

Access to and from Tasmania is being influenced by Tasmanian tourism sector priorities and not “sea highway” policies as promised by the Federal Coalition. The Tasmanian and Federal Governments, by refusing to target the Bass Strait Passenger Vehicle Equalisation Scheme “BSPVES” to deliver “equalisation”, endorse this approach. They are turning the people’s National Sea Highway into a Tasmanian tourist industry assistance scheme.

The result is a focus on low volume, high-paying tourists on travel packages with a “free” car paid for by the Commonwealth under the BSPVES. The Hawthorn AFL team sponsorship by Tasmania feeds this policy at the expense of A to B transport for many ordinary purposes, including supporters attending football matches. The impact is usually fewer travellers, two persons travelling together, longer routes and longer stays, ferries designed to meet these needs, the unnecessary movement of cars at the expense of not offering low foot passenger fares, unnecessarily higher carbon emissions, no incentives to reduce the cost of travel or fill cars with passengers, inefficient use of BSPVES funding and substantial losses for many individuals and industries on both sides of Bass Strait, outside that of Tasmanian upper-level core tourism.

All year, bitumen equivalent sea “highway” transport, offering fares as low as \$50 each way for a foot passenger and \$298 for a car and all its passengers, would offer a direct and positive impact on the private and the public sectors across South Eastern Australia. Tasmania is being denied equal transport links that all other states enjoy. Air is not a substitute. Victoria is denied a third interstate inter-capital transport link and the infrastructure that goes with it.

The original intention of the BSPVES was not for federal taxpayers to fund a “free” car as a promotional incentive to travel to Tasmania, but for very low cost sea highway access based on the cost of bitumen travel for all Australians. Federal monitoring reports are, however, now measuring the success of the scheme on the basis of Tasmanian tourism packages, not interstate highway equivalence. Astonishingly, the “cost of bitumen” or “highway equivalence” is still used to justify the continuance and upgrade of the scheme, but almost no steps are being taken by Canberra or Tasmania to restore the focus of the Scheme to “bitumen equivalence”. In fact, without any mechanism to put downward pressure on the cost of crossing, the total travel cost is likely to rise over time, at best, encouraging value added services, but not lower total fares. This approach is denying fair A to B surface access across Bass Strait and limiting the development of the economies of Victoria and Tasmania. As it is currently applied, the BSPVES skews access and acts as a barrier separating families and friends and against travel by AFL supporters to matches both in Tasmania and on the mainland.

Maintenance of the status quo also discourages population growth necessary to support a Tasmanian AFL team. A Tasmanian AFL team may already be in place if all-year, consistently priced “highway” access based on the uncapped demand-driven federal BSPVES funding, obtained by the people from 1996, had been made. Certainly the rejection of John Howard’s intended offer of a

\$50 sea passenger fare, in 2001, on top of a car going “free”, would not have helped.

Rudd Labor used “highway equalisation” to justify its recent increase in BSPVES funding. The Prime Minister must now intervene, as did both of his predecessors. He, or the Tasmanian Government can direct the BSPVES to deliver highway equivalence. It is unreasonable to expect a tourist industry, having a responsibility to look after its own interests, based on revenue rather than just numbers of tourists, to look after the interests of the nation.

Failure to deliver an equitable transport link, which is also capable of supporting core tourism, will erode faith in the democratic process and in the fiscal governance of both Tasmania and the Commonwealth. The revenue from core, upper-level Tasmanian tourism from a limited number of high-paying tourists, and its flow on economic impact to other industries is far too low to supplant the interstate transport needs of two whole states on this vital artery. AFL teams are among many that need people. Or, are thousands of poor or middle class supporters and their children to stay at home and just watch matches on television?

Tasmania does not suffer the tyranny of distance, or geography. It suffers the tyranny of discriminatory public administration that disregards a national mandate. Every ingredient is now in place to allow Canberra to deliver a fair National Sea Highway within weeks.

**Written and authorised by Peter Brohier, Nth Caulfield, Vic. Mr Brohier is described by Premier Lennon as the person most responsible for the introduction of the BSPVES. 27<sup>th</sup> September 2008 Mob 0415 941 314**