




Speech By
Robbie Katter

MEMBER FOR MOUNT ISA

NORTH QUEENSLAND, RAIL CONTRACTORS

 **Mr KATTER** (Mount Isa—KAP) (3.19 am): I rise to call on the government to use its authority to reverse a worrying trend with North Queensland rail contractors which is threatening to erode jobs and communities in rural and remote areas. I refer to the practices of new private contractors now competing with QR National entities on the great northern rail line. The most significant of these is the use of driver sleeper wagons. Consideration of this issue will make the government take a conscious position on whether or not they want some rural towns to exist in the north-west. Rail jobs in towns such as Hughenden and Cloncurry are the foundations of their economy. When the cattle industry wanes, the rail workers are still buying groceries and goods in the town. When the mining industry declines, the rail families again remain. Any major threats to these jobs can have diabolical effects on the towns.

I also raise a raft of safety concerns that has arisen as a consequence and that is causing grave concerns amongst our long-distance train drivers. This dire situation has come about following the previous awarding of an Xstrata magnetite delivery contract from Townsville to Cloncurry—a contract previously held by Queensland Rail which was undercut by the winning company. The reason QR National, now trading under the Australian Railroad Group, was undercut was that this government allowed Pacific National to operate unsafe processes, albeit while flying just under the level of legal safety requirements.

The Townsville to Cloncurry run has always utilised locally based Cloncurry drivers to toggle with the Townsville based drivers for the long, 48-hour turnaround. This meant there were more people, more houses, more families and more money in Cloncurry. Pacific National has dispensed with that and uses driver sleeper wagons, which means that drivers from Townsville never leave the train. After they leave Townsville for Cloncurry, they then return to Townsville again. This practice has also extended to service workshops, storage and other areas. In one instance a private contractor asked for assistance from one of the local councils with maintenance as they have never been willing to invest in any support infrastructure outside of Townsville. There are just four drivers doing a 10-hour on-off roster, sleeping while the train is going, never leaving the train and never spending a cent in any of the communities along the length of the line—and certainly not in Cloncurry.

I am reliably informed that another major contract for system products for mining giant Xstrata is up for tender very soon. I am gravely concerned that the winning transporter—be it Pacific National or not—will adopt the same unsafe driving practices which are damaging to our communities. The Transport Workers Union in Townsville, on behalf of the train drivers, has previously put forward a case to the state government against this practice. That advice was ignored by the previous Queensland government. I strongly urge this state government to liaise with the TWU, the drivers and the mayors of affected communities en route to amend unsafe driving practices by putting in a caveat that encourages Xstrata and the winning tenders to base train drivers locally. I ask that the Minister for Transport work with me and these mayors in fighting for the safety of our train drivers and for the future of our communities.

I would also like to take this opportunity to identify the issue of the proposed discontinuation of *The Inlander* service by this government—an initiative tried and backed away from by Labor