



Speech by

**Mr M. HORAN**

**MEMBER FOR TOOWOOMBA SOUTH**

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Hansard 25 August 1999

### **ROAD TRANSPORT REFORM BILL**

**Mr HORAN** (Toowoomba South—NPA) (3.51 p.m.): In joining this debate on the Road Transport Reform Bill, I note that some of the main provisions of this Bill are to deliver uniform road reforms and drink-driving penalties. Many of those reforms are directed towards heavy vehicles on the roads. That is what I want to talk about in particular.

My colleague the member for Toowoomba North has already spoken about the proposed second crossing of the Great Dividing Range just north of Toowoomba. I know that the Minister was caught in the House and was not able to attend a recent meeting, but I would like to thank him for making his senior staff available to meet with us. It was a very satisfactory meeting. It is a big, ambitious project, a project that is of great importance to Australia, and we are slowly getting somewhere with it.

At the risk of being repetitive, I would like to tell the House about the importance of this second crossing of the range. The Warrego Highway carries the heaviest tonnage of any road in Australia, so it is important to our nation. It is the major route from south-eastern Queensland and, therefore, to the Brisbane ports and the various manufacturing areas of south-eastern Queensland. It is the major route from there through to Toowoomba, from Goondiwindi down through western New South Wales to Melbourne, and to South Australia. It is also the major route to western Queensland, north-western Queensland and to Darwin. So it is an extremely important road.

Currently, approximately 17,000 vehicles per day use that road. The Minister's department has counting devices on the road in an endeavour to get a more accurate assessment of the exact numbers of vehicles that use it and also to determine the percentage of heavy vehicles. The department estimates that currently 20% of that traffic is heavy vehicles. Of course, when those 20% of vehicles are crawling up the range in low gear, or crawling down the range in low gear, or having to use their J-brakes and so forth, the effect is that it seems that far more than 20% of the traffic is heavy vehicles.

It is well documented that on two occasions in the past couple of months Toowoomba has been isolated. The crashes that occur on the range are horrific. The alternative route, which is a little skinny road down through Murphy's Creek, is really not designed to take major transport. However, in one of those instances when Toowoomba was isolated, heavy transport was diverted down the Murphy's Creek road. It is proposed that this new road would have a lower gradient. Therefore, vehicles would be able to travel at about 80 km/h to 85 km/h, maybe even 90 km/h. I think that the saving in time and fuel would be of real significance. Also, the alternative route would be very convenient for those people who live in western Queensland and who have to take a long six to 10-hour trip. They would be able to bypass Toowoomba and save half an hour, three-quarters or an hour or more. Heavy transport would save at least an hour.

Toowoomba City has at least 100,000 people. The main east-west street of Toowoomba is James Street. In the CBD area of James Street alone there are eight sets of traffic lights. Along that street there is the main Catholic cathedral, two schools, the major turning-off point to the Toowoomba Base Hospital, a huge array of businesses on either side, and, where there are not businesses, there are houses. This road is carrying the heaviest tonnage of freight in Australia right through the centre of the city. It would be only a matter of time before it became totally clogged. Recently, I have taken the opportunity to sit on the corners of some of those intersections just to observe what is happening at the

traffic lights. Probably a dozen or 15 B-doubles or semis pull up at the intersections. By the time the lights turn green and they all go through their gears, they travel one block and they hit the next set of lights. The whole system gets very close to being clogged. I know that some younger drivers, women drivers and older drivers—many people—get a bit nervous when they are caught among such a huge array of larger B-doubles, grain trucks, stock trucks and so forth. That is another important reason why we need this second range crossing.

It is also important to note that, to date, the cost of the range crossing is very substantial; it is somewhere in the order of \$250m. A project of that size needs special Federal consideration. To get that sort of money out of the Federal and State funds that are currently going to a lot of programs would mean that many other projects around the State which are also very important would be wiped out for years.

