



Town and Country Planning Association Incorporated

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Registration no. A0031095J

<http://www.tcpa.org.au/>

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The Hon. Daniel Andrews MP
Premier of Victoria
Email: daniel.andrews@parliament.vic.gov.au

Dear Premier,

The Overland Rail Service

We write on behalf of the Town and Country Planning Association Inc. (TCPA) to urge the Victorian Government to provide the support needed to ensure:

- (a) that *The Overland* rail service between Melbourne and Adelaide will continue to operate beyond March 2020, and
- (b) that through an ongoing improvement program, the service can be further developed to meet the longer term needs of Victorians and South Australians for a viable and attractive interstate/intercity/interregional passenger rail service, forming part of a national network.

Public statements indicate that *The Overland* will operate until 31 March 2020. TCPA holds the view that, if *The Overland* ceased to operate, the economic, social and environmental benefits derived from this rail service would be diminished. Moreover, in the future when the community's need for an effective intercity rail system is likely to be greater, the opportunity to build upon an existing rail service would have been lost.

About the TCPA

The TCPA is a politically independent, not-for-profit association incorporated in Victoria.¹

Since its inception, it has been part of TCPA's ethos "*to give the town a bit of the country, and the country a bit of the town*". The importance of connectivity within and between communities is well recognised, and a significant number of TCPA members have a strong interest in the development of transport services and infrastructure – urban and regional, passenger and freight, motorised and non-motorised.

About *The Overland*

There are multiple modes for passenger travel between Melbourne and Adelaide (e.g. air, rail, bus and private car) each with its own attributes; and depending on their trip purpose and requirements, individuals may form a preference for one mode over another.

¹ *TCPA began life as the Victorian Town Planning and Parks Association in 1914, and the name was later changed. TCPA aims to promote and encourage environmentally sensitive planning principles and practices, in existing cities and towns, new suburbs and communities, and urban regeneration. TCPA also advocates for the establishment of effective strategic planning frameworks, and seeks to build popular support for environmental planning.*

Some key features of *The Overland* are:

- For a century, it has provided vital links with the cities, towns and regions in western Victoria and South Australia's south-eastern border region.
- *The Overland* is easy to access: the terminals are centrally located at Southern Cross Station in Melbourne and at Adelaide Parklands Terminal², about 3 km from Adelaide's Victoria Square.
- The route is highly scenic, with landscapes that showcase the beauty of south-eastern Australia, including the Adelaide Hills bushland, the Murray River crossing, the vast dry-farming lands of the Wimmera, and the golden cropped fields from Mt Elephant towards Geelong. Such vistas cannot be experienced from an aeroplane, nor appreciated as much while driving along a highway.
- Although air travel offers the shortest journey time, *The Overland* avoids the hassle of crowded airports, security checks, and car access and parking.
- Travel time (about ten hours between Melbourne and Adelaide) is broadly similar to that by bus or by car – effectively a day's travel in each case. Car travel requires around nine hours of attentive driving, plus rest breaks, and the bus trip has several stopping points along the route, including a meal break.
- Finally, *The Overland* is a comfortable mode of travel, allowing passengers space and time to stretch out, read, move around or converse in small groups. The meals and refreshments are of high standard, the staff are hospitable and the relaxed atmosphere complements the enlightening visual experience.

The Case for Government Support

In common with major transport systems throughout the world, *The Overland* gives rise to externalities: economic, social and environmental impacts or effects that lie outside its core business of transport service provision. Some of the wider community benefits that would be lost or diminished if *The Overland* service were to cease are:

- *Economic*: As part of the *Journey Beyond* rail group (which also includes *The Ghan*, *Indian-Pacific*, and *Great Southern*), *The Overland* contributes significantly to the tourism, retail and hospitality industries, attracting domestic and international travellers to the south-east Australian region, enabling them to visit two of Australia's finest cities and to enjoy their cultural, dining and shopping opportunities.
- *Social*: The people of Victoria and South Australia have a lot in common – mad about sport (AFL, Australian Open, cricket etc.), a considerable interest in the arts and cultural events (witness the recent Tarnanthi exhibition of Aboriginal art at the Art Gallery of South Australia), as well as friendships and family connections. This applies not only to city dwellers but also to people in regional areas. Rail is seen as part of the fabric that ties the cities and communities together and underpins their ongoing development.
- *Environmental*: Compared to other modes, rail travel is environmentally friendly, provided it is well patronised. In a future in which all industries may be pressed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and be more accountable for their environmental impacts, rail has the potential to emerge as a preferred mode for intercity travel. Air travel might not remain a low-cost option if operators were required to ameliorate or pay for the adverse environmental impacts; and a likely move towards greater use of electric vehicle technology for private vehicles may have implications for long-distance road travel (by bus or car) that are yet to be determined.

