

A Crossmas Carol

Satire, with apologies to Dickens.

Good process was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of its burial was signed in the Coordinator-General's report, and the Auditor-General's inaction. Failure had signed it, upon the changes that were wrought by ineffectual hands.

Once upon a time - of all the good days in the year, on Christmas Eve - old Stooze sat in his construction-house. The city clocks had only just gone three, but it was quite dark already from the perspective of transport strategy. It had not been light for years; the fog came pouring in every keyhole and was so dense without, that although others had attempted to shine a light, a viable future for the rail network was a mere phantom.

Now, it is a fact that there was nothing at all particular about Stooze's house, save that it was very large. It is also a fact that Stooze had seen it, night and morning, during his whole residence of that place, and thought nothing as he threw his head back in his chair. His colour changed though, when, without a pause, it came on through the heavy door and passed into the room before his eyes - the ghost of good process!

"What do you want of me?", said Stooze, as cold and as unmoved by good process as ever.

"Much!" - it was the voice of good process, no doubt about it. "You will be haunted, by three spirits. Without their visit you cannot hope to shun the path of transport failure"

With this, the ghost of good process gathered its bandages, wrapped them around the thousand cuts from which it had passed, and left via the window as only an apparition could.

Stooze sat in his chair, listening for the chiming of the clock, which it now did with a deep, dull, hollow, melancholy One. Light flashed up in the room upon the instant, and a strange figure—like a child: yet not so like a child as like an old man.

"Who, and what are you?" Stooze demanded.

"I am the Ghost of Cross River Rail Past."

"Long Past?" inquired Stooze: observant of its dwarfish stature.

"Not really, as it happens. Bear but a touch of my hand there," said the Spirit, laying it upon his heart, "and you shall be upheld in more than this!"

As the words were spoken, they passed through the wall, and stood within a planning office, with rail planners on either hand. On the wall was a poster proclaiming Collingwood as the premiers.

"Good Heaven!" said Stooze, clasping his hands together, as he looked about him. "Cross River Rail was bred in this place, in 2010. It was a boy here!"

They walked around the office, exploring plans for a long tunnel ending in Yeerongpilly, a separation of fast and slow services, and a viable feed into Clapham yard. They looked at the future-proofing; the tunnel stubs within the northern portal to connect seamlessly to the North West Transport Corridor, the dedicated freight track between the port and Acacia Ridge, the four track corridor to allow for

the expansion to Beaudesert at Salisbury. Planners called to each other, discussing the rail strategy that was defined in CSEQ 2031, and its plans for fast rail to the coasts.

“These are but shadows of the things that might have been,” said the Ghost. “We have no consciousness of them anymore. It was a plan for the network; it was not perfect, but it was a plan”

“So it was,” cried Stooze. “You’re right. I will not gainsay it, Spirit. God forbid! Spirit, remove me from this place.”

“I told you these were shadows of the things that might have been,” said the Ghost. “That they are not what they are, do not blame me!”

Stooze was conscious of being exhausted through virtue of observing the impossibly high NPVs and BCRs associated with the original project, and overcome by an irresistible drowsiness from planning that was so efficient as to be boring; and, further, of being in his own bedroom, where he fell into a deep sleep.

Stooze awoke to his name being called. As his eyes adjusted, he realised that he was in his own room. There was no doubt about that. But it had undergone a surprising transformation. Heaped up on the floor, to form a kind of throne, were consultant contracts, glossy brochures, a thousand-fold images of make-believe stations, many spinning tops, and a clutch of BaT merchandise that made the chamber dim with their delicious steam. In easy state upon this couch, there sat a jolly Giant, glorious to see; who bore a glowing torch, in shape not unlike Plenty’s horn, and held it up, high up, to shed its light on Stooze, as he came peeping through the dark.

“Come in!” exclaimed the Ghost. “Come in! and know me better, man! I am the Ghost of Cross River Rail Present, look upon me!”

Stooze grabbed the Spirit’s robe tightly, as they found themselves in a vision of the outside. The people in orange shirts made a rough, but brisk and not unpleasant kind of music, digging up dirt and launching tunnel boring machines hither and thither.

“Why do they dig so?”, asked Stooze.

“They do not know”, came the sombre reply of the Spirit. “They dig without thought, or merit. They are at once told to bore the tunnels, then to cut-and-cover the very ground beneath their feet. They have no way of knowing where the trains will run; neither do they seem to care”.

