

22 October 2008

# **Interstate Road Transport Charge Amendment Bill (No. 2) 2008**

## **ROAD CHARGES LEGISLATION REPEAL AND AMENDMENT BILL 2008**

### **Second Reading**

**Mr BRADBURY (Lindsay) (11.04 a.m.)** — I rise to speak in support of the two bills before the House, the Interstate Road Transport Charge Amendment Bill (No. 2) 2008 and the Road Charges Legislation Repeal and Amendment Bill 2008. In doing so I think it is appropriate to commence my contribution to this debate by reflecting upon the principles that are contained within these two bills. They are principles that have received bipartisan support in the past and that have formed the basis for the policy of successive governments in this area. They relate largely to the notion of cost recovery from heavy vehicles and the heavy vehicle industry in respect of road construction and maintenance. These have been incurred through the collection of heavy vehicle charges and, as I said earlier, these principles have been supported by successive governments. Indeed, in a speech delivered on 28 June 2007 entitled 'The coalition government's transport reform agenda' the then federal Minister for Transport and Regional Services and Leader of the Nationals, Mr Vaile, said:

The National Transport Commission will develop a new heavy vehicle charges determination to be implemented from 1 July 2008. The new determination will aim to recover the heavy vehicles' allocated infrastructure costs in total and will also aim to remove cross-subsidisation across heavy vehicle classes.

The sentiments contained within that comment really do support the propositions that underpin these two bills. They are that there should be, appropriately, a reallocation of costs imposed upon various heavy vehicle drivers and users to reflect the contribution to the damage and the requirement for continued maintenance generated by those vehicles. As a result of the reference of the matter to the Council of Australian Governments at that time, the comments of the then minister were ultimately taken on board and the 2007 heavy vehicle charges determination was made. Earlier this year, on 29 February, the Australian Transport Council adopted and supported the implementation of the elements of the heavy vehicle charges determination.

In respect of the two bills being considered by the House, the first of the two bills, the Interstate Road Transport Charge Amendment Bill, deals specifically with changes to the registration costs principally of those vehicles that are registered under the Federal Interstate Registration Scheme. It is relevant to note that they account for only approximately three per cent of heavy vehicles. There is the voluntary system of registration at the federal level, but there are obviously many more vehicles covered by the respective state and territory regimes. In respect of those particular regimes and the actions taken by those jurisdictions it is worth noting that those jurisdictions have already implemented the terms of the agreement nuted out at the meeting of the Australian Transport Council, which in effect endorsed

the implementation of the 2007 heavy vehicle charges determination. What we now have is a situation where various changes have been made in respect of road user charges that apply insofar as those vehicles that are registered at the state and territory levels are concerned, but those adjustments have not been made under the federal scheme.

This is of course an integral part of our ongoing efforts to achieve a seamless national economy to try and overcome some of the barriers and challenges that the federal system can sometime present. In the area of heavy vehicle driving, I think that is one example of where there are numerous issues that arise on a fairly frequent basis in respect of different regulations, requirements and charges that apply from one state or territory to another. It is important that we restore a position where some uniformity is achieved, and that is what this particular bill seeks to do.

It is worth noting that, in respect of the registration charges, one-quarter of the drivers of heavy vehicles that are registered will benefit from an overall reduction in costs as a result of this measure. It is worth taking that into account. They are, in particular, the smaller of the heavy vehicles, which are currently carrying a disproportionately high share of the burden of ongoing maintenance costs associated with our very extensive road network.

The Road Charges Legislation Repeal and Amendment Bill 2008 deals specifically with changes in respect of the road user charge, which is ultimately levied as a result of the excise impost in concert with the fuel tax credit rebate process, which under present arrangements ultimately leaves a 19.63c per litre impost in the form of the road user charge. This bill proposes that that be lifted to 21c per litre. This initiative comes against the backdrop of increased road funding by all levels of government. I note that in the press release made by the Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, when he introduced this bill, he made the following statement:

It will also lift the Road User Charge for heavy vehicles to 21 cents per litre from 1 January 2009. This small increase reflects the fact that since the last change to the charge in 2001, spending by all levels of governments has risen by 33 per cent.

