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Transcript

Shane Stone Speaks About the Railway

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BARBARA McCARTHY: The Slim Dusty Track is of course one of the favoured unofficial names for the new railway. Mike Coggan reporting. Well, is the railway commercially viable? One Territorian who should know is former chief minister Shane Stone, who pushed hard for the building of the railway. Ironically, he wasn't invited to this week's ceremony marking the completion of the project - a political snub perhaps, but one he philosophically accepts. He spoke to Mark Bowling.

SHANE STONE, FORMER CHIEF MINISTER: Whether you're there and not there, and you come and you go, the sun still rises in the east and sets in the west and we get on with it.

MARK BOWLING, REPORTER: What's your assessment of the railway? Is it a goer? Can it be a financial success and can it operate successfully?

SHANE STONE: You would never have built the Sydney Harbour Bridge had you asked the simple question - will it make money - back at the beginning of that century when they did build it. The indicators you've got to look for are what sort of trade you generate coming across our wharf, either coming in or going out. You've got to look at it in terms of the way that it will open up northern Australia. For example, what opportunities will it present in the mining sector? What other opportunities will spin off the railway once it's up and running? And I believe, in the fullness of time, and perhaps long after you and I have departed this earth, people will ask a more fundamental question, and it would be, why didn't they do it a lot earlier? So you can't just measure it in terms of will it make money in the immediate future? Probably not. But it's all the other indicators that will be important in this.

MARK BOWLING: There's only one freight company signed up. Given your interest as a businessperson in Asia - your new life after politics - would you say there are the freight companies there and willing to come on board?

SHANE STONE: It is important that there is a very focused and very structured marketing campaign into the Asia-Pacific region, and into North Asia, because we live in a global village today. There is little point just talking about defined regions. We should also be talking to people who operate out of Europe and America because, as I said, it's all connected. But you've got to do it years in advance. You just can't do it

when the last track's been put down.

MARK BOWLING: Has the current NT Government done the planning, the focusing and the marketing you're talking about to get these things up and running?

SHANE STONE: I take the view that a lot more could have been done, and should be being done. And I don't reserve that comment for them alone. I believe that the effort, whilst it's certainly talked about, needs to be far more structured and there needs to be a lot more resources applied to it. Now, what's very important in all of this is that the support for the railway, the support for the port, the support for our engagement of the Asia-Pacific region should be above politics and that all Territorians, regardless of their political background or political party, should be working together to try and achieve those outcomes.

MARK BOWLING: But someone dropped the ball.

SHANE STONE: Well, there has been a disengagement of sorts, people have probably had other priorities and there's no denying that. The International Business Council and the NT here very firmly believe that. Many of the business community believe there's been a disengagement. You only have to look at the graph of our exports and you see a particular trend that's worrying.

MARK BOWLING: So if the current NT Government and the one before, in fact, didn't have the same focus as you did when you were Chief Minister, you're not naming names, but Denis Burke and Clare Martin in your opinion - have they dropped the idea of Darwin as the gateway to Asia?

SHANE STONE: They certainly haven't dropped it because the rhetoric is still in all the material and all the speeches. But there needs to be a more focused effort and it needs to be not only at the Chief Minister's level but also at ministerial level and there also has to be a recommitment and focus at a departmental level. Now you can't expect to get the results and outcomes if you don't have a dedicated department that has as its clear focus the engagement of the Asia-Pacific region. You can't achieve the export outcomes you're looking for unless you have the skilled public servants in place and you need to have people who have a familiarity with the region, a familiarity with the markets, and if you can get them and they're linguistically capable as well that's the icing on the cake.

MARK BOWLING: We've heard this week from Patrick Stevedores boss Chris Corrigan that the chances of the railway making returns for investors was smaller than a tick's testicle.

SHANE STONE: (Laughs) I did read that, and that's Chris. You have to know Corrigan to actually appreciate his turn of phrase and, as I said at the beginning, if you are simply measuring the success in terms of whether or not a Chris Corrigan can make a dollar out of it as opposed to what the railway does in opening up the north and facilitating that language for exports and imports, I guess you'll accept his point of view.

MARK BOWLING: Can I ask you about the Katherine by-election and in a sense the future of Denis Burke. Can he hang on?

SHANE STONE: Well, you can ask me but I've not publicly weighed in to the debate on the CLP woes I've had a personal opinion about various matters which I've conveyed to the individuals concerned.

MARK BOWLING: But the two of you don't get on?

SHANE STONE: Denis was one of my ministers and people keep saying that we don't get on, and I read in the paper that I don't get on with Peter Conran I mean, a lot of people like to comment about personal relationships but I don't think it's helpful for former chief ministers to be weighing into the local political scene.

MARK BOWLING: But has he taken the CLP in the wrong direction, and in a sense, with the Katherine by-election, painted himself into a corner?

SHANE STONE: Well, I thought he made a pretty good start on the Katherine by-election, when he hit the button about air services. In fact, I passed a message to his office that I thought he was hitting the right buttons in terms of the issues that were important to the people in Katherine. So, I guess it all remains to be seen what happens in Katherine and I wish the CLP well. I remain a committed and dedicated supporter to the cause of the CLP, which was very good to me.

MARK BOWLING: With or without Denis Burke?

SHANE STONE: Oh it doesn't matter, leaders are quite irrelevant, in the sense that people come and go. I mean we've had outstanding leaders, dating from Paul Everingham, but, as I said, no-one is indispensable. And the sun still rises in the east and sets in the west, and when you've had your run you've had your run. So the ideal of the CLP, which is one party which represents all conservative interests in the NT, is in my view a very, very good model. And I in fact have written an article just recently and my message to the Labor Party is that if your best hope for the next election is that there will be a split in the conservative parties up here, and that there will be a Liberal Party, well, don't hold your breath. It's not going to happen.

MARK BOWLING: Shane Stone, thank you for talking to Territory Stateline.

SHANE STONE: Thank you.