

Return to Flyer times with business class

Improved train links between Newcastle and Sydney are crucial, writes **Jennifer Buckingham**.

THE new train service between Sydney and Newcastle advertised in the *Sydney Morning Herald* promised to be fast and comfortable. The train's "luxurious carriages" would be "finished with polished crows' foot elm and cudgerie, and fitted with comfortably-sprung seats". Some seats would have tables and a buffet service would be available.

To regular commuters on the Newcastle to Sydney services, it sounds like something exciting to look forward to. After all, if you can get a coffee and a sandwich at 10,000 metres above ground on a 90-minute flight to Melbourne, why can't you get one on a two-and-a-half-hour train journey to Central? And tables would be welcome for commuters wishing to work on their laptop computers.

Unfortunately, what seems like the dawn of a new age in NSW's transport history turns out to be its past. The newspaper report about the new, comfortable train carriages was published on November 8, 1929. Today, 80 years later, passengers on the Newcastle to Sydney line can only dream of the amenities of the distant past.

Train travel was not only more pleasant early in the last century, it was also faster. In 1937, the Newcastle Flyer travelled to Sydney in two hours 26 minutes – seven minutes faster than the current scheduled travel time.

With journeys getting slower, it would be nice if the comfort level had remained high, if not improved. Yet the opposite is the case. The single-class trains that have been servicing intercity journeys in NSW for the past three decades offer a level of comfort to passengers that can no longer be described as adequate. International comparisons reveal that NSW intercity rail connections have not moved with the times. The seats are uncomfortable; there are no buffet services, no power sockets for portable electronic devices, no wireless internet – features that are standard on many train connections



FULL STEAM AHEAD: Passengers on the Newcastle to Sydney line can only dream of the amenities of the distant past. Train travel was also faster early in the last century. — Artwork by David Coleman

in countries such as the United Kingdom, Korea, Germany or South Africa.

For these reasons, taking the train is unattractive to business commuters who choose the more expensive option of driving when travelling intercity in NSW. Statistics obtained under Freedom of Information from RailCorp NSW show that there has been a 38 per cent decline in patronage on the main commuter morning express service from Newcastle to Sydney since 2003 and an 18 per cent decline on the return express in the evening. Traffic counts on the F3 freeway have increased markedly, however.

Some simple policy changes would make trains a more serious competitor to the car. First, timetables for the only comfortable trains to service NSW's major cities, the CountryLink XPT and Xpress, should be changed so that day commuters to and from Sydney can

use them. At present, they are suited only for tourists. To use the current service, you would have to board the XPT at Broadmeadow at 4.10am to get to work on time and leave in the middle of the working day to return home.

Second, business-class service should be introduced on intercity routes. A single class makes sense if you are travelling from, say, Wickham to Cardiff, but passengers have different needs for longer journeys. Relatively modest modifications to the existing rolling stock will make them more compatible with these needs: larger, more comfortable seats; fold-away tray tables; power sockets; and either a beverage service or vending machines. Of course, these amenities would come at an increased ticket price, set at a value that would not require extra taxpayer subsidies. Over time, the business fares might even generate additional revenue.

As the population grows in NSW, transport between urban centres will become increasingly important. If Newcastle Airport is eventually designated as the state's second international airport, improved links between Newcastle and Sydney will be crucial. Fast trains have been the subject of discussion for many years but are still far from fruition. In the meantime, improvements in the quality of rail services would be a small but important step.

Comfortable train journeys in NSW should no longer be a distant memory of the past. It is time to go back to the future of rail transport.

Jennifer Buckingham is a research fellow at The Centre for Independent Studies and co-author (with Oliver Marc Hartwich) of the report *On the Right Track: Why NSW Needs Business Class Rail*, released today (cis.org.au).

Aged resistance to a privatising Government

Wallsend Aged Care Facility has had a win, writes **Lee Rhiannon**.

THE Rees Labor Government may be ideologically committed to privatisation, but it would be wise to think carefully about picking a fight with the Wallsend community by moving to privatise the local aged-care facility.

On Tuesday, the Greens won support in the NSW Parliament for a motion calling on the NSW Government to scrap its plans to privatise the facility.

