

Inquiry into the investment of Commonwealth and State funds in public passenger transport infrastructure and services

Submission

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Introduction:

On 4 December 2008 the Senate referred the following matter to the Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee for inquiry and report by 18 June 2009:

The investment of Commonwealth and State funds in public passenger transport infrastructure and services, with reference to the August 2005 report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage, Sustainable Cities, and the February 2007 report of the Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee, Australia's future oil supply and alternative transport fuels, including:

- a. an audit of the state of public passenger transport in Australia;
- b. current and historical levels of public investment in private vehicle and public passenger transport services and infrastructure;
- c. an assessment of the benefits of public passenger transport, including integration with bicycle and pedestrian initiatives;
- d. measures by which the Commonwealth Government could facilitate improvement in public passenger transport services and infrastructure;
- e. the role of Commonwealth Government legislation, taxation, subsidies, policies and other mechanisms that either discourage or encourage public passenger transport; and
- f. best practice international examples of public passenger transport services and infrastructure.

Submission:

The Public Transport Alliance was formed during the development and adoption of the *Integrated Regional Transport Plan* for Southeast Queensland c1995-6, when it became increasingly clear that, while many of the specific interest groups based on membership interests were actively seeking improvements for their membership, there was no group which could address the "integration" of these interests. PTA is therefore "interest based" not membership based. It relies on information and assistance sought and provided by the range of interests active in seeking improved alternatives to reliance on cars as a mode of transport. PTA has been involved in projects ranging from the implementation of the "model" bus-rail service to Ipswich UQ campus to the major modification of the Goodwill Bridge to better comply with "access for all" principles.

Unlike user groups or specific interest groups, PTA aims to assist in ensuring that meeting the needs of one interest group does not unnecessarily or unacceptably impact on or reduce utility for other interest groups or individuals. PTA therefore uses case studies including the stories of individuals to investigate whether, and the extent to which, these individual cases are indicative of, or indeed evidence of, a more generalised problem or issue. Whenever possible, PTA attempts to be involved in various reference groups, making submissions, and acting on behalf of individuals.

The role of convenor of an alliance such as this relies on a combination of theory and practice, on policy analysis, and on both experience and research. The writer has appeared before a number of national inquiries including the Industry Commission and related inquiries into housing policy and planning, road safety, as well as presenting at conferences on housing policy, planning and the integration of land use and transport in (more) sustainable ie environment friendly ways, both in Australia and internationally. More details can be provided.

PTA also maintains an essential watching brief with like organisations in Australia and internationally in order to be more widely informed but also to support others in the field. One example is the Town and Country Planning Association in Victoria. Numerous TCPA submissions to numerous state and national inquiries and “consultation” provide strong evidence for change.

Unfortunately, but perhaps inevitably, it appears that many issues still being raised or in some cases, discussed have been the subject of previous detailed and substantial inquiries. In this regard, the PTA expresses concern that (i) each new inquiry appears not to research previous inquiries and (ii) each new inquiry appears to give currency or even urgency to matters raised yet arguably many of the matters have not only been raised but supportive evidence provided.

More details can be provided however the PTA looks forward to recognition of the immediacy of the problems and the benefits of addressing them as a very urgent and timely priority.

Brief history:

Aside from a history of various incentives and subsidies to encourage low density housing in Australia (a contested view), the Commonwealth has rarely been involved directly in urban planning with the exception of the “Building Better Cities” and related projects such as “Green Streets”. The result is a fragmented policy framework which leads to competition between states based on lower taxes and cheaper land and living costs. Resultant reductions in service levels are rarely if ever mentioned.

The issue of housing and location induced (relative) poverty has been investigated in depth by national case studies (HALCS). One of the key indicators has been a high proportion of disposable income being spent on cars due to the lack of alternative means of transport and local services provision. Cars are status symbols of power, of wealth, etc as well as providing a range of other justifications for and that result in, “car dependency”.

