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BREAKTHROUGH AT LONG LAST: \$3 MILLION FOR HERITAGE RAIL REVITALISATION

On Saturday just gone, the Tasmanian Labor Party announced a comprehensive 'Tourism & Heritage Rail' policy. The announcement was made at the Derwent Valley Railway's facility at New Norfolk. The plan proposes the establishment of a new body, the Tasmanian Rail Access Co-ordinator (TRAC) and a stakeholder board to work with the sector on the way forward, to get passenger rail back on the network. Shadow Transport Minister Craig Farrell said, the funds would be available for infrastructure upgrades, rolling stock restoration, compliance and training.

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The policy has been embraced by the heritage rail community as a great step forward, following four decades of being overlooked by tourism advocacy groups and the political establishment. The final blow came in 2006, when TasRail management banned all heritage rail operators from their network, including access to all disused lines. The new TRAC would facilitate the allocation of track access for accredited operators.

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Building on existing projects, the policy would enable the immediate expansion of the heritage rail sector into a proper tourist product. Furthermore, the streamlining of accreditations, safety requirements and insurances across the State will ensure effective implementation of the plan. A stakeholder board, composed of industry representatives, would ensure the

needs of all operators are considered and met on a case-by-case basis. Staff training and up-skilling is to be integrated with the TAFE system as well.

POLICY A WIN FOR JOBS AND TRAINING, TAFE

An acute skills shortage in the State stands opposite widespread under- and unemployment. The Tasmanian jobs market consistently performs well below the national average. The focus remains on science and technology, while manual skills and trades are left behind.

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"It is time to stop the myopic concentration on university education being the prime way of landing a well-paying job" the construction magnate Royce Fairbrother stated back in January. Not everybody has the means, the smarts or even the desire to go down an academic path and there should be alternative careers for young people to pursue.

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Years of cuts to TAFE funding have gutted the once exemplary institution and has converted it into a system more in line with a university than anything else. Ever increasing fees actually prevent those who need it most from accessing the skills training they need to obtain meaningful, rewarding employment; those who do graduate have no industries to move into. This leads to an exodus of talent from the State that has invested money and effort into these people, yet misses out on the benefit.

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The opening up of the railway network to passenger- and heritage rail operators will

bring jobs and training opportunities in a myriad of industries. For instance, there will be a need for mechanics, heavy machinery operators, engineers, track gangers and maintenance crews, painters, carpenters, sign-writers, welders and boiler makers, sheet metal workers, electricians and gas fitters, engine drivers and firemen, signalling and train operating staff, cleaners, caterers and service personnel at stations and on trains, tour guides, interpreters and historians, graphic designers, accountants and clerical staff, booking agents and marketing people, gardeners, tree surgeons and horticulturalists.

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These are just some of the jobs on the railway alone. Outside of this circle, regional attractions will benefit from increased visitor numbers, driving investment in infrastructure and more jobs. Struggling rural communities get a chance to revive and be accessible. One is hard pressed to find a downside to the proposal.

TOURISTS NOT BE-ALL AND END-ALL

Statistics show, that half the visitors to Tasmania are non-tourists and that they come here to see family and friends instead. The railways are not just for tourists, but for the locals as well. Gridlock traffic, particularly in Hobart, could be quickly and effectively alleviated with the reintroduction of suburban passenger services. Existing equipment could be brought out of museums, upgraded and put to use almost immediately.

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Tasmania needs to impress her visitors to make sure they return again and again.