

Business manages business best so let's not even think about government-run infrastructure

Another day, another report. This one is by Infrastructure Partnerships Australia and proposing that areas around our ports be gazetted as special economic zones and their management centralised in a new coordinating body.

Such a proposal may or may not be a good idea – it is interesting to note that among IPA's 19 advisory board members only one, Greg Martin the departing ceo of Sydney Ports Corporation, is obviously an expert on shipping.

At least that's one better than the Port Botany Logistics Task Force which consists of a lawyer, a depot manager, a Brisbane-based trucking head and eight bureaucrats but no representatives from shipping, or stevedoring!

What concerns SAL is this new prospect of our industry being launched into yet another talkfest, another round of discussion, another forest of reports and ports' infrastructure ending up in government hands.

There is no way we want port logistics management to be run by any level of government department nor by Sydney Ports Corporation or its interstate sisters. Generally accepted philosophy is that business is better at running business.

Which raises the question of exactly what are the roles of government and commerce in solving the looming infrastructure, logistics and congestion problems facing our ports, particularly Port Botany?

There is a legitimate role for government around ports and what it is should have been settled already but in fact it is very unsettled and the argument over who will pay for Melbourne's channel deepening is a good example of this volatility.

And who will set up and pay for these mythical new economic zones? Would any of Infrastructure Partnerships' members imagine themselves having a role? Sydney Ports' leadership could be valuable in

getting the right people around the table but there should be no question of it having controlling power over road and rail and this will be more important when we get intermodal terminals.

All ports need to be conscious of how they prosecute their agenda while so many people, some self-appointed, are running off in all directions without a clear objective of what is good for the nation.

The federal government wants to control the ports but has no idea how to do it; the State governments say everything is fine when really it's anything but.

The more we think about it the less we like the direction all these reports and discussions are taking us because instead of taking us towards a solution they are taking us instead towards yet more debate.

We don't like that because it's taking us nowhere while some of the major solutions sit there staring everyone in the face plaintively waiting for someone to implement them.

Solutions such as getting Government off its backside to begin pouring concrete at Enfield, laying rails at Macarthur, and helping to create a workable 24/7 supply chain by importers.

We don't really believe a new report on new subjects is the answer.

The immediate answer is to find a proven action man (or woman?), give him the job of coordinating these and other aspects of Port Botany's logistics and tell him to get on with it.

Who?

Bring back Max? On second thoughts, let's not do that; but we could clone him. The fantasy of a lady Max brings the only glint of humor to an otherwise shadowed project.

Another answer would be to launch a worldwide recruitment search. Beautifully expensive, hundreds of meetings, dozens

of reports and – best of all – no outcome for months and even that not certain. A situation that would delight the dissemblers and shilly-shalliers; everyone except the shipping industry.

A more practical answer: The ranks of the federal civil service have many such people; some of them twiddling their thumbs but all trained to the nth degree in making senior, acceptable decisions. Exactly the kind of person required.

So we have no problem with seconding a government-appointed leader but we don't want the government to run our show. Maybe we're kidding ourselves.

Were we to go on to suggest that the federal government finance it all, even we would admit that's getting into wonderland. But it's not wonderland to suggest that such important bodies could be financed equally by the federal government, the states and the shipping industry. Exactly as we have suggested all along that Melbourne's channel deepening should be financed.

And that's how we think it should be – An independent body of involved business people headed by an action-oriented mandarin and funded by everyone involved.

All that is, of course, tainted. Tainted by that terrible word that seems to haunt all discussion of shipping's big issues. The word is ACTION.

The very sniff of action wafts our regulators into a swoon of ineffectiveness. Unfortunately it is a scent which can be quickly and effectively dispelled by forming another body – such as that required to administer a special economic zone and commissioning another report or two. ▲