Even the specifically targeted “Building Better Cities” projects such as along the rail corridor between Brisbane and Ipswich could not overcome “car dependency”. Indeed as one political leader put it, poor people ride bicycles, we don’t want that image. While it may be true but certainly is not only poor people who cycle, in a rail corridor with both housing and jobs and services located along the corridor and mainly within 2-3kms, cycling to the train is an obvious way to maximise the disposable income on expenditure other than cars.

Economic hardship will not be reduced if facilities and a supportive road environment are not provided to encourage indeed promote a reduction in “car dependency”. Further it won’t happen if the assumed “safety + convenience” of travel by car is or seems to be far higher than the apparent convenience of alternative modes - public transport, walking (see the Pedestrian Council of Australia “Pedestrian Charter” which includes for people with disabilities) and cycling or multi-modal combinations thereof.

Safety:

A challenging but quite realistic proposition to consider is whether there is another “industry” in Australia that not only sets targets that imply acceptance but also celebrates success, when 1500 people or more or less, are killed each year. While success has reduced the number killed, the numbers seriously or permanently injured have increased but are rarely if ever accurately reported

This issue was addressed in considerable detail in the 24th Australasian Transport Research Forum in 2001 in which the conference topic was “Zero Road Toll ... A Dream or A Vision?”. The topic was based on the Swedish “Vision Zero” concept.

Numerous papers addressed the topic (including one by the writer) and can be found at <http://www.patrec.org/atrf/index.php?forum=33&hdnShowResults=&surname=&title=>

Currently, road crash costs nationally may be approaching A\$20 billion per annum to which must be added the costs of efforts to make the users of roads safer. At this time, these are accounted as contributing to GDP. Little wonder then that efforts to re-focus road management to a “zero road toll” are opposed and methods to maintain “car dependency” and separate the users are promoted.

By comparison, public transport, walking and cycling are relatively and intrinsically safe ... indeed they ARE safe for people of (almost) all ages and abilities.

Why then are these alternative modes considered unsafe or dangerous? Put another way, why are cars seen as “safe”? This issue is especially important when considering why it is public transport, walking and cycling are not considered safe. Examination almost always shows that the reasons (and these are both numerous and diverse) include the dominance provided for fast motor traffic. One example is the national system for setting speed limits whereby Australia has the highest urban speed limits in comparable socio-economic nations, a major reason for “car dependency”.

Urban speed limits set high not only makes roads “dangerous” for walking and cycling, including getting to and from public transport but makes public transport, walking and cycling relatively much slower than car travel. Indeed provision for separating public transport, walking and cycling is often justified on the basis that otherwise, these “alternative” modes slow down motorised traffic.

There are of course related issues such as public and individual health, environmental impacts, etc. These are already well documented and assumed to be accessible to the inquiry.

Convenience:

Convenience means readily available and easy to access and to use. It is a very useful concept in particular for carrying out comparative audits, a technique often used by the PTA. One example is the tendency for public transport operators (purchasers and providers) to concentrate services on particular routes, most often in or along the same corridor or road reserve as roads and increasingly in single use reserves within the corridor in order that the service is faster and less likely to be held up eg in traffic congestion.

What is often not assessed is the “convenience” of getting to and from the higher frequency public transport corridors. Whereas a car can travel through uncongested local streets at 50km/h or in many cases 60km/h through residential areas to get to a freeway, it takes 10-15 minutes to walk a kilometre to a bus priority corridor on streets and roads where those walking are expected to give way ie priority to the fast motor traffic. In the case of cycling, it would take just a few minutes to travel the kilometre ... or in the same 10-15 minutes, to travel 2-4 kilometres.

Similarly main roads often require much longer distance plus much longer time delays (eg at traffic lights) to get to or from public transport. Similarly these impacts of lack of convenience due to lack of priority apply to access to school, to local retail and other services, to access to recreation.

Even otherwise admirable planning projects (eg the West Australian “Liveable Neighbourhoods” initiative) fail to be able to take into account the priority given to “car dependency” because urban speed limits are set so high.

