

## FREIGHT TRAINS - WINNERS AND LOSERS

Those of us in Toowoomba may or may not have heard about recent moves by Queensland Rail to cancel more freight train services. I'm sure our friends from Cunnamulla and Charleville, or from Winton and Biloela, have heard this news very clearly. They will be very informed about this decision, because for them it will have a more tangible impact.

It seems that a little over a week ago, Queensland Rail announced that they had cancelled some services on the south-western lines, because of a short-term locomotive supply. Apparently there was no indication of which services had been cancelled, or for how long.

For people living in Quilpie or Cunnamulla, or places along the way, this news is likely to be a cause of great concern. Not only are groceries, other food items and general freight transported into these towns by rail, but freight, grain and livestock are also transported out via the same service. The uncertainty about ongoing train services offers yet another source of concern for residents of our far-flung rural and isolated areas. Here is yet another basic service apparently being withdrawn from rural centres.

Various interpretations of this move are possible. These begin with the presumption that Queensland Rail is likely to discontinue their dedicated freight service to the south-west, along with similar services in central Queensland. Another interpretation is the suggestion that the government is withdrawing those parts of QR that make less profit as it prepares to privatise rail services across the state.

Obviously, this is a complex issue, with positive outcomes for some, and undesirable effects for other people involved. There are no simple answers. Of course, there is the option of transporting grain, livestock and freight by road. But there are also varying implications of that alternative - good for trucking companies and drivers, not so good for the environment, for the state of the roads, or for those concerned about bigger and heavier vehicles on our roadways.

When issues like this arise, I am reminded that there are a few simple questions that are helpful to ask when faced with complex situations or decisions.

**Who wins?** There will usually be some group who benefit most from the decision. In this case, it might be the transport companies, and the government; perhaps it will be the new owners of QR, if sale of this public asset goes ahead.

**Who loses?** If there are winners, there will also be losers. Unless those involved are committed to the hard work of creating a win-win situation! In this case, those who bear the cost of the decision will more than likely be the small business people in the rural centres, along with local residents who depend on the rail service to access many of what we consider to be basic goods and services.

**Who decides?** In the end someone - an individual person or organisation, has to take responsibility for the decisions that are made. But each person has a right to participate in

processes which lead to the decisions which have significant impact on their lives and well-being. I wonder what participative processes have been initiated to determine the impact of reducing or cutting the rail services to communities in south-western and central Queensland?

**Whose perspective?** Any situation, when seen from a different angle, or through the eyes of different participants, takes on a different hue. Whose perspectives are considered when decisions about social structures and services are made? To what extent were people in the towns, or their representatives, consulted about the value of the freight services for them? Consultation is an important process in social or political dialogue.

Who knows for how long we will continue to hear the clang and rattle of freight trains as they re-do their couplings in the Toowoomba rail yards in the early hours of the morning. If you are one who enjoys something of the familiarity of that sound, you will probably be disappointed if the freight services are significantly reduced or discontinued completely. Will you put yourself amongst the winners, or the losers? Or is there another alternative where we all parties benefit?