“Surely the project has a plan? Construction cannot start without a means and method to operate and extend our rail web for the years hence? You must seek to construct with a plan!”.

“I seek?!” exclaimed the Spirit.

They went on, invisible, as they had been before, into the suburbs of the town. It was a remarkable quality of the project, that notwithstanding its gigantic size, it could accommodate himself to any place without bringing any benefits.

On to the threshold of a door the Spirit smiled, and stopped to bless Brisbane Everyman’s dwelling with the sprinkling of his torch.

“Is there a peculiar flavour in what you sprinkle from your torch?” asked Stooze.

“There is. My own.”

“Would it apply to any kind of city on this day?” asked Stooze.

“To any kindly given. To a poor one most.”

“Why to a poor one most?” asked Stooze.

“Because it needs it most. The Everyman has little for his public transport budget, yet we are spending it all on a project which will deliver no benefits. Yet rest assured, for they can have a high level of confidence that Cross River Rail’s design and planning is robust”

“God bless us every one!” said Tiny Commuter, the last of all in the thought process.

“Spirit,” said Stooze, with an interest he had never felt before, “tell me if Tiny Commuter will get the public transport he deserves.”

“I see no vacant seat,” replied the Ghost, “in the poor car-corner, and no service for the homeowner, carefully preserved. If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, the child will live in a car-dependent world.”

“No, no,” said Stooze. “Oh, no, kind Spirit! say he will be spared.”

“If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, none other of my race,” returned the Ghost, “will find him with a train service. What then? If he be like to drive, he had better do it, and decrease the surplus ridership. The previous design - which was the longer tunnel design - was servicing a different methodology. The present design is giving that additional service through the CBD – and to nowhere else.”

Stooze hung his head to hear his own words quoted by the Spirit, and was overcome with penitence and grief.

It was a long night, if it were only a night; but Stooze had his doubts of this, because the Christmas Holidays appeared to be condensed into the space of time they passed together. It was strange, too, that while Stooze remained unaltered in his outward press conferences, the Ghost grew older, clearly older; now, when looking at the Spirit as they stood together in an open place, he noticed that its hair was grey.

“Is the current project’s usefulness so short?” asked Stooze.

“My useful life upon this globe, is very brief,” replied the Ghost. “It ends on day one. Even just ETCS would have delivered the same benefits.”

The bell struck twelve.

Stooze looked about him for the Ghost, and saw it not. As the last stroke ceased to vibrate, he remembered the promise of old good process, and lifting up his eyes, beheld a solemn Phantom, draped and hooded, coming, like a mist along the ground, towards him.

The Phantom slowly, gravely, silently, approached. When it came near him, Stooze bent down upon his knee; for in the very air through which this Spirit moved it seemed to scatter gloom and mystery.

“I am in the presence of the Ghost of Cross River Rail Yet To Come?” said Stooze. “You are about to show me shadows of the things that have not happened, but will happen in the time before us?”

The upper portion of the garment was contracted for an instant in its folds, as if the Spirit had inclined its head. That was the only answer he received.

The Phantom moved away as it had come towards him. Stooze followed in the shadow of its dress, which bore him up, he thought, and carried him along.

They scarcely seemed to enter the city; for the city rather seemed to spring up about them, and encompass them of its own act. But there they were, in the heart of it; on 'Change, amongst the commuters; who hurried up and down, and clutched the smartphones in their pockets, and conversed not but alone, and looked at their phones again, and trifled thoughtfully with their contactless ticketing; and so forth, as Stooze had seen them often.

The Spirit stopped beside one little knot of businesswomen. Observing that the hand was pointed to them, Stooze advanced to listen to their talk.

"No," said a great fat woman with a monstrous chin, "I don't know much about it, either way. I only know there's no capacity left."

"When did it run out?" inquired another.

"Last night, I believe."

"Why, I'm surprised it lasted this long" asked a third, taking a vast quantity of battery packs out of a very large handbag to plug into her very small phone. "I thought it'd never work."

"I haven't heard," said the woman with the large chin, yawning again. "but I understand the findings of the commission of inquiry will be released shortly. Perhaps then we'll finally have confidence in a government process." This pleasantry was received with a general laugh.