There are many means of assessments for convenience. Desktop and GIS audits are never sufficient. Case studies provide one means but requiring adequate evidence all modes have been examined in similar degrees of competence and with users needs most prominent, is essential.

“Safety + Convenience”:

Combining assessments of safety and convenience proves to be a useful way of assessing urban design and planning. Both proposals and existing settings can be assessed as the Heart Foundation “Supportive Environments” and related initiatives have amply demonstrated.

As with “car dependency”, all forms of mobility require individuals to make trade-offs between convenience and safety. Too often, it is assumed that an urban area is populated by fit able bodied males in the age group 20-40 while consideration of children walking to school or people with disabilities or indeed simply ageing, are on the evidence, ignored. The result is children being driven to school. For the less able people, it can be isolation and depression.

Analysis of the provision of public transport, walking and cycling by use of audits based on “safety + convenience” (Yeates, 2000 at <http://www.yeatesit.biz/transfiles/rsafe00papera.pdf>) will inevitably show the policy influence of “car dependency”.

Recommendations:

The following refer to the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry.

(a) *an audit of the state of public passenger transport in Australia.*

Any assessment of existing or proposed (or previously proposed) initiatives must accept that “car dependency” has an inordinate influence whether on available funds, or on implementation, or on current modal splits (the proportion of users of the various modes). Any assessment must have a mechanism that assesses the extent of the influence of “car dependency”.

Reliance on surveys of current use (eg current market research, Census data, etc) is inherently biased by way of the structural policy and level-of-service bias in the provision that favours car use.

Unsurprisingly, then, high levels of public transport, walking and cycling occur in two types of locations namely (i) by user choice, ie where high levels-of-service exist and where “safety + convenience” is high and (ii) by user coercion, ie where car use is constrained eg by congestion, lack of reliable access to parking, cost, etc.

As may be pointed out below explicitly or implicitly, (i) and (ii) respectively represent the “carrot and stick” approach. Both work well without the other. But results are better if both are used. This means that policies and plans that attempt to influence (ii) by reducing the costs and constraints, will inevitably lead to less use of public transport, walking and/or cycling and more use of cars and reliance on “car dependency”.

In summary, in some parts of Australia, public transport, walking and cycling are quite clearly of a very high standard and use confirms this to the point where advocates and users are critical of lack of further provision. While supporting the need for increased provision in such cases, PTA rejects the complaints-based advocacy as it tends to discourage people who might otherwise try to use the existing services. Improvements in levels-of-service and funding etc should be provided automatically to reduced inadequate levels-of-service. PTA is of the view that there IS a strong policy and funding role for the Commonwealth to ensure (if necessary by intervention by way of demonstration such as “Building Better Cities”) that transport and urban development funding gives far higher levels-of-service where needed ie “the Carrot” rather than funding “car dependency”.

(b) *current and historical levels of public investment in private vehicle and public passenger transport services and infrastructure;*

Reference has been made above in relation to this category. PTA’s competency does not extend to analysis of funding. However, levels-of-service and choice of users with rejection by others are indicative and acceptable indicators.

Further, a focus on “current and historical levels of public investment in private vehicle and public passenger transport services and infrastructure” fails to address the broader issues of integrated planning. Manning (in Yeates 2000 cited previously) provides a timeline for the incremental changes that quite “deliberately” planned to convert the existing road network from a place for slow multimodal transport to domination of the roads and streets by more or less one single mode, cars.

But as many examples here and overseas have shown, the process which has led to “car dependency” having such dominant policy and funding support in Australia, can be reversed and not necessarily at great cost. Indeed the “savings” from current costs may well pay for the changes. Thus to in effect separate the public investment in “private” and “public” transport fails to address walking and cycling in much the same way as does a focus on “services and infrastructure” that does not include reference to walking (including disabled access) and cycling.