This reflects the additional contribution that governments at all levels are making when it comes to road spending. As a result of that, to ensure that we continue to provide sufficient investment in roads, that charge is being increased by a fairly modest amount, to 21c per litre.

One of the key elements of this package, and it is one that I wish to direct my comments to, is the range of initiatives that will address some of the safety concerns on our roads—safety issues facing all road users but more particularly those who are behind the wheels of heavy vehicles and who do such a great job in keeping the wheels of the national economy moving. The issue of the safety challenges faced by people in the road transport industry in particular is particularly close to my heart and one that I have spoken about in this place on numerous occasions in the past.

Importantly, this package makes provision for \$70 million to be spent on safety initiatives. I think most observers would say that this is a welcome investment and a step in the right direction. In fact, I note that the Australian Trucking Association, in a press release, said:

The \$70 million of funding is a good start, but it is not nearly enough to build all the rest areas that we need.

That is probably a fair point, but it is worth noting that it is a very good start. Those funds will be applied to a range of purposes, all relating to various safety initiatives that we hope will make our roads safer not only for heavy vehicle users but for all road users.

The package sets out some of the detail of the vehicle productivity and safety agenda of the government. There is a four-year heavy vehicle safety and productivity package, which will fund a number of things but in particular the construction of more heavy vehicle rest stops along our highways and on the outskirts of our major cities to assist truck drivers rest. It will involve trials of black-box technologies that electronically monitor a truck driver's work hours and vehicle speed. There will also be significant investment in bridge strengthening projects and upgrades to linkages between existing AusLink freight routes.

I want to direct my comments towards three particular aspects of the safety package. There is the issue of providing greater investment for rest areas. This is a critical area, and I commend the government for recognising the great need for more rest area facilities for heavy vehicle users across this country. The Australian Trucking Association issued a press release setting out a list of funding priorities. There are many items that have been identified within that list and, as a consequence of their consultation with other stakeholders, they suggest many areas which would be and should be some of the first locations to be considered for these new rest areas. The No. 1 priority that was identified—at least, it appears as the first one on the list—was:

Construction of a major rest area, including adequate capacity for changeovers and decoupling, in proximity to the intersection of the M7 and M4 in Sydney.

This area is located very close to my electorate, although it is not in my electorate. The Westlink M7 is a tremendous motorway that has been of great assistance to economic development right across the Western Sydney region. Where it intersects with the M4—if you consider the M2 to be the north-western motorway and the M5 to be the south-western motorway then the M4 is the central western motorway—has become known as the Light Horse Interchange. It truly is one of the most significant intersections throughout our road network in this country. It has been a great boon for investment in the Western Sydney region. Anyone who has driven along the M7 in that area will see the proliferation of new businesses providing local jobs in the Western Sydney region. The sheer volume of truck drivers using that particular route does lend real support to the proposition that we should look at funding improvements for rest areas in that location. I support the comments that have been made by the Australian Trucking Association and would like to lend my voice in support of that particular proposal.

Another element of the safety package is the trial of black-box technologies that electronically monitor a truck driver's work hours and vehicle speed. Clearly, the very demanding and gruelling hours required of many truck drivers, who often subject themselves to these as a result of financial necessity, need to be balanced against the need for public safety on our roads. Governments at all levels are moving, albeit somewhat slowly in some cases, towards increasing the extent of regulation in this area to ensure that drivers are not being forced to work hours that ultimately threaten the safety of other road users—not to mention the safety of the drivers themselves. It is one thing to start to beef up these requirements and to increase the extent of regulation on our heavy-vehicle drivers, but that really only underlines the significance of my earlier point about the need for greater investment in rest areas if we are requiring greater monitoring of the hours that are being driven. I think there are legitimate reasons for doing



that; there are, of course, arguments on how best to achieve that. Certainly, some of the chain-of-responsibility initiatives that have been supported by the New South Wales government in the past have gone a long way towards achieving best practice in that regard. But as we require more of our truck drivers at a regulatory level, it is only fitting that we make that investment in the rest areas. The bridge-strengthening initiatives are also to be supported.

These bills form an important package. They will go some way towards addressing the massive safety concerns and issues that we face on our roads, particularly those that are faced by heavy-vehicle users. I think it is a package that will be welcomed throughout communities right across this country because of the important role that it will play in trying to make our roads safer. I commend the bills to the House.