



Transcript—ABC Radio Newcastle—Paul Culliver interview with High Speed Rail Authority CEO Timothy Parker

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Subjects: [Sydney to Newcastle high-speed rail](#).

PAUL CULLIVER: First, though. We've got to go fast. We've got to go fast between Sydney and Newcastle. The news today, as you may have heard, the Australian Government is saying they've got \$78.8 million allocated to fund a business case for Sydney to Newcastle high-speed rail. The man responsible for delivering that, of course, is the CEO of the High Speed Rail Authority, Timothy Parker. Good afternoon to you. Oh, I think we've got it. Tim Parker, good afternoon to you.

TIMOTHY PARKER: Good afternoon.

PAUL CULLIVER: Good to talk to you. First of all, you've been appointed to this role this year. What do you see as your job as the CEO for High Speed Rail Authority?

TIMOTHY PARKER: My role here is to—the Australian Government's been very clear, they want a high-speed rail business case from Sydney to Newcastle, and that's what I'm here to deliver. My background is delivery, so I see this as the first step on moving forward to actually delivering the project - not just simply a business case, but actually setting the foundations for a really successful project in the future.

PAUL CULLIVER: Given it's been talked about for so long—it's been much touted under previous governments as well—at this point in time, do we even need a business case?

TIMOTHY PARKER: I think with the sort of investment you're talking about, I think we certainly do need a business case. The benefit I have is that—as you say, quite rightly, this has been studied many times before—but I think it's important to recognise that since the studies were done, particularly the 2013 study, a lot of things have changed and we want to take account of those things in the new business case.

That includes population growth and work patterns that have changed since COVID. Also, Newcastle is growing faster than they thought it would at the time. So, I think there's a lot of things that need to change if we want to update the business case to make sure we get it right. The project is set to be very successful.

PAUL CULLIVER: The feasibility study done under the previous LNP government was, as I understand it, completed but never released. Is that available to you, and is it useful to you?

TIMOTHY PARKER: We're currently having discussions with the NSW Government about working together, and obviously part of those discussions is for them to give us what information they have. We certainly see it as very important to have a close working relationship and also taking advantage of what work has been done so we don't have to redo it. But again, from our point of view we see this as very important, it's a joint project between the Commonwealth and the NSW Government. So, I'm very hopeful that any information they have, they'll pass on to us.

PAUL CULLIVER: \$80 million. What does that get you? What's the work that's actually going to go into this?

TIMOTHY PARKER: Okay, well, I've got a long list, but I'll give you a potted list. One of the first things we want to do is actually define what a high-speed rail product is in Australia. That's things like the train type, the service pattern, fare structure, how is it going to operate, how is it going to be maintained? We're obviously going to update the demand modelling—how many people are going to use it, the alignment, where will it go from, where to where? Station locations, project corridor, land requirements, the environmental approval pathway, economic analysis and the benefits, financing—ultimately the cost of the project and the timescale to develop and deliver it. And often some of those steps are iterative. Depending on the station locations, the demand can go up and down; the benefits can go up and down. So, the process is that you do these models and you iterate to find the preferred option, and that's what takes the time and that's what takes a fair amount of the funding necessary to get these business cases done so that you end up with an optimum project.

PAUL CULLIVER: The Federal Government, the Minister for Infrastructure, Catherine King, announcing this today said it's going to be delivered by the end of 2024. That's this year. Can you do it?

TIMOTHY PARKER: Yes, I'm very comfortable that we can do this. As I said, we have the benefit of a huge amount of work that's been done before, and we're currently growing the team very quickly. So, we're out looking for people, we'll be out to tender for the various packages very shortly.

PAUL CULLIVER: What is it about Sydney to Newcastle that makes it attractive or appropriate to be the first place to achieve this in Australia?