“Integration” is a much used concept but here it is essential. Strategies such as adopting the 50/30 speed limits as used in Europe can be introduced nationally, and perhaps illustrate why a focus on infrastructure can be misleading eg by drawing attention to an apparent need for new bike paths or bus ways for example, when slowing traffic is and has been shown to be an adequate alternative requiring little or no “infrastructure” in the increasingly common use and sense.

An example is an initiative introduced to Australia by the writer and initially trialled then implemented in Brisbane and since then, elsewhere. It is based on the concept of “Sharing the Roads” a common slogan used in Australia in relation to cycling. It brings into question why roads are not shared. Details can be found at <http://www.yeatesit.biz/transfiles/HowToRoadCycling.html>

The focus of the Inquiry must therefore be directed towards assessing how “integration” (ie better use of existing corridors and existing infrastructure) rather than “separation” and resultant duplication and often destabilisation of urban settings (eg by way of urban freeways or busways) can be assessed more effectively. This of course requires understanding what “better” means.

It follows that the Inquiry must examine how easily (in relative and funding terms) existing infrastructure eg roads can be better managed to achieve desired outcomes eg more people walking, cycling and/or using public transport yet done in ways successfully demonstrated and widely implemented overseas (and to a limited extent in Australia) that do not prohibit car use, but rather constrain its dominance and the resultant “car dependency”.

(c) an assessment of the benefits of public passenger transport, including integration with bicycle and pedestrian initiatives;

PTA is supportive of positions put by many other interest groups etc in relation to the need to reduce oil dependency as these have resultant outcomes that are very consistent with those of PTA. However the real issues are about the extraordinary public cost ie expense (albeit apparently counted as beneficial in GDP) of the negative impacts of “car dependency”.

Of all others, “equity” of access is perhaps most useful as a concept. Why is it that despite Commonwealth discrimination legislation, Brisbane has so many low floor accessible buses but so few bus routes that provide reliable scheduled bus services that can be relied on to provide an accessible bus service? Why is it that a recently completed A\$26 million upgrade of a major Brisbane suburban railway station has not improved access to/from trains? Why is it that children cannot benefit from a wealth of documented benefits derived from walking and/or cycling and/or public transport as access to school?

Perhaps most of concern is the inculcation of current “car dependency” by way of children who rely on “car dependency” and thus fail to benefit from the range of life lessons involving responsibility, judgement and spatial awareness skills - see <http://www.yeatesit.biz/transfiles/veloci99paperb.pdf>

In summary, whereas “car dependency” inculcates a need to rely on cars and a resultant political dominance for meeting what is clearly a need that is widely felt in the Australian urban population,

a focus on “access for all” or equity in access provides similar levels-of-service for individuals irrespective of mode/s chosen.

Whereas oil shortage can be addressed by electric vehicles for example, these vehicles and if “car dependency” remains as at present, presumably many more such vehicles, will all be requiring more roads and more parking space while threatening more people who might still want or need to chose walking, cycling or public transport.

In the simplest terms, it may be a matter of ensuring (rather than as at present “risking”) the “safety” of those not in cars and of ensuring and providing both the space for and cost of continuing to provide for so many more cars.

(d) measures by which the Commonwealth Government could facilitate improvement in public passenger transport services and infrastructure;

There are essentially two available measures namely (i) intervention and (ii) demonstration.

Demonstration projects allow the Commonwealth to offer funds on conditions that require implementation of projects that might be seen as politically intrusive or radical to be adopted as policy or regulation. “Building Better Cities” projects such as the extension of the Gold Coast rail line are of this type. While the Queensland Government obviously preferred to build a massive upgrade of the M1 road between Brisbane and the Gold Coast and did so, the rail extension was built and seemingly begrudgingly, is receiving incremental upgrades albeit far behind required to meet the existing let alone constrained ie latent demand. A useful comparison can be made with West Australia and the “Northern rail” service in the freeway reservation north of Perth.

