The Infrastructure Road to Recovery— Let's Build Our Way Out of the Depression!

A Great Railway Boom

Australia's rail sector must be revolutionised, both for the sake of transport within our country, and also to tie Australia into the rest of the world, in particular into the world's greatest population centres, at the eastern and southeastern Asian terminals of the Eurasian Land-Bridge. This revolution will have two axes: Prof. Endersbee's proposal for a Melbourne-Darwin Asian Express, and a vast upgrading and expansion of Australia's rail network centring upon the new magnetic levitation (mag-lev) rail technology pioneered in Germany, and which is now being built in China.

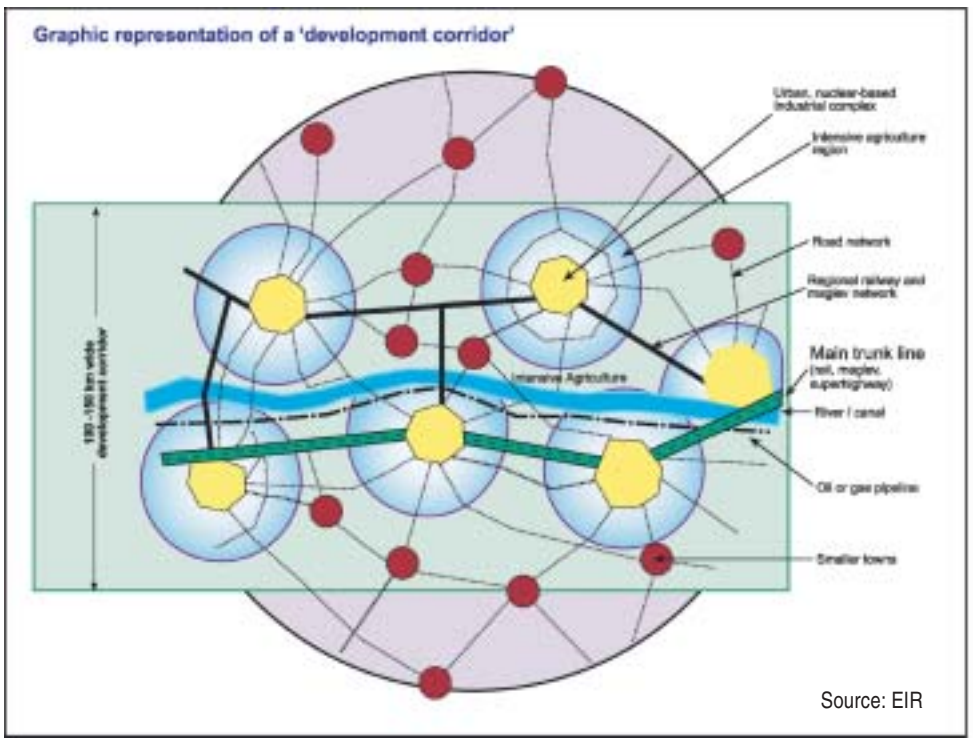
Our nation's rail sector at present is a pathetic shambles, so bad that the 2001 Australian Infrastructure Report Card prepared by the Institution of Engineers, Australia, a very conservative, understated body, rates it at D-, with the crucial Melbourne-Sydney-Brisbane rail corridor rating an F, due to "poor track co-ordination, steam age alignments and inadequate signalling and communications systems."

