No. 4 — Private enterprise may build the line from Alice to Darwin

If the Federal Government won't build the rail link between Alice Springs and Darwin, private enterprise may do the job, according to the former Chief Minister of the Northern Territory.

By Ian Tuxworth

Throughout Australian history the national defence infrastructure has had only one interesting feature: it has never been built until it was too late.

This original and amusing approach to defence planning has left us with some excellent, but useless, examples of military fortifications. Scattered around the coastline, Australia has workmanlike and quite sturdy examples of 19th century coastal forts — built to halt Czarist troops from paddling ashore. It also has a smattering of rickety gun emplacements and various rusting anti-aircraft guns. Sadly, it has little else.

During the country's most serious crisis, the Japanese bombing attacks of 1942, the most important element of the internal defence infrastructure — transportation corridors — was shown to be sadly deficient.

Considering the national population at the time, and Australia's level of economic development, such a lack was, although regrettable and costly in human lives, not surprising.

What is surprising is that today, 44 years later, the situation has not changed all that much.

While Australia has made considerable gains in some forms of transport — aircraft in particular — and in some regions, the links between the south-eastern population centres and our northern settlements are still extremely tenuous.

Australia has been appropriately and accurately described as a series of lightly populated islands dotted about a sea of desert. These islands, linked by fragile and easily broken transportation corridors, are as vulnerable today as they were in 1942.

The country's capacity to halt, or even measure, the extent of an enemy landing in the north is still extremely limited.

Perhaps it is only those of us who live in the extreme north who clearly understand this unpalatable and somewhat frightening fact.

Consequently, the recent Dibb Report on defence capabilities received a generally warm reception in Darwin. His strategy of "denial" — a self-reliant defence posture within which Australia should be able to handle its own defences out to a thousand miles from its shores — is based on several basic assumptions.

The first, and perhaps the most important from our point of view, is that the Australian Defence Force would be able to move rapidly and in considerable strength to any part of Australia. Underlying that is another assumption. That is, that we possess a sufficiently sophisticated transportation system to move the military, their equipment and the massive supplies they require in combat to any part of our continent. Unfortunately, at present, that is simply not the case.

Mr Dibb's Report correctly concentrated on the capabilities and equipment of the Defence Force. However, had the scope of his study been broader it would immediately have identified our major weakness. Our transportation links are so limited and so fragile that they can easily be broken.

There are really only three transportation corridors, the west coast, the centre and the east coast. However, three corridors are linked, tenuously in the wet season, by three roads. There is one link to Queensland and two to Western Australia, only one of them sealed.

If the strategy of denial is to have any real substance, these corridors must be maintained and their capacity improved. This view was reinforced by a recent study released by the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University, Canberra.

Written by Desmond Ball, J.O. Langtry and J.D. Stevenson, the study entitled DEFEND THE NORTH — put the case for an Alice Springs-to-Darwin railway as an important element of Australia's strategic defence posture. Ball et al point out that in a major conflict "all three corridors could be taxed to the utmost, simultaneously."

A major railway between Darwin and Alice Springs would do much to strengthen these tenuous links and give Australia a considerably more realistic chance of coping with an invasion through our exposed north.

I do not suggest that it would in any way be a cure-all. However, a rail link would immeasurably strengthen Australia's capacity to both cope with, and deter, a potential invasion.

DEFEND THE NORTH argued that "the existence of the railway would provide a powerful deterrent to the development of any significant military threat to northern Australia. In the event that any attack against the north did eventuate, then the railway would be essential to Australia's defensive actions."

For those who argue that our road and air links would be adequate to deal with such a contingency it is instructive to look back to those critical days in the Pacific War.

Large troop movements and lodgments require a monumental amount of transport support. Despite changed technology, the relative importance of various methods of transportation is still comparable.

Forty trains a day on the NAR

In the four years following the initial 1942 bombing attacks, the Territory hosted one of the largest armies ever assembled on Australian soil. By late 1944 the then working North Australian Railway (from Birdum to Darwin) was carrying nearly 150 trains a week and sometimes up to 40 military trains a day. Prior to the war there was only one train every two weeks.

More than a quarter of a million Allied troops were carried by the NAR between June 1941 and June 1945.

Such are the demands that could be placed on a system during a major conflict. The Stuart Highway, from Alice Springs to Darwin, was in place at the time, but the military could not move all the necessary men and equipment by road. They needed rail support.

Major military movements place extreme demands on transportation infrastructure — demands we do not believe the present road and air system could meet.

The proposal to complete the rail link is not, of course, based purely on defence considerations. We want to bring economic development and population to the north of Australia. We believe the railway would be of considerable help in this task. Development of the north in itself is a major defence consideration.

In defence terms, a larger northern population would be extremely desirable. A larger population would generate more extensive facilities and services, as well as providing a larger recruitment pool for locally based military units such as Norforce.

It would also forestall any claims about the legitimacy of Australian sovereignty over this sparsely populated area.

The Darwin-to-Alice Railway is desirable from many perspectives. Unfortunately, the present Government has evaded its responsibilities in this regard.

The Northern Territory is nevertheless determined to go ahead with the project. Negotiations for the construction of a privately owned and operated railway — the first of its kind in Australia — are proceeding.