The risk with demonstration is that it can be used as a token or symbolic gesture, or as occurred with the Gold Coast rail project, a change in government support and/or reluctance to support the intended virtues of the demonstration, can lead to the value of the demonstration being substantially reduced and/or distorted.

However there are always lessons to be learned but then seemingly forgotten. Who can forget the then Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson arguing that Commonwealth funds (and in particular national priority road funding in this case) should not be spent on roads where the result would be a better national highway congested with even more commuter cars?

The lesson was made clear north of Sydney and again between Brisbane and the Gold Coast yet apparently forgotten or subsumed by other less obvious (seemingly political rather than transport) priorities in the case of Commonwealth funding of major road “improvements” on the Ipswich (west of Brisbane) and Sunshine Coast (north of Brisbane) national road corridors where in both cases, the roads are clogged by commuters in corridors where there has been little if any funding from the Commonwealth on the adjacent rail corridors.

Demonstration projects therefore do offer a means for the Commonwealth to intervene but clearly in doing so, the conditions of what in effect is an example, must extend to other similar situations.

More direct intervention may well be by for example, setting much more stringent targets as a condition of Commonwealth funding any projects. Examples relevant to aspects discussed above could be a requirement that funding be conditional on ensuring that research and monitoring be carried out and ongoing evidence provided that particular goals were being achieved eg a change in mode shift by commuters, reduction in car parking places, reduction in urban speed limits, etc

Two current opportunities are available. Every effort should be made to make use of them.

Massive Commonwealth “infrastructure” spending aimed at alleviating current and near future economic conditions could and should be diverted to projects that involve “soft” retro-fitting existing urban areas as this will inevitably involve both demonstration and intervention, but also is likely to

be more labour intensive while also more effective in raising community awareness and understanding of the issues involved. That there is latent demand is well known eg through “individualised marketing” projects in Perth and Brisbane and similar projects in other cities.

This Inquiry must find that it is opportune to divert a substantial component of these available funds to demonstrate alternative approaches to managing urban assets.

In addition, Commonwealth funding of urban and inter-urban projects be subject to conditions that equity of access be achieved. It appears West Australia may have the best record in this respect given early recognition of the benefits of “access for all” on train and later bus services throughout Perth. By comparison (and acknowledging there are legitimate technical reasons for difficulty in achieving some goals), older train stations that are in high use areas but are not accessible should be funded and brought forward including relocation if necessary, not subject to expensive upgrades that do not provide or achieve “access for all” as in the example at Indooroopilly in Brisbane mentioned above.

As the Commonwealth is the creating body for the states (and trusting that “states rights” concepts have reduced somewhat in favour of compatible national expectations across Australia), it seems reasonable to expect that all transport projects ie whether private or public transport and however funded, be subject to rigorous assessment in terms of not creating barriers to implementation of “access for all”. For example this could (if not would) require that Commonwealth funding for buses also require provision of bus stops that are accessible and that the number of accessible bus routes increase.

The issue is about deciding which modes best suit purpose from a national policy perspective. It is possible to travel without a car in many places, no matter how much less convenient. But it is also more convenient in some places to not use a car. The issue is whether more urban (not forgetting inter-urban) travel by other than car is beneficial at national level.

Reducing urban (and inter-urban) speed limits is one obvious national strategy which if applied to many existing roads, would result in major reductions in crashes and crash costs, a substantial move from car to other-than-car transport for commuters if these are of a sufficient level-of-service, and thus a great reduction in funding road upgrades such as those currently being funded by the Commonwealth on national roads in support of and encouraging increased “car dependency”.

(e) the role of Commonwealth Government legislation, taxation, subsidies, policies and other mechanisms that either discourage or encourage public passenger transport;

There are numerous examples where in effect, car users are encouraged and others penalised by for example tax law. Business expenses, use of cars for business purposes, etc are hardly incentives to not use cars or not provide car parks. By comparison, those who use public transport or walk or cycle do not get comparable benefits. Similarly, sales tax has differential impacts. If there is a public cost in one mode and a public benefit in another, then it might be expected that tax and other methods be used to reduce the negative impacts and outcomes.