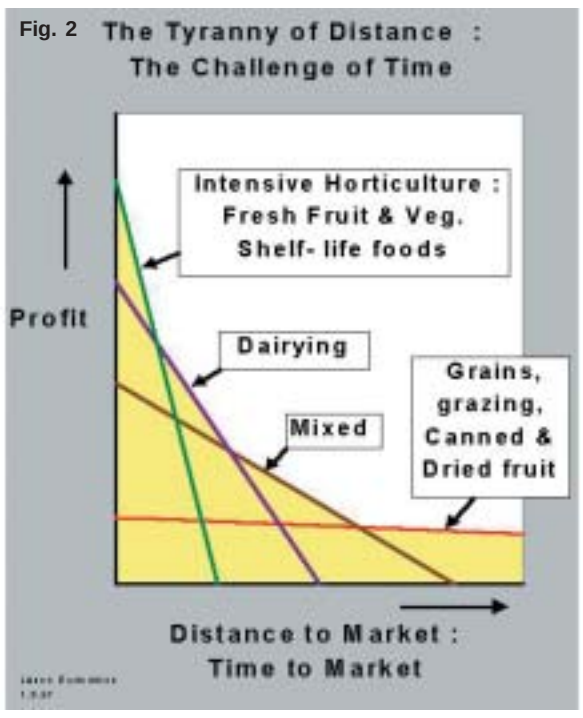
With the exception of rail lines built expressly to service mineral deposits, most of Australia's rail system was built at the turn of the 20th Century. The report of the federal Parliament's Standing Committee on Communications, Transport and Microeconomic Reform, *Tracking Australia* warned in 1998, "Without urgent and substantial investment in this infrastructure, major sections of the national rail network are likely to become irretrievable within ten years. In this context, the rationale for increased investment in rail infrastructure has to be about averting the potentially enormous costs of diminished or defunct rail services between major cities on the eastern seaboard, including increased road construction and maintenance, and the negative externalities associated with large and growing volumes of road traffic."

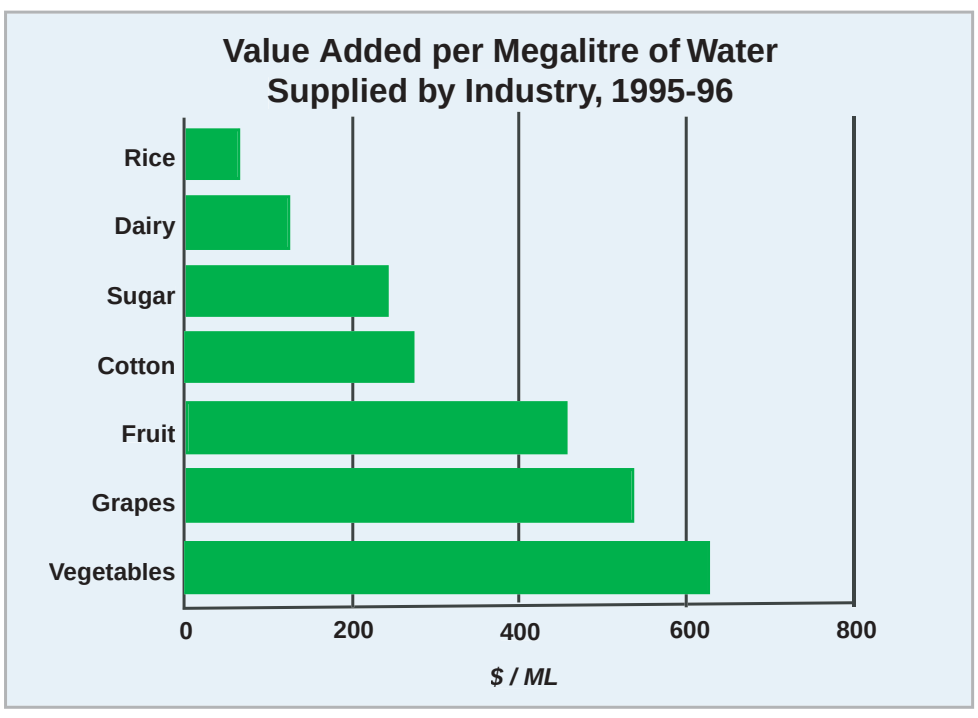
That report was three years ago, and, under privatisation and competition policy with the exception of the beginning construction of the Alice Springs-Darwin railroad, the rail system has not improved significantly since. The "negative externalities" in the report refer to the horrible figure of $15 billion per year lost in road accidents on overcrowded, deteriorating roads along with an estimated $13 billion annual loss due to congestion, which is expected to rise to $30 billion by 2015. Only a tiny fraction of the nation's passenger traffic moves by rail, and, since 1975, rail's share of interstate non-bulk freight has declined from 60% to 35%, even as the trucking industry is suffering record rates of bankruptcies and psychological and health problems associated with horrific working hours. Between 1975 and 2001 the Federal Government spent $43 billion on roads and a miniscule $2 billion on rail, even though for medium and long distance, rail is an inherently much more efficient mode of transport. Therefore, we must plan to spend some tens of billions on the industry over the next ten years, both in upgrading existing lines, but in particular in building the Asian Express and a mag-lev grid tying together all of our major population centres.

