the transport sector – including freight, passenger and environmental group representatives.

The Australian Democrats also believe that the recommendations of the Advisory Council should be made according to a comprehensive, long term national transport infrastructure plan - so that decisions are made strategically and not on an ad-hoc basis. This plan should be developed with extensive consultation, effective modelling, creative alternative transport solutions and an emphasis on environmental, social and economic sustainability. We must take a long term and holistic view of Australia's transport infrastructure needs to ensure that these needs are met both now and into the future.

Lyn Allison
Senator for Victoria
Leader of the Australian Democrats

