

What's Wrong with the Parry Report?

A Summary

Prepared By The Friends Of The Northern Railway

Armidale, New South Wales October, 2003

The Report

The examination of regional rail services in the report is very cursory and is treated with a dismissive air.

The report lacks any independent critical analysis of the case for curtailing regional rail services, and especially that to Armidale.

The report uncritically mouths SRA's comments and treats them as fact, even when they are incorrect.

The report makes the bald claim that "few CountryLink intrastate train services are justifiable" when in fact it means justifiable in narrow economic terms.

The Economic Facts, as Contained in the Report

Government support to CityRail is expected to total \$1,300 million in 2003-04, while that to CountryLink in 2002-03 totalled just \$149 million. The cuts to CountryLink rail services are therefore likely to bring about minimal real-dollar savings but have major impact on affected regional communities.

CountryLink recovers a greater proportion of its costs through fares and other revenue than CityRail does.

The Economic Facts Not Contained in the Report

The \$1,300 million Government support for CityRail has blown out from \$498 million in 1989. Over the same period CountryLink costs have declined from \$206.6 million to \$149 million. The report appears to be endorsing a strategy of penalising efficiency gains.

Many full-fare paying passengers are travelling by train because they do not wish to take the car to Sydney. A bus journey

either to Tamworth or Sydney would mean their patronage would be lost to CountryLink, reducing farebox revenue even further.

The report is narrowly focused in its dependence solely on immediate revenue and costs associated with regional rail operations. No community or environmental factors are included in the analysis of CountryLink services.

Community and Passenger Wants and Needs

The report notes that 50% of CountryLink passengers are concession card holders. The report fails to draw the obvious conclusion that any cuts to rail services will have their major impact on these less well-off members of the society.

The report says that replacing trains with buses "should not be interpreted as downgrading services, but rather as focusing on better meeting regional and rural communities' transport needs". In reality the users of the existing service do see the change to buses as a downgrading of service.

Elderly passengers in particular find bus travel stressful and even unmanageable. There is no room to move around, there is no provision for refreshments, bus toilets are virtually inaccessible to them and scheduled stops too infrequent, and they find the confined space is extremely unpleasant.

Parents with young children find buses unmanageable. Buses do not have facilities for changing babies' nappies, for warming milk, or for toddlers to move around. Managing a young child on a bus is extremely stressful.

Many of the elderly passengers using existing train services are travelling to visit

family members who have dispersed from the regional home towns in order to find employment in metropolitan regions. For many of these people replacing the train with a bus is effectively preventing them from visiting those family members because they are not willing to travel on the buses.

The report tends to characterise all concession fair travellers as frail elderly, particularly in its emphasis on replacing long-distance trains with local community and medical transport. In fact most of the concession travellers are likely to be active retirees wanting to enjoy their later years.

Letters to the press and calls to talkback radio from older citizens indicate that availability of the train service is a greater concern to many than is the fare they pay. For these people removal of the train means removal of mobility beyond their immediate locality.

A recent ACNielsen survey reported in *The Sydney Morning Herald* indicated that 60% of polled people disapproved of the replacement of "under-used country trains". Among respondents aged 55 and over, the disapproval rating rose to 63%.

Disabled people have made it clear that buses do not offer an acceptable alternative to the train.

The report says that when the trains are replaced with buses "rural communities will benefit from faster travel times" (p.30). This is not true, regardless of whether the option is bus travel from Armidale and the north to Tamworth to connect with the train or bus travel all the way to Sydney.

Not every member of the community has access to a car. For these people public transport is a necessity. They should not be penalised by being required to travel on inferior transport simply because a car is not available to them.

The report implies that local transportation is needed more than long-distance transport. In fact, both needs exist and it would be

impossible to say one is somehow "needed" more than the other.

Patronage

The report offers few actual figures on patronage, especially on the section north of Tamworth. This means the case for removing the service is not transparent.

Our reliable observations indicate that passenger numbers on the Armidale to Tamworth section are averaging in the mid 60's per train. This means that replacement of trains by buses would have an impact on at least 120 people each day. Unlike the commuters of Sydney, this 120 comprises different people each day, so the total impact on the regional communities north of Tamworth is substantial.

The mid-60s average patronage indicates that communities north of Armidale are occupying, on average, 41% of the train's capacity when it is running as a 3-car set.

People joining at Tamworth will necessarily reduce the number of seats available for passengers north of that city. It is hardly surprising that as the train travels south the number of occupied seats increases and as it travels north the number of occupied seats decreases.

Is the train seriously empty when it arrives at and departs from Sydney? Reports from passengers indicate that the answer is frequently no. Indeed there are many tales of people who have been unable to get a seat on the train. To penalise people for not travelling because they can not obtain a seat is wrong.

Ridership figures for the Xplorer service to Armidale in the three years leading to 2003 are likely to have been seriously affected by the notorious unreliability of the train sets at that time. The service is now much more reliable and confidence is again returning among potential users.

It can be assumed that the growth of confidence will lead to a gradual increase in patronage provided the reliability is

maintained. In the meantime it is inappropriate to use the patronage figures from the three previous years as indicative of potential loadings on the line.

In promoting the use of CountryLink buses to replace trains the report argues that “it is not obvious that these coach services are less safe ...” (p.xiii). This analysis fails to consider the perception of safety among those who are forced to use the bus replacements. Whether the facts can reveal a statistically significant difference or not, people believe there is a difference. They feel more at risk on a bus than on a train.

Impact on the University of New England

The Vice Chancellor of the University of New England has described the proposed closure of the train service as “an appalling move”.

The University contributes substantially to the cultural and economic prosperity of Armidale. Any reduction in student numbers arising from inconvenient travel connections would in turn have repercussions on the town. This again is a case of the cuts potentially aggravating the social and economic difficulties already faced by rural communities.

Political Inconsistencies

In 1993, the Labor Party welcomed the return of the rail service to Armidale. They even said it “should never have been taken away in the first place”. It is inconsistent for the party, now that it is in Government, to reverse its position completely on the issue. Country Labor in Armidale appear to be true to the party's original policy. The Governing arm should be equally so.

The Carr Government's electoral success over recent years has partly resulted from its claimed “Green” agenda. The act of replacing rail transport with road-based motor vehicles is hypocritical in this context.

Alternative Action Which Does Not Entail the Curtailment of Rail Services

There are numerous directions for the Government to head in order to reduce the cost of CountryLink rail services and thereby improve the sustainability of the service.

A review of the CountryLink fare structure is required.

Pensioners in letters to the press and on talk-back radio have frequently indicated that service availability is a greater priority than the fare. This issue needs to be examined.

Greater utilisation of the track infrastructure would occur if freight services could be encouraged to use the line once again. The State Government should work with local government bodies to encourage freight operators to these areas, through the establishment and promotion of regional rail freight depots.

The State Government must not see the removal of CountryLink services as desirable simply because it would provide an opportunity to close a rail line to save money.

CountryLink must maintain a vigilant watch on its maintenance standards to ensure continuing reliability of the service it offers.