




Speech By
Robbie Katter

MEMBER FOR MOUNT ISA

MATTERS OF PUBLIC INTEREST

Mount Isa-Townsville Rail Line

 **Mr KATTER** (Mount Isa—KAP) (11.55 am): I rise in the House to discuss some significant issues surrounding the Mount Isa to Townsville rail line which is known as the great northern rail line. Currently I believe the line is suffering as a result of the corporatisation and now commitment to the full privatisation and continuous removal of maintenance staff along the line and general reductions in maintenance spending over the last 20 years. If this requires, as mentioned earlier today, a commitment from the federal government then I look forward to the day—in the event of a change of government at the federal level—that the Queensland government ensures this critical investment is made.

The Mount Isa System Rail Infrastructure Master Plan 2012 indicates that there is currently 380 kilometres of steel sleepers and light rail on the north-west corridor that was laid in the 1960s that require replacement to bring the rail network up to a suitable standard. Traditionally, a railway line has a working life of around 50 years before it is due for replacement. In the case of the north-west corridor, much of this rail line is coming to the end of its life. This may be one reason we are experiencing so many derailments across the corridor.

Modern heavy haul rail systems, like our coal network, comprise heavy rail laid on concrete sleepers. This is what is needed on our corridor. We have witnessed train sizes increase from an average of 4,000 tonne to 7,200 tonnes of distributed power trains with the introduction of the Pacific National Queensland magnetite trains between Townsville and Cloncurry in recent years. This trend will possibly increase as we need to get heavier trains in the future to meet potential growth in the north-west minerals province.

The LNP's proposal to outsource the maintenance on this track is a recipe for disaster, particularly if we look at past history of what has occurred with UK, New Zealand and, more recently, Tasmanian rail. In all these cases, the private operators who became responsible for the below rail maintenance of the network never invested enough of the returns into maintaining the track to a suitable standard. With TasRail, Pacific National/Toll ran the network into the ground and then walked away from it, with the government left to pick up the bill of returning the state's rail network to an efficient and safe operation. Looking at the amount of investment that is required to bring the north-west corridor up to a suitable standard—which I believe is some \$3 million a kilometre—and to meet the growing demand, it is highly unlikely that once the network is outsourced to a private company the required upgrade work needed to meet future tonnage will be forthcoming.

Under right to information I obtained the following information on disturbances along the line. From 1 June 2010 to 31 December 2012 there were 136 derailments including 31 running line derailments. This represented a large increase from the two years previous. There is a significant increase here. Why? I will offer a suggestion. We are seeing here the reduction of the maintenance of rolling stock along this line following part privatisation of QR National as it was previously called. With

the advent of that, we have seen maintenance crews taken off this line. Again we are looking at more reductions in staff at Hughenden.

In 12 of the line derailments mentioned earlier, faulty rolling stock or rolling stock issues were to blame including broken axles, defective bearings and flange climb. Significant track damage was done with the majority of these line accidents ranging from 100 metres to more than two kilometres, with delays from one day to two weeks. That represents a significant hole in revenue to the state government every time that happens. Every time that rail line is interrupted it means Queenslanders are missing out on revenue that we desperately need.

The speed of the trains in those accidents ranged from 10 kilometres an hour to 56 kilometres an hour. The agreement signed by most states some years ago was that trains in every state would travel at 80 kilometres an hour. So as members can see, we are well below that capacity on that line due to the slow speeds trains can travel at.

The number of train wagons hauled is difficult to assess given the different companies along the line, although Aurizon is the largest hauler with varying weights of train wagons and loads. I think the government now has a very strong responsibility to take note of the problems on this track and to look at what is causing the problems we are facing now. I believe that the problems started back in the 1990s when the Goss government decided to sack over a thousand rail workers on that western line. It is a path that this government seems willing to continue to go down, because it keeps happening. Rail workers in Hughenden are now facing job cuts when they are the ones who keep this rolling stock maintained. They have the local knowledge and they keep those towns alive. Yet these blokes are looking at losing their jobs right now. So I call on this government to stop that from happening and to keep this line viable and efficient to keep industry going.