



Speech by

HOWARD HOBBS

MEMBER FOR WARREGO

Hansard 8 May 2002

TRANSPORT LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr HOBBS (Warrego—NPA) (3.10 p.m.): It is my pleasure to speak to the Transport Legislation Amendment Bill, which covers a number of issues that are of interest to all members. I am sure that many and varied opinions about this bill will be put forward by members of this parliament.

The transport network is one of the most important structures in our society and it is particularly important to electorates such as mine. In recent times, Flight West Airlines—what we thought was a very good, secure company—ceased its operations. The swiftness with which that company fell into difficulties probably caught a fair few of us by surprise. This legislation helps to fix up some matters when that sort of thing occurs.

I was very involved when Flight West Airlines came into being. It got going very quickly and did a great job. Bob Fulton was sent by Sir Dennis Buchanan to set up Flight West. He did a magnificent job in a very, very short time. He got a few King Airs going and in a matter of weeks we had an airline up and running. It was great to see the birth of an airline and wonderful that that company could, in fact, from those very early days achieve the status of being the biggest regional airline in Australia. Of course, the disappointing part is that Flight West Airlines has folded, although some of its planes are still flying under a different ownership.

Certainly, what happened was a lesson for all of us. The way I see it, at that time the airline industry was experiencing difficulties. Perhaps it was just coincidence, but I think that the change in the equilibrium of the industry through the coming into Queensland and the rest of Australia of Virgin played a significant part. In hindsight, one wonders whether it was very wise to pay \$12 million, or whatever it was, to Virgin. Although it is good that we have cheap flights and competition, what are the consequences? I know that we are keen to attract business to Queensland. We have to try to do everything that we can to bring business into Queensland. However, I am agonising over the fact that we put \$12 million into Virgin and then we had cheap fares. Flight West Airlines made it quite clear that one of the reasons why it could not continue to fly was the cheap fares. Then the bus services experienced difficulty in matching their fares with the cheap airfares. When passengers can fly from Brisbane to Sydney for the price of three cartons of beer, although everyone knows that that situation is only temporary—it cannot last—that certainly has some impact on the rest of the passenger transport community.

Sure, we all benefited from the cheap fares offered by Virgin and Qantas. In the meantime, Ansett fell over. I am not suggesting that Ansett fell over entirely because of the cheap fares—I think that Ansett was probably on the way out, anyway—but the cheap airfares certainly would not have helped. Ansett's backers would have realised that they were in the middle of a huge price war. We have ended up with a situation that probably may have happened anyway, but it appears now that, once the dust has settled, the \$12 million has been eaten up in fares and we are back to having airfares that are very, very expensive. A lot of people have been caught. I would not doubt that members in this chamber and their friends have been caught through the cancellation of their frequent flyer points or their airfares. A mate of mine in Western Australia paid for tickets to Queensland so that he could go to a wedding. He lost all of that and instead had to drive over. It is actually cheaper for him to fly from Western Australia to Manila and then back to Brisbane than it is to come straight across from Western Australia. So we had that price spin-off for a short period, but it has gone. So I just wonder if there is a good lesson in that for all of us to consider.

I want to refer to the bus passenger transport industry. Certainly in my electorate, bus companies have been struggling to make ends meet. The low cost airfare war had an impact on bus companies. McCafferty's, which services my area, made it quite clear that those cheap fares made it very, very difficult for it to operate. It started cutting back some of its bus services at about the same time as those cheap fares. It has now been given assistance by the state government, which I welcome. But I think that we are on a merry-go-round that we cannot get off until such time as the cost of airfares levels out.

I believe that we have to provide a bus transport service to people, because many of them do not have access to vehicles. The bus service provides a valuable service for people living in the towns in my electorate. It also provides a small freight service. I can recall that when I was based in Charleville the local baker was using the bus service to carry certain amounts of bread and suchlike to Blackall. The bus run was then cut out. He really had no other means of getting that bread to Blackall. That certainly had an impact on his income. Although buses are not necessarily meant to carry freight—passengers are their main game, and I recognise that—the reality is that carrying freight helps bus companies to defray some of their costs. So once we change one part of the passenger transport game, the other part falls over as well. Often people build their businesses and make their lives around a transport structure. They live in certain areas because that is where they have access to transport. The same occurs in the city. Often one of the things that people take into account when considering where to buy a house is whether it gives them access to public transport. People go to live in little towns assuming that the local transport service is going to continue to operate.

So I say to the government and the Transport Minister that I appreciate the subsidy that is provided at present to McCafferty's in those rural areas. I hope that it can continue. The service that goes from Toowoomba down to Tara, St George and Lightning Ridge is a valuable service. We certainly require some assistance to keep it going. Let us hope that down the track the passenger numbers will increase and that we will not have to continue to provide that assistance. In the meantime, I believe it is such a valuable service that it must be assisted.

Another topic that needs to be discussed—and the member for Toowoomba North mentioned it a while ago—is the inland rail. That has been a very innovative and far-reaching plan which has taken eastern Australia by storm. Many sceptics did not believe that it would be a reality. Everal Compton and Scotty Macleay are on the committee and, basically, they are doing a great job. I believe that people are slowly starting to realise that yes, this can happen. This inland rail system will be much faster than our current system and it will also be able to carry big loads. When one travels overseas and observes some of the rail lines in America and Canada being used by huge double-decker wagons, one realises that they really can carry some freight.

That will certainly make a big difference in Australia. It will open up the opportunity for produce to be transported north and then exported. It will also prevent a lot of damage to our roads, particularly our coastal highways. Overnighters will still be used to carry road freight. However, produce will be able to be loaded and transported all the way from Victoria and New South Wales, right through Queensland, to Darwin and then exported.

That rail line is expected to go through my electorate. Obviously the people around Miles are particularly excited about it. There will be a major station there, which would certainly draw a lot of people into that region and make it a very viable area. It is going quite well now, but it would make a big difference.

Mr Johnson: Good representation.

Mr HOBBS: Absolutely! Good representation. The member is working very hard in that particular region, as the member for Gregory points out! No doubt the rail line will eventually go through the Gregory electorate as well.

In all seriousness, it is a great concept and one that I believe will eventually be in place but it will take some time. Of course, any major project is a long time in the making and in the final development phase. It is good to see that the stakes are in place and things are up and running. It is really quite exciting.

Another interesting issue dealt with in this legislation is sewage holding tanks on yachts of a certain size. I have always been amazed that there is no mandatory requirement for holding tanks. I suppose there has been pressure from the industry. I believe that it is very important in this day and age and it surprises me that it has not already been the subject of legislation. I can certainly see the need for them. One only has to consider the number of ships of 10 metres and over which are moored in our marinas, sometimes for quite some time, which do not have these facilities. There is no doubt that a lot of them do, because people with foresight are using those facilities, but quite a few do not—and they do not have to. Sewage facilities on boats from overseas is an issue that needs to be resolved. This legislation will certainly make a big difference. It will be beneficial for our waterways in

general. Many of our marinas are situated along the coastal strip, which is very beautiful and which is visited by a lot of tourists.

Another important issue is the Central Queensland Coal Associates Agreement Act. Obviously all members would be very interested in coal freight. It plays an important part in the economy of the coal regions. It has been wonderful to see the development that has occurred over the years. The coal industry has provided jobs for a lot of people and security for many families throughout this state over a long period. I certainly hope that this will be of assistance to them.

Generally speaking, this legislation is certainly a step in the right direction. I endorse the words of our shadow minister and I look forward to some of those recommendations being implemented.