**Mr Bredhauer:** We have only about \$160m a year in national highway funding from the Commonwealth.

**Mr HORAN:** I take that point. The Federal Government gives \$160m a year in national highway funding. I have talked in this House before about other important road projects such as the Gatton bypass, which, in recent times, has been the site of 11 or 13 fatalities. I know that at the moment the Main Roads Department, with Federal money, is working on the Marburg section of that road, which is another dangerous single-lane road. We appreciate all of that work.

Recently in Rockhampton the member for Toowoomba North, the member for Crows Nest and I were able to meet with Federal Transport Minister John Anderson. I am pleased to say that he was very understanding. I think that he now has a proper appreciation of the situation. I have talked to some of the Minister's staff, and I understand that they feel that the Federal department is starting to take a little more notice. The Federal department has offered to meet with the Minister's staff in two weeks' time, which should be a gradual step forward.

There are three groups representing the people in Toowoomba and the Darling Downs who are working on this project. The Federal member for Groom, Mr McFarlane, is lobbying hard within Canberra; the local members, Mr Healy, Mr Cooper, Mr Elliott and I, are working through the State sphere, and the mayors of EDROC regularly attend our meetings. They are working through the Local Government Association in an endeavour to raise the profile of and the need for this particular project. When we consider that towns such as Pittsworth and Oakey are becoming real road transport towns, as is Toowoomba, we start to realise the importance of this road to those councils.

I am pleased that the department is doing an accurate traffic count on that road, because we can start to get an accurate figure on when the road is actually going to be at its capacity. Over the years various studies have shown that the capacity of that highway is somewhere between 24,000 and 26,000 vehicles, depending on the percentage of heavy transport. As I say, currently it is at least 17,000 vehicles. It would appear that some time around 2003 to 2005 it is going to be at full capacity. When we consider the time that it takes to carry out such a massive project—and it would be like a Snowy Mountains project, really—we realise that it is important to start doing the work now. It is important that we get the Commonwealth Government to commit to a special fund that does not detract from the other moneys that should come to Queensland for projects in the north-west, along the coastal roads and everywhere else where there is a need for road funding. It is important that work be started on the alternative route, because it would be dreadful to see the highway reach its full to capacity in 2005, funding not turn up until 2010 and the alternative route not completed till 2015, by which time we could have 7 to 10 years of chaos on the highway. Certainly Toowoomba would be clogged, because James Street cannot take many more trucks. It is a four-lane inner-city road not designed to take trucks. I do not think that many major Australian cities of 100,000 people would have a road carrying such heavy tonnage running straight through their centre.

**Mr Johnson:** None.

**Mr HORAN:** None, the shadow Minister tells me. The Minister's department has been investigating the Toowoomba Arterial Road Link Study, or TARLS, which looks at Cohoe, James, Davis, and Tor Streets, which are all the elements of James Street, and also the southern part of Ruthven Street from James to Alderley Streets. I congratulate the staff of Main Roads in Toowoomba on the way in which they have consulted exhaustively, despite the difficulties that they have had to face, which I know about because I have attended a couple of their meetings. When people may be affected by future planning, they get very concerned about issues such as traffic being able to access their business and their motels. People who own houses along parts of a road that may have to be widened get extremely concerned about property resumptions. Such issues have been handled in a very caring way by the staff who have undertaken exhaustive consultation.

The TARLS draft report will become the final document, depending upon the changes that may be put forward by any of the community bodies. However, because the consultation has been so exhaustive, there may not be too many adjustments to the document. One particular area of concern

that the TARLS identifies is Tor Street. The TARLS document will become a planning framework for the future and some of the projects that it discusses may not commence until some time in the future. It is very difficult for people to plan their lives if their houses or businesses are on a road where there may or may not be resumptions. I commend the staff of the Main Roads Department for how they have been handling that problem. There have been some compassionate resumptions along portions of Tor Street.

The other issue that has been looked at, and which is a little contentious, is the alternative route to the New England Highway on the western side of Toowoomba. That road has been called the north-south bypass or the New England Highway alternative route study. This project came to fruition for a couple of reasons. One reason is the proposal for a second range crossing and, associated with that are the moves that are afoot to develop major transport, warehousing and industrial hubs on the western side of the city. There are two proposals put forward there: one is that proposed by EDROC in consultation with the Transport Department for transport and warehousing alone, and the other is the proposal by private enterprise to site a project at Wellcamp.

