

Letter to the Editor

The report into a possible high speed rail line between Brisbane and Melbourne via Sydney and Canberra has grabbed the headlines in recent weeks, and has certainly achieved Minister Albanese's aim of sparking a debate about the future of rail in Australia.

The focus on the efficient movement of people is welcome, but it must also include the facts on the urgent need to improve the efficiency of Australia's freight task.

The high speed rail report acknowledges passenger numbers would depend on population rates, which are predicted to reach around 35 million people by the middle of the century, or around 50 per cent more than today's population of 23 million.

That sounds big, but contrast it with Australia's freight task, which is predicted to nearly triple from 550 billion tonne kilometres today to 1400 billion tonne kilometres in 2050.

Notwithstanding the Australian Rail Track Corporation's major investments in the rail freight network in recent years, particularly in Sydney, greater effort is required by both industry and government to get more freight onto rail, particularly along the north south corridor.

Getting more freight onto rail would boost productivity levels in the industry which have flat-lined in recent years. It would also improve the liveability of our cities which continue to suffer from growing levels of traffic congestion.

A report to government in 2010 on an inland rail freight line connecting Brisbane and Melbourne via Parkes pointed to the line's potential economic and social benefits.

It envisaged using existing track, upgraded where necessary and with a number of bypasses.

The cost benefit analysis found that the new freight line would divert freight from trucks (the distance is long enough for rail freight to be competitive) and the rail mode share would rise from the around 30 per cent today to around 74 per cent.

An inland rail freight line would also come with a relatively modest price tag, with construction estimated to be around \$5 billion compared to \$114 billion for high speed rail.

While the line will not be feasible for approximately another 20 years, it needs to feature in the national conversation on rail investments necessary in Australia to improve productivity, efficiency and safety.

Improving passenger movement along the eastern seaboard is important, but it must not come at the expense of improving freight efficiency in Australia. Unfortunately, freight doesn't get a vote, but it sure needs a strong voice.

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