

# Reconnecting an isolated state

Reconnecting an isolated state - My vision for Tasmania –Peter Brohier- The Examiner Newspaper

Twenty years ago a vision for Tasmania's future was published in the Australian Financial Review.

It was subsequently supported by my committees and the people of Tasmania.

Two prime ministers then made most of the vision a reality. The Tasmanian economy boomed.

Half a billion dollars later, Tasmania is moving away from that vision.

It is seemingly bound by the views of a few groups in Tasmania who resist change. Some others who should embrace change lack the will to ask for it.

The vision still remains the only whole of state vision that can positively change Tasmania - right now.

Tasmania is said to be a state in decline. The talk is of closures to save money. The reverse is needed. Tasmania has under-utilised infrastructure and resources that can start to be used, not closed.

Tasmania is on the shortest interstate, inter-capital route in Australia, near a population centre of about 4 million (Melbourne). This geographical position is a critical strength that must be fully used.

Tasmania has a potentially strong economy but is taking the wrong approach to its vital interstate transport links.

In the 1970s, a federal equalisation scheme assisted industries that were most important to the Tasmanian economy. From 1996, people and vehicles were also offered equalisation in the form of a Tasmanian sea highway, said to be part of the national highway. Equalisation is the principle of being able to cross Bass Strait by sea at the same cost as on a road.

Unfortunately today, one scheme is now said to assist manufacturing, mining and primary production, and the other, to facilitate driving holidays for mainlanders through low cost cars, but not by equalising people.

Both these federal equalisation schemes are not delivering comprehensive equalisation for the movement of all that would travel on a road.

The federal mandate for transport equity, uncapped federal equalisation funding, long- term federal sea highway policy and port and shipping capacity are not being effectively used to implement the vision. The vision is unravelling.

It is time Canberra properly planned and effectively managed a process of providing comprehensive equalisation. This is vital to the needs of a modern, largely service based, Tasmanian economy in need of people.

The arguments in favour are sound and irrefutable. The vision is economically dry as all states and regions are fairly connected to the national transport grid by road, except for Tasmania.

Canberra has favoured all other states by building infrastructure to connect them. It should now be asked, if not compelled, to enhance Tasmania's interstate connection to fully duplicate a national highway, using shipping.

But the Tasmanian Government seems unable or unwilling to ask Canberra to balance the interests of competing industry stakeholders, preferring maintenance of the status quo, with perhaps an incremental approach to improvement. Instead they ought to seize this whole vision with a vengeance.

Given the nature and state of the Tasmanian economy, maintaining the status quo or the existing equalisation schemes without substantial adjustment, seems inappropriate and unacceptable. The schemes, as applied, badly skew access favouring some industries and not others.

It is vital that Bass Strait mirrors a highway for retail, transport, construction and for all public sector activities by allowing for substantial movement of people at low fares. For lower consumer prices, there needs to be a spreading of overheads over more travellers and residents. Southbound consumables and building materials also need to be covered by equalisation. A full sea highway link is critical to justify federal coverage of international exports while some protected industries will also need access to a larger customer base.

The cost to Canberra of this proposal is immaterial. Tasmania's notional share of this full link, calculated and based on Tasmanian government estimates, is about the cost of a Brighton bypass, each year. It could be far less.

This expenditure, if applied to the Strait, would be the best bypass surgery performed on the whole of Tasmania in decades. It would allow the free flow of people, all vehicles and all freight over the only surface artery between the north and south islands of Australia.

As with any new land based highway, the economic resurgence from this initiative can be immediate and substantial. It can underpin the whole Tasmanian economy by giving all activities critical mass.

How can there be a Commonwealth without a comprehensive surface link to the common wealth of Australia?

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