Prof. Endersbee's Asian Express, a high-speed train from Melbourne to Darwin, our gateway to Asia, would revolutionise Australia's export potentials.

The Asian Express







Top, Left and Right: The railroads of the Eurasian Land-Bridge will not merely be transport systems, but 100 km wide "development corridors", encompassing oil and gas pipelines, communications networks, superhighways, agro-industrial complexes and new cities—precisely the way Prof. Endersbee's Asian Express and Ring Rail proposals should function for Australia. Bottom Left: Australia's agricultural exports have been largely constrained to bulk products which are not time-sensitive, but which are often much less profitable, such as grains, cotton, wool, canned fruits, etc. Bottom Right: Through greatly expanding our irrigated acreage, in combination with high-speed rail and ship links to Asia, we can greatly increase the return to Australia's producers, as the combination of this graph and Fig. 2 demonstrate.

The Melbourne to Darwin Asian Express proposal, which Prof. Endersbee later expanded into the Ring Rail to go around the top end of the continent and terminate in Perth, is a beautiful idea, which would transform Australia's relations to Asia.

Australia's present transport system is a huge constraining factor on the nation's export capabilities, as Prof. Endersbee explained to the CEC National Conference on November 23, 1997,

"Our present system of shipping involves what are still effectively tramp steamers, that go through several ports.… If you have a look at the time tables of all the ships that come to Australia, you find that when a ship comes to Australia, they visit three or four ports in our waters and effectively, most shipping in Australia, circumnavigates the continent. This system would cut right through this, with a total new transport system. It is not just a railway line. *It's a new transport system*. Because of the fact that these ships have to call at several ports in Australia, the sort of ships that serve Australia also call at several ports around in the South West Pacific/ East Asia area. So they have a schedule of about six weeks, a turnaround time of about six weeks. So, for shippers shipping from Australia, it usually is a month plus, to get to anywhere in Asia."

With the Asian Express, however, three trains a day could be running between Melbourne and Darwin, and then, with high speed ferries, products could be in key Asian ports in another day or two. Said Prof. Endersbee, "The distance from Darwin to Singapore is the same distance as the length of the Mediterranean. The sea state is mostly fairly flat. In other words it is calm seas most of the time, so that means we can contemplate fast ferries servicing these areas, and so we can have daily ferry services from Darwin to Java, Darwin to Singapore, and so on." And these Asian ports are huge: Hong Kong and Singapore are close to tied for the world's largest, while the third largest port in the world is Kaohsiung in Taiwan, with four ports on the north coast of Java which handle as many containers combined as Europe's greatest port, Rotterdam.

The Asian Express should obviously be built immediately. But, explained, Prof. Endersbee,

"In proposing this project over the past five years, I have been totally opposed by every government in Australia, federal and state.… And nobody is really interested in my analysis of the economies of the project, all the detail I have done in terms of professional work. I have done at least five years solid professional work on this, and prior to that I was working in Southeast Asia, and I have been looking at these economies in Southeast Asia for the last 30 years, and so I had an awful lot of background behind me and