Moreover, the mix of modes in this intercity travel market provides people with *choices*. It follows that governments (state and federal) have a role to play in maintaining choice, by ensuring that potentially valuable options are not eliminated from the market.

Two decades ago, the Bracks Labor Government recognised the importance of rail as a bond between metropolitan Melbourne and the regions of Victoria, and embarked upon reinstating, expanding and

² Adelaide Parklands Terminal is also known as Keswick Terminal

modernising regional rail services - to provide convenient and comfortable travel for business, social, educational, recreational and personal purposes. This has been very successful and a similar approach could be applied to interstate passenger rail.

Suggestions for Possible Improvements

The Overland carries around 17,000 passengers per year, only a small proportion of the total travel between Melbourne and Adelaide. In order to survive and thrive, *The Overland* will need to grow its patronage and hence its revenue. Some suggestions for making the service more attractive are as follows.

1. Better marketing and promotion of *The Overland* within its own region:

The Overland's three sister rail services in the *Journey Beyond* rail group (*Great Southern*, *The Ghan* and *Indian-Pacific*) are iconic, long-distance, perhaps "once in a lifetime" rail journeys of 3 or 4 days, advertised regularly in newspapers and travel supplements. *The Overland*, however, does not appear to be widely advertised.

The Overland is a single-day journey between two capital cities: it also offers a remarkable tourist experience and, in addition, has the potential to service a wider range of travel needs and opportunities in its own region. With a more diverse market, *The Overland* would appear to have greater synergies with the Sydney - Melbourne XPT service (run by NSW Trainlink) than with the other three *Journey Beyond* tourist rail services.

Suggested Action: Expand marketing and promotion by:

- *identifying and reaching new markets (not only tourists and seniors, but also travel to major sporting or cultural events, social visits and holidays, student excursions, and possibly business travel)*
- *better linking with other ground transport and tourism opportunities in both states (e.g. coach tours to special attractions, wineries, coastal regions, etc.)*
- *increased advertising and promotion of services in line with the above.*

2. Expand the timetable:

The Overland currently operates two services in each direction per week (departing Adelaide on Mondays and Fridays, and departing Melbourne on Tuesdays and Saturdays).

This limited timetable poses a significant constraint on the travel choices of potential customers, particularly if they wish to attend an event or an appointment, and even for tourists and retirees who may be less time-constrained. For instance, the choices for visitors staying in Adelaide are effectively limited to 2 days + 3 nights (arrive Tuesday, depart Friday) or 5 days + 6 nights (arrive Saturday, depart Friday).

Suggested Action:

As an immediate first step, increase the frequency of service to 4 times per week in each direction. This is expected to require the deployment of an additional train set and additional staff costs. The longer-term aim should be a daily service in each direction.

3. Ongoing improvement program:

To attract more customers over a sustained period, a program of progressive investment in service improvements, rolling stock, infrastructure upgrades and passenger facilities will be needed. In view of the resources required, prioritisation will be essential.

- **Short Term:** Examples of issues to be addressed in the near term could include:
 - additional rolling stock;
 - improved interfaces, co-ordination of services, and passenger information (e.g. at Parklands terminal, at North Shore Geelong, and in western Victoria);

- on-board passenger services such as WiFi and audio-visual facilities, and
- integrated ticketing with the Victorian and South Australian systems.
- Medium-to-Long Term: Major capital investments such as more modern rolling stock and track and signalling upgrades, as well as on-going maintenance, will be required to improve journey times and ensure an attractive, competitive service.

For example, one advantage of the current route is its connection with the rapidly growing region of Geelong and its coastal hinterland, but a more direct route between Melbourne and Adelaide (via Ballarat) would reduce journey times. Such a project would probably be scheduled for the medium-to-long term as it would require costly track work (due to different rail gauges).

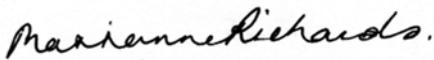
While TCPA does not claim specialised knowledge in the technicalities of rail infrastructure, it recognises the value of state and federal government support and oversight in the development and delivery of an ongoing program of improvements.

Conclusion

TCPA requests the Victorian Government to consider the views presented above: that *The Overland* rail service provides substantial community benefits over and above its own commercial operations; that the need for a quality rail service between Melbourne and Adelaide will continue to grow in the future; and that there is significant potential to improve and develop the service.

We and Dr Tim Patton, Vice-President, TCPA, would be pleased to engage in further discussion of issues relating to the future of *The Overland* rail service, should this be desired.

Yours sincerely,



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