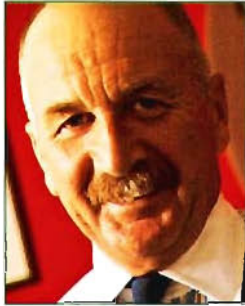


by Michael Phillips,
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Wanted: A task force with the Nelson touch

Updating the infrastructure of our shipping industry probably represents the biggest commercial task facing this nation. Almost more momentous is the fact that almost nobody outside shipping seems to appreciate the urgency of the problems.

The media sometimes report them but to date there has been no outcry over what is about to become a galloping crisis.

Yet the facts are that without huge infrastructure construction the next 6 – 10 years will see Sydney's traffic gridlocked in a radius around Port Botany and Melbourne's supremacy as the No 1 container port will be but a memory.

And that's not even the half of it!

If we consider "it" as the total problem, then this country is facing an infrastructure fix of a magnitude greater than the Snowy Scheme, the Ord River project, and the Sydney Olympic bid combined.

The question I ask today is: "Who is coordinating the solutions to this giant task." The answer is: "Nobody." The solution I offer and believe our industry should vociferously call for is the immediate appointment of a national task force of very senior people to decide without fear or favor what must be done and to form a compact national body authorised to grasp whatever nettles are in the way. Can-doers with the Nelson touch.

What is the issue in our infrastructure crisis? The issue, not what is needed; the components of the need are long established. The dominant and urgent issue is to find a way to quickly materialise the solutions to these established needs.

It is timorous and indecisive to procrastinate with warnings against over-simplification when simplification is one of our greatest and most immediate needs. Being afraid of over-simplification is another way to avoid solving problems.

Keep them difficult and they become too difficult, therefore can't be done; what a relief, and we can all go home! One hears of the Port Melbourne EIS consisting of 7000 pages. Just one problem crying out for simplification if only to bring it to the 100 pages in which the steps to achievement become visible and doable.

We need to appoint a power group to do such things. What makes up the NEED list?

1. Deepening Port Melbourne.

Not how or when but now. Put off much longer and the problem will disappear as will Port Melbourne's relevance. Already some new-generation ships have decided to by-pass our second city and are unlikely to return in the foreseeable future. For Melbourne the time is nigh, not for more research – we already have too much information – but to do or die!

2. Deepening Adelaide's harbour:

Agreed to in principle but in reality still shrouded behind the curtain of obfuscation hanging from its opening bridges affair.

3. Actualising the third terminal at Port Botany.

The thinking has all been done, the plans drawn. Only the doing lacks a driving force strong enough to achieve the vision.

4. Heading off the trucking congestion.

This is a problem that goes farther than the cities themselves. The problem travels by road when it can be solved only by rail. Forecasters talk about Sydney's roads being jammed within eight years. Meanwhile the Enfield intermodal terminal site stands waiting for a team with strong enough leadership to make it happen.

5. Modernising and extending port equipment

viz Port Waratah and Dalrymple Bay. We are only a few years into a boom period yet the world's two biggest coal ports are handicapped by equipment shortages and malfunctions costing millions of dollars in diminished production, below-capacity sales, demurrage, and one wonders what else. Moving away from bulk one recalls our industry's concerns about the stevedores' level of future capital investment at their container terminals; albeit they are now slowly adapting.

That's five huge projects forming a mega-project of national proportions. It is an immediate mega-project and by being thus defined is already a step to simplification of the infrastructure situation by purposely ignoring the great background shadows cast by fulfilling the destiny of the Adelaide to Darwin line, and such dreams as the Trans-Australian Railroad.

All the governments recognise that something must be done. But no single body has responsibility because of the rival private/State/Federal interests and possibly undue emphasis on who is going to pay for what rather than on the objectives to be achieved. We believe national needs should over-ride all these partisan positions. The country should be looking at what is good for Australia in the future.

We need a top-level task force to master it; just as we had on the Snowy. The Ord, the Olympic bid, and the Hedland dredging and Dampier/Withnall Bay gas project.

The task force won't achieve its goals if composed of fearful middle people. It must be composed of our hardened leaders; decision-makers accustomed to earning high salaries by achieving stellar results.

Next step? Find these people.

Step 2: Give them their brief

Step 3: Set them to it!

Outcome: Australia, its people, and the economy all gain from it. ▲