

Queensland's grand transport scheme, to date, has been plagued by bad headlines, causing politicians to point fingers and left passengers wondering when, and how, the mess will be cleaned up. However, it wasn't always this way.

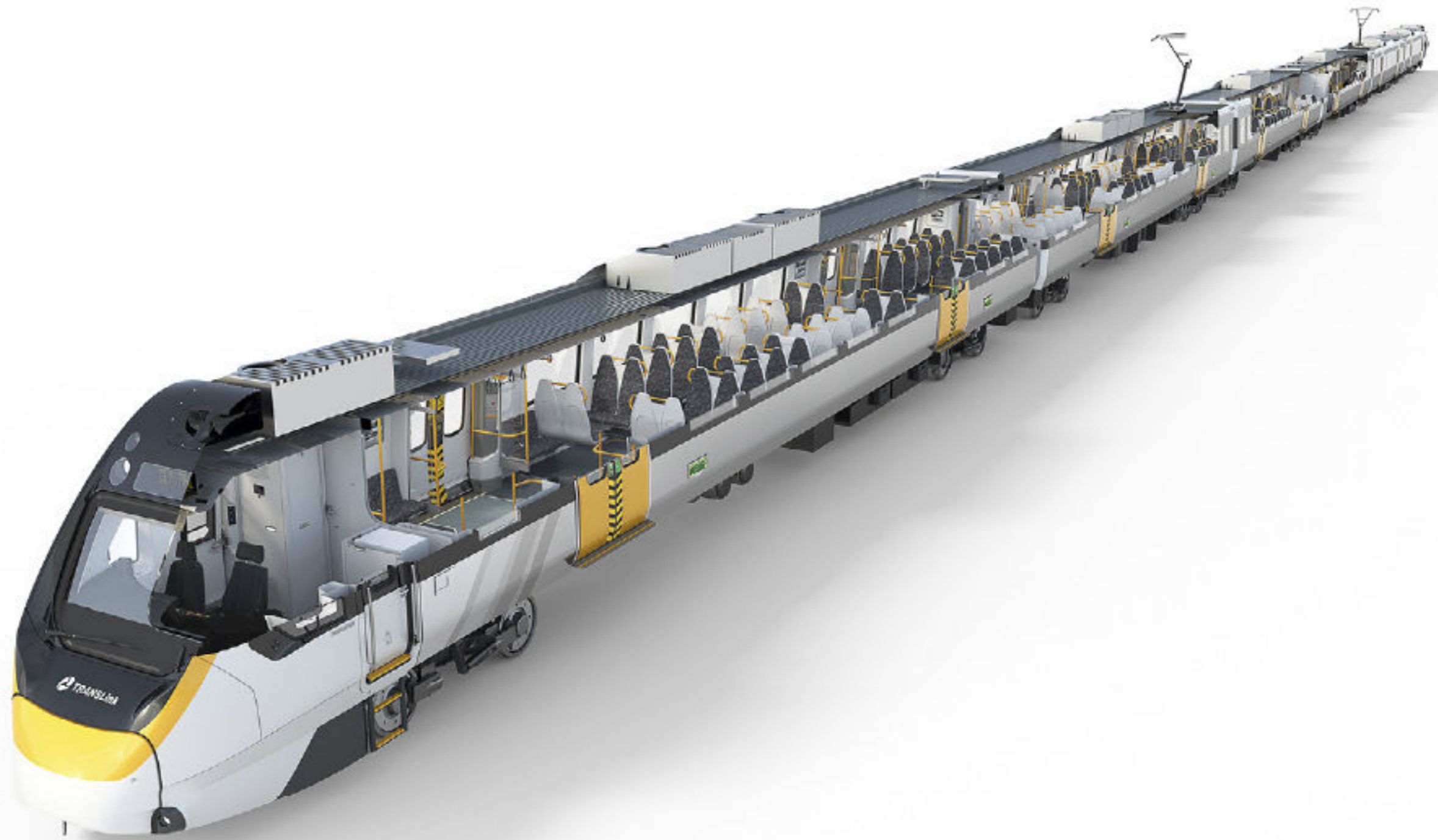
Back in 2013, the contract for the New Generation Rollingstock project (NGR) was awarded to Bombardier-led consortium Qtectic, which also consists of John Laing, Itochu and Aberdeen Infrastructure Investments. Valued at \$4.4bn, it is the single largest public transport investment in the history of the Queensland Government.

The rationale? By 2036, the population of South East Queensland (SEQ) is forecast to hit approximately 4.9 million, increasing pressure on the transport network. A spokesperson for TransLink, a division of the Queensland Government's Department of Transport and Main Roads that is responsible for train

services in the region, says: "The number of daily passenger trips in the Brisbane metropolitan region alone [is] predicted to reach 1.2 million. The NGR project will deliver a 30% increase to the SEQ's current train fleet."

The core of the NGR agreement covers the design, construction and maintenance of 75 new passenger trains, manufactured by Bombardier Transportation in Savli, India, for Queensland Rail's City network division, as well as a \$190m purpose-built maintenance centre at Wulkuraka, west of Ipswich, which is fully operational.

Last February, the first NGR trains arrived for testing. In those happier days, the public was invited to view the trains at an open day, organised at the centre in Wulkuraka, and the then Transport Minister Stirling Hinchliffe said: "These new commuter trains will be rolled out on the rail network to deliver passenger services later this year after they have undergone comprehensive testing and commissioning."



