"RAILWAY TO DARWIN A MUST!"

A joint Commonwealth/Northern Territory study to examine the feasibility of constructing a rail link between Darwin and Alice Springs has been completed...and the end-product has not particularly pleased the NT Government.

In a bid to bring pressure to bear on the Commonwealth for a definite commitment to an early start on the rail link, Territory Chief Minister Paul Everingham, Treasurer Marshall Perron and top Government officials made a barnstorming three-day tour of Southern States.

They met Federal and State politicians and business leaders in three capitals to push the Territory Government's case. They also held a series of media conferences.

Commenting on the rail study report, Mr Everingham said: "I do not accept the Report as a well-balanced and comprehensive analysis of all relevant issues. It is almost grudging in its recognition and acknowledgement of the strength of the case for the railway."

INACCURACIES

"This is particularly so in respect of the economic and financial assessment, the ultra-conservative nature of the freight assumptions and the various inaccuracies in the treatment of costs — all of which seem designed to obscure the essential conclusion. This conclusion is, that when consideration of the railway is placed in its proper perspective, the arguments in support of an immediate commitment to construction are incontrovertible."

The Northern Territory Government believes that the arguments favouring an immediate commitment to the railway are far more compelling than the joint Commonwealth—NT Report suggests.

In particular, it feels that the Study Team adopted a narrow interpretation of its terms of reference which led it to omit a number of important considerations and give narrow focus to others.

"Any decision on the railway must be taken against the background of the existing commitment by the Commonwealth to construct the line — a commitment clearly accepted in Commonwealth legislation," it said in a special paper commenting on the Report.

"In this sense, the point should be made that the railway does not have to be justified. If any justification is required, it is for the Commonwealth to justify its failure to fulfill this commitment."

In its paper, the Government said that perhaps the most significant development in the history of the Northern Territory had been ignored by the Report. This had been the advent of Self-Government and the changing constitutional status of the Territory. This presented a completely new aspect to the case for the railway.

"The emergence of the Northern Territory to a position of partnership in the Commonwealth requires new perspectives about its basic infrastructural needs," the paper added. "This argument is of itself sufficient to justify the railway."

DEFICIENCIES

The paper also said the economic and financial assessment contained in the Report contained serious deficiencies.

"It fails to reflect the role of the railway in the economic life of the community," the paper pointed out. "It fails to portray the case for the railway against the present-day backdrop of railway operations in Australia."

"The Report should state the economic and financial aspects of the exercise in the context of the operations of railways in Australia at the present time."

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"Apart from these omissions the Report also contains weaknesses in presentation.

"Its financial evaluation contains methodological and conceptual errors; it relies heavily on earlier work which was directed towards a quite different objective; and it does not adequately update information which is critical to any kind of rational assessment."

PIONEER LINE

The Territory's 'basic needs' for a railway were emphasised and given wide coverage four years ago when the North Australia Railway was closed.

The line ran from Darwin to Larrimah, 180 kilometres south of Katherine. It had its beginnings in the pioneering days of the 1870s. Its end came 100 years later with the stroke of a Ministerial pen.

Chairman of the Australian National Railways, Mr Keith Smith, made it absolutely clear then that he personally believed the service should be withdrawn.

"The North Australian Railway is an anachronism," he said. "The line should have been closed down years ago.

"Losses on the line are disastrous. NAR spent $4.2 million for the 1975-76 operation and income was only $800,000. The previous year operating costs were $3.15 million while income was $1.4 million."

COMMITMENT

Mr Smith agreed that there was a firm Federal Government commitment to linking Alice Springs and Darwin by rail.

"That is why we are not closing the NAR down. We are simply withdrawing the service temporarily," he added.

But how temporary is temporary?

The Commonwealth said in 1910 it would complete the north-south railway . . . it has not said when.

Current estimates put the cost of building the line from Alice Springs to Darwin at $380 million. What would the Federal Government be getting for its money?

GROWTH

The increase in freight associated with the growth and development of the Territory should provide justification for the railway on financial grounds within the foreseeable future.

Construction of the railway will have enormous economic impact on the Territory, including the potential for some imports from South-East Asia to enter Darwin and be freighted to the southern States.

Results from the NT Government's efforts to promote trade with South-East Asia could grow substantially if rail capacity could be available for southern journeys at attractively low rates.

The trans-continental line undoubtedly would become a major tourism facility and big dollar earner.

But perhaps the greatest attraction of a north-south rail link for the Commonwealth is in the area of defence. The Defence Department attaches high priority to early railway construction.

In the time of war, the north-south rail link would automatically become an all-important and crucial artery between the empty, vulnerable north and southern sources of supply.

OTHER INDUSTRIES

And what of the mining, pastoral and agricultural industries? Peko copper and bismuth mines at Tennant Creek would generate 77 000 tonnes of rail freight a year, 95 000 tonnes annually if the Warrego power house and smelter switch form distillate to coal.

The giant MacArthur River zinc-lead-silver deposits of Mount Isa Mines could generate a total of 724 000 tonnes of freight annually, and could deserve a 300 km spur line to Borroloola.

This could lead to mineral exports through Darwin instead of a proposed new port at Centre Island in the Sir Edward Pellew group.

Other rail freight could be generated by barytes production at Dorisvale near Katherine, Merenbie and Palm Valley oil and gas developments in the Centre, and possible re-opening of iron-ore mining around Pine Creek.

CATTLE

The extended railway could move up to 135 000 head of cattle, and be engaged in short-haul movements to local abattoirs. It could also carry more than 1 000 tonnes of buffalo meat.

Planned NT agriculture development could lead to rail freight for both produce and fertiliser.

But one point which is becoming increasingly evident and vital with the escalating price and insecurity of oil supplies, is that rail is far more fuel-efficient than road transport.

And this latter may well be the argument that will finally spur the Commonwealth into going ahead with the north-south rail-link.

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