

Report into Australian rail disaster shows government decisions undermined safety

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The final section of a three-part report by a judicial inquiry into the Glenbrook rail disaster in New South Wales was brought down in April, nearly 16 months after the accident claimed the lives of seven people and injured 51 others.

The disaster occurred on December 2, 1999, when a suburban passenger train travelling towards Sydney ploughed into the rear of the stationary interstate Indian Pacific. The passenger train had been directed to pass through a malfunctioning signal showing red just outside of the Glenbrook station on the Blue Mountains line.

The judicial inquiry's interim report had already found that the disaster was caused by the lack of a visual monitoring system covering the track and inadequate communications systems to follow movements.

These factors meant that rail personnel at Glenbrook and the main signal box at Penrith were unaware that the Indian Pacific had been stopped by another faulty red signal ahead of the suburban train. The Indian Pacific driver was unable to communicate this vital information to anyone.

The final report, which covered the Glenbrook tragedy and eight other rail accidents, went further, however, touching on some of the underlying economic and political causes. Its conclusions are an indictment of the policies pursued by the NSW government and by the State Rail Authority (SRA).

Summing up the investigation, the presiding judge Justice Peter McInerney damned the NSW rail system which he said had “a culture of on-time running”. “[T]his objective,” he said, “had become so entrenched in the attitudes of railway operational personnel that they could no longer assess anomalous situations”.

Referring to the operational staff decision to direct

the suburban train through the failed red signal at Glenbrook, McInerney said: “They [operational staff] had developed an attitude that could not be varied under any circumstances—trains have to run on time despite the consequences.”

McInerney's condemnation, serious as it is, deflects attention from a more fundamental problem. “On-time running” presupposes a timetable that matches the capacities of the rail system to provide safe travel. For electoral purposes, the NSW Labor government insisted that trains had to run on time, but under conditions where it was running down rail infrastructure and maintenance in order to cut costs.

Evidence given by a number of witnesses to the inquiry shows that the “culture” referred to is imposed from the top. Rail personnel are subjected to considerable pressure to take shortcuts and ignore safety requirements to ensure train schedules are met.

Train driver Charles Jarvis testified that drivers had been “forced to operate trains with non-functioning radios” and had “pressure brought to bear on them to take out trains with non-functioning brakes”. Justice McInerney acknowledged that Jarvis had “named the persons involved in the incidents” and that “in the absence of any challenge to his evidence [by the rail authorities]... it must be regarded as having been conceded.”

The report also contains evidence that Network Operations Superintendents or supervisors on the Blue Mountains line would only attend signal boxes during morning and evening peak periods and were mainly concerned with on-time running, not safety. According to the report, “superintendents [with the exception of one supervisor] did not know how to operate a signal box so they could not have supervised anything in any event”.

The report criticised the 1996 decision by the state Labor government to break up the State Rail Authority into four stand-alone commercial entities. It declared that, “no proper consideration was given to safety management in New South Wales when the 1996 disaggregation occurred” and that this led directly to “deficiencies in safety management”.

The report stated: “The process appears to have been driven by an ideological commitment to the separation of train operations from infrastructure ownership and to the economic benefits which were perceived to be available from the creation of Rail Access Corp with a duty to collect access fees on behalf of the government.”

There is no question that “economic benefits” were the main consideration driving the government's decision to dismember the SRA. In 1995 the NSW government became a signatory to the National Competition Policy Agreement, known as the Hilmer Report. Drawn up by the Federal Labor government of the day, the Hilmer Report called for all state government-owned enterprises to be reorganised on an economically competitive basis.

The Hilmer recommendations were aimed at creating a favorable climate to attract investment by offering reduced costs and other concessions for overseas and domestic companies and preparing state-owned enterprises, such as power and rail, for privatisation.

In 1996, in line with the requirements of the Hilmer report, the NSW State government introduced the *Transport Administration Amendment Rail Corporatisation and Restructuring Act*. Under the changed structure, three new corporations were created. Rail Access Corporation (RAC) became the “owner” of the rail infrastructure, Rail Services Australia took over maintenance and Freightcorp took over all freight services. The State Rail Authority only retained responsibility for metropolitan train services.

Each of the four services undertook significant cost cutting. The cuts to maintenance by the Rail Access Corporation resulted in the reduction of vital programs and contributed to several derailments between July 1999 and April 2000, as well as the Glenbrook disaster itself.

The Corporation's 1998 Annual Report stated that, since 1996-97, it had achieved cumulative real maintenance cost reductions of 22 percent, producing

accumulated savings of \$296 million. This included cutting overall rail maintenance to produce savings of \$112 million and slashing \$50 million from track maintenance expenditure.

Since 1996, all the state-run fleet maintenance centres at Chullora, which previously carried out extensive overhauls of suburban and intrastate trains, have been closed down and the work outsourced. Track Walk—a system where examiners would walk along and check the entire length of the track—was abolished. Regular checks of the signalling systems by gangs of electricians were abandoned.

Rail tracks have deteriorated substantially, directly affecting the correct operation of signals. Track foundations are far from adequate in many areas, so that during heavy rain train movement pumps up sludge which fouls signalling equipment. This and other deficiencies regularly cause signal light malfunctions.

A document circulated by the RAC just prior to the Glenbrook crash revealed that speed restrictions had been imposed on 100 sections of track in metropolitan and regional areas. The document said the restrictions were necessary because of “suspected faults or damage to the track” and that “dozens of sections of track, ranging from 100 metres to more than one kilometre” were badly affected.

The McNerney report makes 95 recommendations, dealing with infrastructure, training, monitoring systems, track and signal inspections and independent safety auditing. The number of recommendations, which cover all areas of rail operations, speaks volumes about the serious lack of safety within the NSW rail network.

One of the major recommendations is the merging of Rail Access Corporation and Rail Service Australia into a single statutory authority to be known as the Rail Infrastructure Authority. But this attempt to return to the old structure will not overcome the basic problem. Safety has been compromised by the drive to cut costs and pass on concessions to big business. This remains the government's central concern.



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