

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE INQUIRY INTO PUBLIC TRANSPORT

The public transport system in Australia is an essential component of our infrastructure, and valuable as a means of reducing our national carbon footprint. At this time, as we face peak oil and the challenges of climate change, it could not be more important. An effective, convenient, comprehensive public transport system must be established and be affordable to all if it is to attract people out of their private motor cars and out of aeroplanes. The climate change pressures on our planet make better public transport a most urgent priority for action.

I welcome this opportunity, through the first ever Senate inquiry into public transport, to express my thoughts on this issue. Energy efficiency should be the prime arbiter of how we move forward on this issue. We must implement measures that wean us off the great Australian car dependency. If funds are scarcer now with the global financial crisis, then infrastructure initiatives that will result in the longest term good should be the focus of what spending is possible. Such an investment strategy will boost the economy and benefit the environment simultaneously.

While metropolitan public transport has in the past been managed by State governments, the time has come, because of the global carbon implications of how people travel, for the Federal Government to become involved in supporting public transport within our cities. For instance, light rail systems branching out from existing railway lines would make accessing rail travel much easier for people in the outer suburbs. Typically, battlers of our mortgage belts live in cheaper outer suburbs and such a light rail system would reduce their costs in their daily transport needs of getting to work, shopping, accessing schools. The Rudd Government's BUILDING AUSTRALIA FUND could source some of the funding for such projects to encourage State investment in them.

Good bicycle paths will also entice people out of their cars. Perth already has a good system, often paralleling railway lines – but it could be extended greatly to accommodate more routes. Many sections are dual, that is for cycling and walking, and this is ideal. Cycling to work and for other purposes will become more and more common as cycle path systems extend. While not exactly “public transport”, I think enabling people to cycle more should be an essential element in considering how to move people in a greener, more efficient way. In at least one German city, there are publicly-owned bicycles. These are left unlocked at bike stations and people are free to use them to cycle where they need to go – and they then leave them at the nearest bicycle collection point for other users. Perhaps this idea could be adapted for Australian cities too.

Building new bicycle paths could be a great way of creating green jobs, a boon to the growing army of unemployed and a boon to the environment.

Beyond the metropolitan reaches too, we need to imagine means of moving people about the country with less environmental impact. One such national project requiring Federal coordination and funding could be an Australian Super Train following much of the route of our Highway No. 1. Air travel is very carbon expensive compared to ‘super trains’ such as that between London and Paris that travel at c. 450 kph and take less time than flying between those two major cities because they require less waiting at either end of the journey. If Australia had a Super Train moving people conveniently and quickly and relatively cheaply between our major cities, or at least our capitals, a vast amount of private and business road traffic would become unnecessary and uneconomic by comparison. Realising such a vision would require hugely expensive investment – but the reduction of CO2 output would be immense and beneficial. It is essential for the continued habitability of the planet that cost-benefit analyses take environmental considerations into account.

I urge the Federal Government to involve itself in transforming public transport in Australia with the objective of making it a greener, more efficient and attractive system – and that these changes are implemented urgently.

Judy Blyth

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http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/rrat_ctte/public_transport/index.