Stooze was at first inclined to be surprised that the Spirit should attach importance to conversations apparently so trivial; but feeling assured that they must have some hidden purpose, he set himself to consider what it was likely to be. He could not think of any one immediately connected with himself, to whom he could apply them. But nothing doubting that to whomsoever they applied they had some latent moral for his own improvement, he resolved to treasure up every word he heard, and everything he saw; and especially to observe the shadow of himself when it appeared. For he had an expectation that the conduct of his future self would give him the clue he missed, and would render the solution of these riddles easy.

He looked about in that very place for his own image; quiet and dark, beside him stood the Phantom, with its outstretched hand, and in his bony grasp did Stooze see a smartphone, displaying the news of the latest interviews of the commission of inquiry.

There was Stooze, questioned on what he had known and by when. The bottlenecks, at the north and south of the tunnel, were surely known, came the searching inquiry by the investigative board. How to, was it deemed acceptable to curtail freight between Park Road and Yeerongpilly, actually worsening the situation from before the project was delivered? What thought given to the people of the Gold and Sunshine Coasts; the former tormented by slow journeys inbound of Clapham Yard, the latter forced to endure the tortuous NWTC via Ferny Grove alignment, dashing any hopes of fast regional rail? What merchant sought to release the contracts and start digging tunnels, without a rail strategy or even an operational plan, and change them mid-activity? Stooze watched himself sink ever lower into chair, and its situation in reference to himself, that the Unseen Eyes were looking at him keenly. It made him shudder, and feel very cold.

They left the busy scene, and went into an obscure part of the town, where Stooze had never penetrated before, although he recognised its situation, and its bad repute. The ways were foul and narrow; the shops and houses wretched; the people half-naked, drunken, slipshod, ugly. Alleys and

archways, like so many cesspools, disgorged their offences of smell, and dirt, and life, upon the straggling streets; and the whole quarter reeked with crime, with filth, and misery. This was, of course, Flagstone.

As Stooze looked around, it was clear he was in the presence of two friends becoming reacquainted.

“You couldn’t have met in a better place,” said old Joe, removing his pipe from his mouth. “Come into the streets, without sufficient rail service. We were made free of it long ago, you know; and there just an’t capacity south of Park Road to run a tiered service for our region. Stop till I shut the door of the housing developments. Ah! How it skreeks! There an’t such a rusty bit of metal in the place as its own rails, I believe; and I’m sure there’s no such new railway that runs such a low frequency in the peak. Ha ha! We’re all suitable to our trains calling, we’re well matched with service as long as no more than one-in-twenty wants to travel to the city”.

“Spectre,” said Stooze, “something informs me that our parting moment is at hand. I know it, but I know not how. Tell me what document that was we saw lying dead?”

The Ghost of Cross River Rail Yet To Come conveyed him, as before in silence, extending a bony finger to reveal a torn page blowing in the wind. Stooze looked upon it; the writing brought a chill to his bones, for there it was title “A viable railway for southeast Queensland – a rail strategy”.

“Am I that man who killed the railway?” Stooze cried, upon his knees.

The finger pointed from the page to him, and back again.

“Spirit!” he cried, tight clutching at its robe, “hear me! I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse. Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life!”

“I will honour Cross River Rail in my heart, and try to keep it in line with its original intentions. I will live the Past project, shun the Present project, and change to Futureproof. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach. Oh, tell me I may sponge away the writing on this page!”

Holding up his hands in a last prayer to have his fate reversed, he saw an alteration in the Phantom’s hood and dress. It shrunk, collapsed, and dwindled down into a bedpost. Running to the window, Stooze opened it, and put out his head.

“What’s to-day.” cried Stooze, calling downward to a person in orange clothes but who seemed not to have hard toiled a moment in life, who perhaps had loitered in to look about him.

“To-day.” replied the board member. “Why, to-day is the day that we go past the point of no return with Cross River Rail, and enshrine its failings in the cold concreted walls of the bored tunnels.”

“Will I gain anything by making the hard but right calls, as the Spirits have taught me this night, to set Cross River Rail on a course to deliver for the entire region for the next hundred years?”

“Probably not. It will just get politicised, and to be honest it would create a bit of a headache for us. Better to just plough on, you know? None of us will be held accountable for it in the future anyway, and it makes it easier for us today to just keep our heads down”.

So Stooze did nothing, for ‘twas politically expedient. The Three Spirits facepalmed in unison, then left for a jurisdiction to the south with proper planning processes.

A merry Christmas to everybody. A happy New Year to all the world. Hallo here. Whoop. Hallo.