→ Structural design of the new carriages

POOR VISIBILITY AND BRAKING CONCERNS



BRAKING CONCERNS

This testing regime consists of checks to mechanical and electrical systems, Wi-Fi capability, CCTV, doors, seats and air-conditioning; tests on communication equipment to ensure it integrates with existing Queensland Rail systems; and of course, on-track testing on the rail network. Three NGR training simulators are also in use for train crew training, while an automated vehicle inspection system (AVIS) at Wulkuraka inspects trains as they arrive.

“The first trains were due to be on the network mid-year (this year) and the Department of Transport and Main Roads, Queensland Rail and Qtectic are working around the clock to resolve the issues as soon as possible, without compromising safety,” says a TransLink spokesperson. “There are 15 NGR trains in Queensland – three of which are currently undergoing on-track testing.”

However, this potential jewel in Queensland’s transport crown is being splashed across the Australian media for all the wrong reasons, leading to blame and counter-blame, as politicians and the Qtectic consortium fight to get it back on track.

Last October, it was revealed that four of the first five trains delivered were between 4.4t and 5.6t underweight. The Australian

train identified the need for adjustments to the braking system, as it was exceeding the required braking rate (over-performing),” a TransLink spokesperson said last year. “Any adjustments or improvements made to the NGR train’s design will be subject to a thorough technical review and testing programme.” Since then, braking concerns have been resolved, Qtectic confirms.

Sight lines have also come under the spotlight, with drivers being unable to see stopping points on platforms from the NGR windscreens.

Should the train specification be questioned, then? In a statement provided to Railway Technology, a Qtectic spokesperson explains: “As a global company, Bombardier must ensure that the products they supply from their facilities in India comply with the same quality standards that are applied in any other of their global facilities. The NGR trains comply with those quality standards.”

The spokesperson confirms that as part of the design process “a full-size mock-up drivers’ cab and carriage was produced”. This formed the basis of consultation with the Department of Transport and Main Roads, Queensland Rail, the disability sector and other user groups, the spokesperson adds. Train design and

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Courier-Mail also stated that the fifth was 16t under; however, it should be noted that a number of components on the first trains were installed in Wulkuraka, and for the trains to be delivered, some items were deliberately not installed prior to arrival in Queensland.

Also last year, TransLink confirmed that braking problems had been discovered; namely that trains were braking too suddenly. "On-track testing of the first NGR

performance requirements were set in 2013. "There was a three-step consultation process and feedback was considered and incorporated into the final design," says the Qtectic spokesperson.

"The trains are then tested to ensure they meet all requirements and safety standards before entering passenger service. For all new train projects, especially of this size and complexity, it is not uncommon to identify issues during testing."





→ Rolling stock failed testing due to several features, including driver visibility and braking

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NOW EVERYBODY
KNOWS YOU
GET WHAT YOU
PAY FOR

POLITICIANS POINT FINGERS

For its part, Qtectic insists it wants to see the trains in service as soon as possible, and states it is working with all relevant parties to get the rolling stock up to standard in the near future. A further blow was dealt, however, when in March the Queensland Government halted the delivery of any new trains until all problems have been ironed out. The question that arises, of course, is who is to blame? The answer to that varies, but what is true is that the political blame game is in full swing.

Newly appointed Transport Minister Jackie Trad, who confirmed in March that no payment would be made for the trains until the issues were resolved, has spoken of mistakes made by the former Liberal National Party (LNP) Government, which

as saying by ABC News. “Back in January 2014,” Trad added, “Tim Nicholls and Scott Emerson [former Newman government ministers]...were crowing about the fact that they were getting these trains for half price manufactured in India. Now everybody knows you get what you pay for.”

To no great surprise, such charges have been rejected by opposition parties who have, in turn, accused the Australian Labor Party of being incompetent. The LNP Shadow Transport Minister Andrew Powell has claimed that designs have been changed to accommodate train guards and, in fact, “that is one of the reasons we’re having significant delays”.

Tim Nicholls, now leader of the LNP,

was in power when contracts were signed.

“Those detailed designs were approved by the Newman [Campbell Newman, former Premier of Queensland] government and they signed the contract,” Trad was quoted

went one step further: “Labor is mucking around,” he told ABC in March. “[They] don’t know how to run the public transport system and today we’re simply seeing Jackie Trad trying to muddy the waters to cover up their own incompetence.”



→ On-track testing has been requested as soon as possible

POOR VISIBILITY AND BRAKING CONCERNS

So, where does this leave the NGR project? What can be surmised is that all those with an interest in seeing the project succeed have plenty of hard work ahead of them. First on the agenda is to restart deliveries as soon as possible and meet the original target of having the entire NGR fleet operational by late 2018, if that is still feasible.

What was once simply a rail project has morphed into a political blame game, filling column inches in a way that was never intended. And for the public – those who rely on a functioning transport network for leisure and business – it leaves them scratching their heads.

“Delays with the introduction of the NGR trains are having an impact on the ability to deliver reliable services,” explains Robert Dow, spokesperson of RAIL Back on Track, an Australia-based rail advocacy group. “Mechanical issues with the existing train fleet, [for example] some trains are approaching 40 years of age, are causing cancellations and flow-on delays and disruptions.

“There is also community concern about the secrecy surrounding the issues with the NGR trains. These trains have now been in Queensland for around 14 months and none have been in regular revenue service.” ●

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