TIMOTHY PARKER: One of the things that makes it attractive is, without putting too fine a point on it, it doesn't perform very well at the moment. It's a 165-kilometre journey from Sydney to Newcastle and takes about two hours 45 minutes. Now, that is slow. In global terms, that's slow. I also think, as I said before, that you look at Newcastle and the Lower Hunter, that's actually growing really fast. There are more people moving there, the population is growing. The benefits of interconnecting Sydney and Newcastle are huge. Both cities will benefit from that interconnection, as will the people along the corridor. So, I think it's a really good starting point to set the tone for what high-speed rail could be for the whole of the eastern seaboard of Australia.

PAUL CULLIVER: I'm tempted to ask about what comes next after the business case, but I dare say you are going to say, well, we'll figure that out in the business case. Do you have timelines? Do you have ideas? Once you've got the business case, what happens next?

TIMOTHY PARKER: Yeah, I think it's very much a government decision, but my experience has been that if we produce a good business case, it provides government the ability to make an investment decision. That's obviously a government decision, not mine, but my role is to produce a business case that is compelling and optimises the product so that government and the people of the region go, "Actually, yes, we do want to do this. It is worth the investment to actually get the benefits that we will be able to derive from it".

PAUL CULLIVER: Is it in the realm of possibility that you deliver the business case and it doesn't stack up?

TIMOTHY PARKER: I think there's all sorts of possibilities. I have a fair amount of confidence, based on the work done in 2013, that it will stack up. The earlier work showed there are real benefits to be achieved by high-speed rail. We haven't done the work at the moment, so I can't say whether it's going to be a huge benefit, a bit of a benefit or whatever, but my experience - and you just go overseas and you look at what's happening in France, Germany, Spain, Turkey, Japan—they're all very successful high-speed rail projects. So, I think this is the time. I can't think that they're investing all their money without getting some positive return. So, I think there is a great opportunity for Australia here.

PAUL CULLIVER: In creating the business case, it's based on engineering and analysis and you're crunching the numbers and that kind of thing, but essentially it's an exercise in theory. How much, though, do you have to consult with landowners, consult with communities? How much of the business case involves actually putting boots on the ground to have a look at what you're actually looking at physically building?

TIMOTHY PARKER: As we work our way through, we will need to obviously get feedback from the community. The community know their area better than us. We also know that there are a number of engineering challenges which you can't do at desktop. You've got some very interesting geographical and geotechnical issues out there. So, in the course of the year, we will be doing consultation with the

community and we will also be doing physical geotechnical investigations to find out what are the conditions on the ground. From the early studies, there's a significant amount of tunnelling involved not just coming into Sydney, but along the route as well. So, they're all things that we'll get on and do again. This provides some certainty. It's all about making sure that when we finish the business case, that it's been done very thoroughly and we know what the risks are, we know what the issues are, so that when we come to deliver it we can deliver it within the timeframe and the budget that is set.

PAUL CULLIVER: And Tim Parker, it's my experience that people who love trains, really love trains. So, I might ask you, as the CEO of the High Speed Rail Authority, how much do you love trains?

TIMOTHY PARKER: Oh, I love trains. I really do.

PAUL CULLIVER: Tell me a bit. Why is that?

TIMOTHY PARKER: Well I've done a lot of projects. I've done trains, I've done planes, I've done roads. Looking at our future, I think trains are the way to go for Australia. I think the experience of travelling at a high speed—I've been fortunate enough to spend some time in Japan and some time in Europe. The journey experience is so much nicer. Environmentally, it's so much better. I think this is the way to go and I think the people in Australia and in this region deserve a high-quality rail service. It's not just about the love of the train. It's going to be a better product than people driving down the M1 or catching a slower train. I think it's going to be fantastic for the people.

PAUL CULLIVER: Yeah. Well, I really appreciate having this conversation today and hopefully we can keep having them as the project progresses. So, thanks for your time today.

TIMOTHY PARKER: My pleasure. Thank you.

PAUL CULLIVER: Tim Parker, the inaugural Chief Executive Officer (the CEO) of the High Speed Rail Authority. Australian Government today announcing that they are funding to the tune of roughly \$80 million the business case that is expected to be delivered by the end of this year. Then what happens next? Well, of course, the Australian Government has to say, yep, here's a tonne more money to actually get it built.

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