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Gillard hopes for commuter-led head of steam

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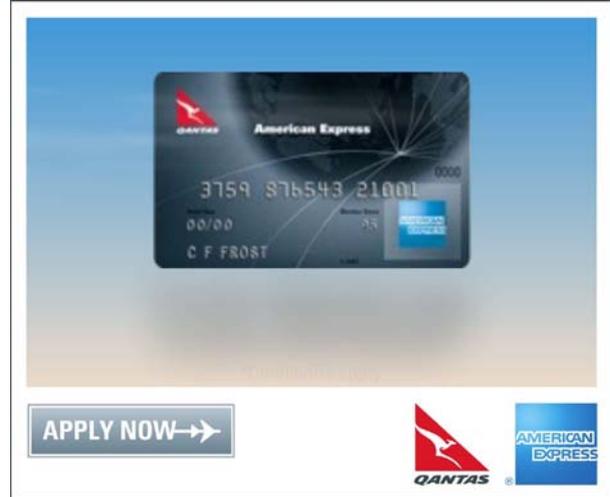
TODAY'S promise by Julia Gillard that her government, if re-elected, will fund the majority of the cost for a rail link between Parramatta and Epping will tick a number of boxes for Labor.

If well received, the announcement will bolster Labor's prospects in a crucial clutch of seats in western Sydney, reverse the trend that has seen significant infrastructure funds withheld from a hapless NSW government, and play to Gillard's original election campaign theme of sustainability.

This election, she declared in the first days of the campaign, would be about "our very quality of life".

Western Sydney's infrastructure has failed to keep up with the pressures of burgeoning population growth.

If the current growth rate continues unabated, the region's population will double within 40 years.



The proposed link will cut 25 minutes off the trip from Chatswood to Parramatta and take pressure off the western line. Commuters in five key seats will benefit - Parramatta, Bennelong, Lindsay, Greenway and Macarthur.

Importantly, the government will put a timetable on the project. It says it will be completed in 2017. That's two more elections after this one but a commitment nonetheless.

The Commonwealth's contribution of \$2.1 billion will not be available until 2014-15, which is two elections away. This ensures the government can meet its promise to return the budget to surplus by 2012-13. It is also the best you can do when the budget is broke and in recovery.

The Coalition may call the long-term promise wishy-washy but it can hardly complain after Sunday when, at the Coalition campaign launch, the Nationals leader, Warren Truss, promised \$40 billion in road and rail projects. This included a four-lane highway from Adelaide to Melbourne and the Melbourne-to-Brisbane inland rail link.

All this, Tony Abbott assured reporters on Monday, was affordable and would be funded from the Auslink III program also to begin in 2014.

By contrast, Gillard's announcement, which will be funded from "National Building Program II", looks austere. Neither Gillard nor her Transport and Infrastructure Minister, Anthony Albanese, will hail the rail link as a cure-all. Rather, they will describe it as a first but important step towards meeting Sydney's needs.

The key risk today for Gillard is appearing with the Premier, Kristina Keneally. As the Penrith byelection showed, the NSW government is as popular as cold sores.

The condition that NSW must work with Infrastructure Australia is wise.

Until the weekend Gillard had an awful campaign. This week, some big funding initiatives for education, and a flat spot in the Coalition's disciplined campaign, has given her momentum. Today's announcement is designed to keep that momentum rolling. Not to mention give her something to talk about tonight at Rooty Hill.