Some countries now provide tax incentives to encourage use of cycling and public transport and to discourage car use. PTA is aware of these in principle but not aware of details. However PTA is supportive of such strategies. One example is bike lockers (the Brisbane and SEQ system managed by Citytrain – Translink being widely and highly regarded) which could be funded by the Commonwealth not only to generate an additional industry task across Australia but also to provide similar tax benefits instead of encouraging provision of car parking. It is understood applications for funding of bike lockers by the Commonwealth have been recently rejected.

The equity issue also arises here as does the cost to those for whom a low disposable income is available. Unfortunately tax on cars and related use seems to be seen as valuable as a revenue stream, however if the crash and other costs of “car dependency” are moved from the positive to

the negative side of GDP, provision of Commonwealth subsidised public transport, walking and cycling incentives will make more sense.

(f) best practice international examples of public passenger transport services and infrastructure.

Again the attention of the Inquiry must be drawn to the need for consideration of the “integration” effects of walking, cycling and public transport and multi-modal use. One of the major problems in Australia is the ongoing “silo mentality” of transport providers and purchasers (and planners).

For example, while parking for bikes at train stations in Brisbane and SEQ is well regarded (see previously) Brisbane City Council’s previous Lord Mayor Jim Soorley while visiting the USA was very impressed by the extensive use of racks on the front of buses to carry two (and in some cases three) bicycles ... an “international best practice example”.

A limited trial/demonstration was implemented and while use was very much limited by the trial conditions, the idea worked well, as it does in the USA. However the current Lord Mayor found reasons to remove all racks from all buses. At the same time, ACTION in the ACT has introduced the same basic bike rack and use is increasing over time. This is an illustration of one form of integration whereby for those for whom the bus is not sufficient, being able to use a bike at both ends of a bus trip can mean a choice to not rely on a car. More detail can be provided.

Another example is the provision of space on trains, light rail and buses for bikes in the vehicle, in some cases with light rail and buses, in space provided with priority for disabled users. Whereas in most train systems in Australia, bikes are not permitted on trains, it was only in Perth possible to obtain a permit if it can be shown that there is a genuine need eg journey to work or study where the destination is too far to walk and/or not sufficiently serviced by public transport.

Integration also means making multi-modal trips quick and easy. This requires complex management systems to ensure that buses that deliver passengers to a train or another bus also wait for passengers from that bus or train ... unless the frequency is such that another service provides the connectivity. This aspect of connectivity varies widely but a rule-of-thumb is a reliability and frequency level-of-service such that a timetable is not needed.

The above is in effect an explanation as to why particular places cannot be cited without accompanying critique ... put simply, there are too many variables. Many cities have much better public transport and related services and infrastructure, in some if not many criteria, an example being Hong Kong and Singapore, London, Paris, Beijing, Barcelona, Zurich, etc.

Other cities much smaller are in many ways better and include Graz in Austria which is perhaps the #1 example of what is called “integrated traffic management” ie it has perhaps the most complete package of integrated transport policies of any city in the world.

But to cite these is to imply a need for high density development which is not necessarily the case. Dr Paul Mees (whose book “A Very Public Solution” and related articles are essential reading) is well regarded as an exponent of provision of public transport albeit generally not well regarded in regard to the role of cycling in transport provision. Mees contends and case studies and examples show that public transport can be provided to suit whatever criteria are needed.

Examples that demonstrate if not achieve “best practice” are in Australia eg Perth regionally and SEQ outside Brisbane, and parts of Melbourne and Sydney and in the ACT. These examples all need detailed critique which PTA would be willing to assist the Inquiry.

PTA is of the view that once people know what public transport does provide for them and what it can or could provide, ie their awareness is raised sufficiently, use of walking, cycling and/or public transport is quite surprisingly better than might be expected without the increased awareness

[Further details, references, etc have not been included but can be provided on request.]