

**KELVIN THOMSON MP**  
**INFRASTRUCTURE AUSTRALIA BILL 2008**  
**Second Reading**  
**12<sup>th</sup> March 2008**

**House of Representatives**

**Mr KELVIN THOMSON** (Wills) (6.04 p.m.)—The [Infrastructure Australia Bill 2008](#) will provide for the establishment of Infrastructure Australia and the infrastructure coordinator. It is a bill which provides the kind of leadership we need—firstly, to tackle inflation; secondly, to provide a nationally coordinated approach to tackling infrastructure bottlenecks; thirdly, to drive investment where it is needed most, fuelling the nation's productive capacity; and finally, to ensure that infrastructure development and investment is motivated by value, not the margin of a seat.

This is another of those bills that shows that it is Labor that is the nation-building party. The previous government had 11 years to fix bottlenecks and 11 years to put downward pressure on inflation and interest rates. They failed; they were never interested in nation-building. It took a Labor government to appoint Australia's first federal infrastructure minister. This is a party which has a proud record as the nation-building party. It was the great Labor Prime Minister Ben Chifley who started the massive Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme. It was the Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam who gave us practical infrastructure solutions like fixing sewerage and building new hospitals. He appointed Tom Uren as Minister for Urban and Regional Development. We saw then the creation of land commissions which provided for reasonably priced housing blocks and the development of new planned communities. Again, it was the Labor government of the 1990s which saw the introduction of the Better Cities program under Minister Brian Howe. That was a broad-ranging strategy of reform that included innovative housing programs and a focus on urban consolidation. So it has always been Labor that has been the nation-building party, and Labor again turns to this task.

Now what is the modern infrastructure challenge—the challenge of the 21st century? I think the big infrastructure challenge is public transport. It is clear that reducing congestion and improving the efficiency of transport networks will play an important part in the abatement of greenhouse gases and will improve urban amenity. It is also clear that climate change, with its effects on infrastructure reliability and maintenance costs, will present new infrastructure challenges—for example, from coastal and storm flooding. I noticed just yesterday that Professor Ross Garnaut's paper on transport and urban planning included an issues paper which found that building new roads may make Australia's greenhouse emissions from transport worse. He noted that the provision of road infrastructure may induce growth in passenger car use by reducing the competitive advantage of public transport, and possibly inducing additional travel. This came at the same time as, in my own state, we had an announcement from the Victorian government that all unzoned land within Melbourne's urban growth boundary will be released for development to accommodate the city's booming population. Clearly, we have to ensure that moves like this do not add to the city's reliance on cars. We certainly have state government policy which seeks to reduce car trips and increase the use of walking, cycling and public transport.

Clearly, what we need is a focus on public transport infrastructure. Despite having one of the highest levels of urbanisation, Australia remains the only OECD nation where the federal government does not provide funds for sustainable transport infrastructure. This places Australia at an international disadvantage

compared to countries such as the UK and the United States, whose national governments do invest heavily in public transport infrastructure. The federal government currently funds major upgrades of roads and I think that public transport should be eligible for similar funding, given its role in the reduction of congestion and its role in relation to greenhouse gases.

Congestion is a very serious national cost. Delays in delivery schedules and opportunity costs—the costs of congestion—have been estimated at over \$20 billion annually. Something like \$2½ billion of that directly impacts on Melbourne's eastern and south-eastern suburbs. These are suburbs which are part of a prominent industrial hub and I think it is imperative that they are provided with an efficient and readily available public transport system to reduce overall traffic congestion. Again, the area of eastern and south-eastern Melbourne is responsible for hundreds of thousands of tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions. This is something which will rise exponentially in future years if congestion is left unchecked. Although it is clear that respective state governments need to be ultimately responsible for public transport services, I think there is a role for federal involvement through joint funding arrangements which will provide for appropriate accountability in project delivery.

I commend the work of the Metropolitan Transport Forum, the MTF, and the Eastern Transport Coalition, which jointly represent 26 Melbourne councils. I commend the work of Councillor Mick Van de Vreede, the Chairperson of the Eastern Transport Coalition, and also the work of Councillor Jackie Fristacky, from the Metropolitan Transport Forum. They have put forward some very useful ideas for public transport infrastructure in Melbourne, essentially under the heading of the need for the federal government to allow urban public transport to be funded under AusLink or through the creation of specific programs and, secondly, proposing that the federal government provide funding for a number of urban public transport initiatives in Melbourne's east. As they say, it is clear that Australia is facing immense challenges to create sustainable cities for the future.

This is something which was looked at by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage, which published the report *Sustainable cities* back in August 2005. It looked at many of these concerns, and it recommended:

... the Australian Government significantly boost its funding commitment for public transport systems, particularly light and heavy rail, in the major cities.

It further recommended:

... the provision of Australian Government transport infrastructure funds include provision of funding specifically for sustainable public transport infrastructure for suburbs and developments on the outer fringes of our cities.

That is consistent with the federal Labor Party's platform, which states that we need to ensure that Australians have access to adequate public transport services by providing appropriate financial assistance to state governments to improve and extend public transport systems in urban areas. It is also consistent with the kinds of initiatives which occurred during the time of Better Cities, when there were cooperative funding arrangements struck with the Victorian government to fund extensions to light rail and upgrades to heavy rail.

There are several projects, which have been mentioned, in the eastern metropolitan area of Melbourne which would help reduce congestion and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. I mention to the House the rail to Rowville project,

which would provide a heavy rail connection from Huntingdale station to Rowville, along the median of Wellington Road to Stud Park Shopping Centre at Rowville. That would remove thousands of private vehicles from the road network. That project has been proposed for the past 40 years. The City of Knox has undertaken a prefeasibility study for that project, and a great deal of work has been done on it.

Furthermore, there is a proposal for the Belgrave and Lilydale lines beyond Ringwood to be duplicated, with the addition of a third track in a number of locations along the Belgrave and Lilydale lines. That would assist flexibility in train operations and improve safety and service levels. Thirdly, there is a proposal for rail to Doncaster. There is a space along the Eastern Freeway median to provide heavy rail from Victoria Park to Doncaster and beyond. It should be noted that you would need to get extra capacity on the Clifton Hill group of lines and an upgrade of the city loop as part of such a project.

There are also proposals to improve the coordination and transfer of passengers at transport interchanges. Commuters hate changing modes, and little is done to assist with protection from the weather or with directions and real-time information. The current network of public transport requires greater coordination between modes, and better passenger facilities are required where train, tram and bus services meet.

These are all very important and sensible proposals. I hope that they are given consideration, and I hope that both the federal and state governments work hard at meeting our public transport infrastructure needs. I commend this piece of legislation to the House.

**KELVIN THOMSON MP**  
**Federal Member for Wills**