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Dear Mr Cox,

2010 Review of Private and Stockton Ferry Fares

Introduction

This submission is not concerned with the minutiae of various costs and revenue items. Considering the parlous state of some private ferry services, that would be akin to the old nautical analogy of re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. Nor does this submission apply to the Stockton ferry.

This argument is a plea for fares for scheduled services on private ferries in the Sydney area to be included in the MyZone arrangements. Whatever the outcome of the mathematics from this review, I urge the Tribunal to also support, to recommend or even to demand that Transport NSW arrange with all speed for passengers on private and government ferries to be treated alike.

Background

From 18th April this year, the new MyZone scheme ushered in a long overdue reform to public transport ticketing in the Greater Sydney Area. Four new ticket types were introduced – MyTrain, MyBus, MyFerry and MyMulti. These replaced most of the former historical mishmash of tickets and fares that even locals had trouble comprehending, let alone visitors.

Now, armed with one of the MyZone tickets, I can travel on any train, bus or ferry in an area bounded by Dungog in the north (237 km from Sydney), Lithgow in the west (155 km), Goulburn in the south-west (216 km) and Nowra in the south (153 km) – except for a dozen or so private ferry routes in the Sydney area, and the single tram and monorail routes. The irony is that most of these exceptions are within a ten-minute walk from the Minister's office.

Some Statistics

For the Greater Sydney Area, including Newcastle, Wollongong and the Blue Mountains, annual patronage for 2007-08 was: trains (CityRail) 296 million trips, State Transit Authority (STA) buses 206 million, private buses 65 million, the government's Sydney Ferries 14 million, private ferries 0.5 million, monorail 4 million and light rail 3.5 million - a total of nearly 590 million. An additional 63 million trips were made by students accessing the School Student Transport Scheme.

Putting Things in Proportion

Trips on the private ferries amounted to 0.08% of the total of 590 million trips in the area. It is not hard to imagine that the financial consequences to the government of bringing the private ferries into the fold would be virtually unnoticeable, but such action would be warmly welcomed by passengers (read “voters”).

The Bus Contracts and Ferry Contracts

In the simplest terms, the bus companies, both government and private, contract with Transport NSW to provide defined bus services in return for an agreed payment. Fares collected are remitted to the government, or, in practice, are deducted from the contract amount to be paid for the services.

By contrast, the private ferry companies hold commercial contracts with Transport NSW under which they provide specified services, keep the fare revenue, and pay their own expenses. Transport NSW pays a subsidy to the “slow ferries” companies, but not to the two Manly fast ferry operators.

Stages in Bus Fare Unity

Since the beginning of government bus services in Sydney on Christmas Day 1932, passengers on private buses paid different fares to those on government buses, and different to those on other companies’ buses. There was also a vast array of different ticket types.

On 17 March 2004, the Minister for Transport Services released the Final Report of the Hon Barrie Unsworth's Review of Bus Services in NSW. This heralded the rapid transformation to the scene today where anyone on any bus anywhere uses the same ticket to pay the same fare.

In the interests of saving time, I have not checked historical dates and details of the following, but the steps from dystopia to utopia went something like this:

- Pensioner Excursion Tickets (PETs) available only on government buses
- PETs extended to be available on private buses in Sydney
- PETs further extended to be available on buses in Outer Sydney area
- Single trip fares harmonised on all buses in Sydney
- Fare harmonisation extended to all buses in Outer Sydney area
- Multi-trip tickets introduced (or restored) on private buses
- MyZone provided same-ticket-same-fare bus trips for passengers from Nowra to Newcastle.

In the space of a few years, the impossible became possible. Further miracles are still being worked on bus fares in regional and rural areas of the state.

Stages in Ferry Fare Unity

None.

Passenger Concerns

Passengers, locals and visitors alike, have a reasonable expectation that their MyFerry or MyMulti tickets will allow them to ride on any ferry, just as for the equivalent bus tickets. Denial results in confusion, frustration and even aggravation.

Such discrimination must certainly be eliminated before any smartcard is introduced. It is not the passenger’s fault, or choice, to live in a “no-go” zone.

IPART Involvement

While many of the bus reforms were government initiatives, it was IPART, urged on by consumers, that prodded the government into arranging multi-trip tickets for private bus passengers.

IPART, in its reviews, is required to consider the list of matters (a) to (g) in the relevant section of the legislation. However, paragraph (h) allows for “such other matters as the Tribunal considers relevant.”

I suggest that other relevant matters for IPART to consider would include passenger convenience, customer expectations, fare harmonisation, ticket transferability, and simple logic.

At my newsagent in Annandale I can buy a ticket for use on Rover Coaches in Cessnock. At my travel agent in Leichhardt I can buy a Eurail pass for use in Dusseldorf or a ticket for a ferry cruise in Québec, but nowhere can I buy a ticket for use on the Lane Cove ferries just across the river.

I suggest that the Tribunal needs to show some fortitude in this matter, so that by this time next year there will be no need to conduct a separate review of private ferry fares.

Conclusion

Considering the magic that has been worked on bus fares and tickets in recent years, it should not be beyond the ability of our government, which can make railways and metros appear and disappear in the space of a week, to come to some agreement with the private ferry operators to accept a standard fare and interchange of tickets.

I request that the Tribunal, whatever its recommendations on the dollar amount of fares, also make a forceful recommendation that private ferry passengers must be able to use MyZone tickets by a fixed future date.

I have no objection to this submission being made public on the IPART web site.

Yours faithfully,

Allan Miles