



# Transcript—Craig Reucassel interview with High Speed Rail Authority Chief Executive Officer Tim Parker

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Subjects: High-speed rail from Sydney to Newcastle; population density.

## **CRAIG REUCASSEL:**

Well, here's a buzz phrase we've been hearing for many years: high-speed rail. It's something governments in Australia have been talking about for decades, since the 1980s. Could we have a bullet train that goes up and down the East Coast of Australia, cutting our travel times and revolutionising interstate travel? Endless reports, inquiries and ever other have come and gone, and most have come back and said the idea just isn't that feasible for Australia.

The current Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, is a high-speed rail fan and wants to keep the conversation going. The Government's High Speed Rail Authority Board has been working since June of last year looking at the first section of a possible high-speed rail network between Newcastle and Sydney, which I must admit I thought was the kind of hard part to do.

But now the Authority has its first CEO, Tim Parker, appointed by Catherine King, the Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government. Tim has 30 years of experience in developing significant infrastructure projects and is the former Head of Project Delivery for Sydney Metro since 2018, and he's here now. Thanks for joining us, Tim.

## **TIM PARKER:**

Good morning Craig, lovely to be here.

## **CRAIG REUCASSEL:**

Lovely to be here. Okay. So priority number one for you is planning a corridor of works between Sydney and Newcastle. How feasible is this? As I said, I got the impression, I don't know who from, that this was a really difficult part of it because there's lots of hills, there's lots of rivers, it's going to take a while. How feasible is it?

## **TIM PARKER:**

Well, it's certainly feasible, Craig. I think – you're talking to an engineer here, so the answer's always yes. It's then how do we actually do it? It's a difficult alignment, and that's why it hasn't been done for a while. But, yes, it is feasible, and I think it's certainly achievable.

It will involve tunnelling, it will involve getting through and avoiding some of those obstacles, and obviously the environmental issues as well, but I'm very comfortable that there will be a feasible solution, and our role now is to optimise that feasible solution.

**CRAIG REUCASSEL:**

And can I ask, Tim, and we're speaking to Tim Parker, the newly appointed CEO of the High Speed Rail Authority. Why go Sydney to Newcastle first? I think the Grattan Institute suggested that that was the hardest bit of the job there. Why have we chosen that first? You know, would it be easier to go, for instance, from Sydney down to Melbourne, or Sydney to Canberra, that kind of thing? Why are we choosing Sydney to Newcastle first?

**TIM PARKER:**

I think it's an important region. I think it's an area that I think from the point of view of Sydney and New South Wales, there is a lot of people that live through that corridor. Also, from my point of view, you've got to start somewhere. This is a huge project, and a lot of the work that will be done in the next year or so will be to actually look at how the network will work as a whole, but with a real focus on this section.

So you've got to start somewhere, it's a really important section from Newcastle through Central Coast and onto Sydney, and obviously having a quicker travel time, will set the benchmark for the larger network.

**CRAIG REUCASSEL:**

I know some of my friends will be thrilled. Thanks to the housing crisis, they've had to move to Newcastle to afford a property. So as you say, this is a growing area. Just let's kind of get the numbers here. What are we talking about in terms of, if we had a high-speed rail between Newcastle and Sydney, what would the time be between the two as opposed to what it is now?

**TIM PARKER:**

Obviously, it will end up being finalised once you've done all the studies and got the alignment. But I think around an hour is very achievable.

**CRAIG REUCASSEL:**

Okay. And now what is it about, it's about just a bit over three hours probably currently. So it would be an hour between Sydney and Newcastle, and then Sydney to Melbourne, for instance, what would that be with a high-speed rail network.

**TIM PARKER:**

Look, again, there's some early studies that have been done. You know, I think from my perspective we'll just need to work through that, but I think it will be under four hours.

**CRAIG REUCASSEL:**

Under four hours for that. One question that's been brought up on our text line is population density. Do we actually have enough population to justify the costs of high-speed rail? You know, we talk about Japan being one of the main places people go to, but obviously this is very high density there in Japan.

**TIM PARKER:**

I think you rightly said, Japan is almost the gold standard, and they developed it very early for very good reasons because of their high-density population. But you look around other parts of the world – I was in Spain in the European summer. That's not a high-density place, but their high-speed rail is fantastic. Same with France, same with Germany. And they're all expanding their systems to cater for other destinations, because the existing lines are working really, really well.

And what we have to remember is that things have changed since – in the past 10 years. I think we're far more conscious of environmental impact and sustainability. So I think if ever there was a time to build high-speed rail in Australia, this is the time.

**CRAIG REUCASSEL:**

Absolutely. I think on an environmental impact alone, it's definitely something to be looking at here. Just in terms of this, like there's a couple of different models you can do with high-speed rail, you know, you can start from scratch and build a high-speed rail network kind of like Japan has done, or you can start trying to change the current one. What is the model that we are looking at here in Australia?

**TIM PARKER:**

We're looking at a high-speed rail network which is different to the existing network. The high-speed network will have operating speeds over 250 kilometres an hour, so it will be a different system to the existing ones. That doesn't mean to say that there may not be sections that will be shared. But at the moment I think that the best way of doing it is to have a stand-alone system, so you actually build in high reliability, it's a brand-new build and makes it a more compelling project.

**CRAIG REUCASSEL:**

When you talk about a compelling project, I mean, I think there's a lot of people would say, "Yes, we should have it, we've been talking about it for years." It seems to get scotched normally on the costs front.

We were talking to earlier to Mathew Hounsell who's a transport expert, and he was kind of talking about how expensive roads have become in Australia, like building them is actually massive expense there. So how does it compare, building a high-speed rail network compared to building these kind of very expensive road networks?

**TIM PARKER:**

Well, unfortunately, railways are complex and expensive. Generally, a kilometre of rail is more expensive than road. However, on saying that, when you actually look closely, it comes down to where it is located, and the particular geotechnical conditions. Again, over the last few years we've done more tunnelling in Sydney than probably most places around the world.

So again, we're getting experience now that other places in the world don't have. So whereas a few years ago tunnelling was considered incredibly difficult and complex, it's still very difficult and complex, but we've got a lot of experience, and we can do it very well.

From my point of view, things have moved on, and we've got to take advantage of the latest technology and skills that we have in Australia.

**CRAIG REUCASSEL:**

And just very quickly, because I know there will be a locality of train nerds listening, what's the plan; is it kind of bullet trains, another thing called maglevs, is it something different? You know, do we know what we're kind of focusing on here?

**TIM PARKER:**

No, what we can say is we're not going to look at maglevs.

**CRAIG REUCASSEL:**

Okay, we're not looking at maglevs.

**TIM PARKER:**

I think what we're looking at is a high-speed system that is tried and trusted and proven; in other words we'll be looking at what they've been doing in Japan for years, what they've been doing in Europe, and building on the experience. What we want here is, we don't want to be bleeding edge, we want to be leading edge.

**CRAIG REUCASSEL:**

Yeah.

**TIM PARKER:**

So in other words we want to take advantage of what people have done in the past, learnt the lessons they've learnt and buy a product that we know is going to be reliable and is going to work.

**CRAIG REUCASSEL:**

Thank you. Well, let's hope that's the case. Thank you so much, Tim, for joining us. That's Tim Parker, inaugural Chief Executive Officer at the High Speed Rail Authority.

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