That project caused the commencement of the study that is looking at ways of linking the New England Highway south of Toowoomba to the Warrego Highway. That link will impact upon the growing number of houses on the western side of the city around the showgrounds area and the Westbrook area. As a result, a number of local groups have done a considerable amount of work to identify zones of interest. One group in particular, led by Mr David Carey, did an enormous amount of work. The upshot of their efforts is that, at this stage, there appears to be no need for such a bypass. The figures were that out of about 6,000 vehicles that access that southern area of Toowoomba each day, only 300 would use a north-south bypass. Considerable pain and angst were going to be caused, whatever was decided.

I congratulate the local group that was led by David Carey on the amount of research that they undertook and I thank the Minister for making some of his officers available to take their submissions. They have determined a route. Even though they are very disappointed that nothing will probably happen for some foreseeable time, they have identified some very important planning issues for the western side of Toowoomba, such as the growth of housing which is quite substantial. Much of that area will be added to my electorate, and that is where a lot of growth is happening. Certainly, the work they did was outstanding in determining the liveability of that area and where such a road should go.

This study also came about because of the growing problem that the city has to face up to, which is that of road trains coming into Toowoomba. On the one hand, we need road trains because we have major saleyard complexes, a lot of grain handling terminals and a lot of western transport that comes into the city. It is important that road trains can access the south western part of Toowoomba. Ours is probably one of the few remaining major cities where road trains are able to come into parts of the city. When I used to be the manager of the Toowoomba showgrounds, the road train route crossed Glenvale Road where our patrons came out. The road trains would come in and turn right and left, and right and left again, and pass through all the new subdivisions. They would almost go over the corner of the footpaths, because the roads are so narrow. Now they are required to come in along Taylor Street and then turn right and go out towards the saleyards.

Toowoomba is a city that relies upon road transport. We need road train access, but we have to face up to this problem which some of the local groups on the western side of the city identified. It is not very pleasant for anyone to buy a half acre or a three-quarter acre block of land in a lovely area and then find that there is a possibility that road trains will be going by. The gradient up the western side of the range makes changing gears rather noisy. That is something that we will have to face up to.

I compliment the staff of the department for the way that they have addressed some very difficult issues and have listened to everything that people have told them. People get quite concerned and angry if they think that changes to the road systems will affect their businesses, as it can in inner city areas such as James Street and Ruthven Street. They very patiently and courteously listened to everybody and we are close to developing some important future planning for the city.

I wish to conclude by talking about the strategic importance of Toowoomba. Toowoomba lies right on the main highway of Australia in terms of tonnages carried. We have the second highest range in Australia, the highest being the range north of Tamworth. The only real range that has to be crossed between Melbourne and Brisbane is the Great Dividing Range at Toowoomba. Toowoomba is Australia's biggest inland city and the amount of transport that travels through the city is close to clogging our main east-west street. I do not think that that is fair on our citizens. There are huge benefits for the people of western Queensland and the rest of Australia if this highway can be improved.

I say to the Federal Government that it is time to show some national vision and look at undertaking a Snowy Mountains type project. An amount of \$250m spent on this road would have unbelievable effects in terms of job creation, efficiencies within the heavy transport industry and the export opportunities that it would open up.

**Mr Johnson:** A gateway to the Territory.

**Mr HORAN:** Indeed, it will be a gateway to the Territory, South Australia, Brisbane and south-eastern Queensland. It is a project that the Federal Government has to come to grips with. Some things need to be done. This project should be undertaken as a special additional project so that it will not impact in any way on our neighbours throughout Queensland who have pressing needs of their own, such as river crossings, road widening and so forth. Those projects are also essential and we recognise that.

In conclusion, I know that the Bill has been a long time coming. I join with other honourable members in congratulating the previous Minister and the current Minister on pulling together the four very important issues in this Bill. I am pleased to join with my colleagues in supporting it.

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