It's an important win for this broad-based community campaign, sending a strong, clear message to the NSW Government to keep this facility in public hands.

The original Wallsend hospital was set up by coalminers in 1892 for

their community. The NSW Government has no right to sell it. It is bad health policy, and reflects poorly on the Labor Party.

There is a real fear in the community that the care of their loved ones at this facility will be downgraded if a company or a non-government organisation takes over.

Staff cuts would be inevitable if the sale goes ahead, as cost-cutting is the only way the new owners could make the venture a going concern.

Recently I met with staff from the Wallsend Aged Care Facility and the families of a number of its patients.

Their personal stories were very moving.

Many people told me they felt insulted by meetings with the Department of Health, where they were told about the Government's plans rather than being consulted on the future of the facility.

I understand that about a third of patients have a disability, a third have dementia with challenging behaviour including psychiatric disorders and a third include palliative-care residents with high-care needs.

None of the current residents need to pay accommodation bonds. Many are socially disadvantaged. They do not own their homes and they could not afford to pay for care. Wallsend means a great deal to these patients and their families.

The community are united by concerns that the current high level of care at the facility will be compromised if the Government pushes ahead with its sell-off plans.

Community support for the campaign is growing, with backing from the Newcastle Trades Hall Council, the NSW Nurses Association and CFMEU Mining Division.

In Parliament I spoke about the strengths of both current and past

campaigns. A petition has been signed by more than 10,000 people calling for this facility to be retained in public hands. In 1993 a 10,000-strong protest and 18-month picket was held when the government tried to close Wallsend hospital.

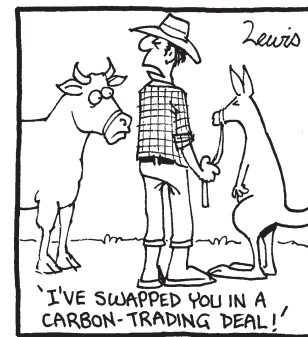
The Greens will mobilise our local contacts to support the coming Wallsend community protests.

Retaining the facility in the Hunter Area Health Service is such a no-brainer for the Government you would think even it could get this one right.

The Government must listen this time and reverse its bankrupt policy direction and reconsider its plans to enable private operators to take over 10 other government-owned nursing homes across the state.

Lee Rhiannon is a Greens MP and health spokeswoman.

Topics today



Today's fact

Kangaroos don't produce methane, making them more environmentally friendly than cattle.

Today's word

Punctilious: Showing great attention to detail or correct behaviour.

It happened today

From our files – 1938: After the shark danger on the Wickham waterfront had been discussed, the Newcastle District Council of Parents and Citizens Associations decided last night to ask the Police Department to arrange for a patrol of the foreshore of Throsby Creek after school hours, and at weekends.

Today in history

1618: English adventurer Sir Walter Raleigh is executed in London, charged with treason against King James I.
1863: International Committee of the Red Cross is founded in Geneva.
1929: Prices crash on the New York Stock Exchange on what becomes known as Black Tuesday, heralding the Great Depression of the 1930s.
1942: Germans massacre 16,000 Jews in Pinsk, Russia.
1982: Trial of Lindy Chamberlain, whose baby daughter disappeared at Uluru in 1980, ends with her conviction for murder. She was pardoned in 1987.
1996: Thousands of paintings, sculptures, coins and other objects plundered by the Nazis from Jewish homes in Austria go on sale in an auction to benefit needy Holocaust survivors.

Born today

James Boswell, Scottish lawyer-biographer (1740-1795); **Frank Sedgman**, pictured, Australian tennis champion (1927-); **Richard Dreyfuss**, US actor (1947-); **Kate Jackson**, US actress (1948-); **Randy Jackson**, US singer (1961-); **Eddie McGuire**, Australian media personality (1964-); **Matthew Hayden**, Australian cricketer (1971-); **Winona Ryder**, US actress (1971-).



Odd spot

A 24-year-old female kindergarten teacher has been detained in south-west China after allegedly stabbing more than 20 children with a syringe to discipline them.

Today's text

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. **Ephesians 6:10**