The Hon. Malcolm Turnbull, MP

Prime Minister

PARLIAMENT HOUSE

CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister,

I write concerning rail issues of the Western Sydney ‘city deal’.

These relate to a supporting study conducted by Commonwealth and NSW Governments.

The main Commonwealth commitment arising is $50million to develop a ‘business case’ for a line between St Marys and the new airport at Badgerys Creek. That this is far from what is needed goes without saying.

What does need to be said is the study, and therefore ‘city deal’, is bad for Western Sydney and Australia’s taxpayers and indicates major problems with Commonwealth urban policy.

While the study rightly identified the need for a north-south line through Badgerys Creek, it bizarrely recommended:

* Any new rail line in Western Sydney be separated from existing lines;
* A misdirected grandiose scheme, the most important part of which is to be deferred for 15-20 years i.e. probably never;
* Against by far the best option for providing rail to the new airport precinct – from Leppington – whose cost was estimated at less than 25% of the recommended scheme;
* A line from Leppington to stop kilometres short of the airport for no apparent reason;
* These matters on the basis of a failure to differentiate trains and tracks - a belief that single-deck trains cannot run on tracks used by double-deck trains and railway lines cannot have junctions.

I find such incompetence nigh incomprehensible. The recommended approach – putting the wrong south line to the airport and requiring passengers to frequently change trains and stand for long periods - is virtually guaranteed to make the lines fail, diminish the Commonwealth’s investments and squander opportunities in Western Sydney.

You have been very badly let down by the study and associated claptrap which includes: make-believe terminology; incompetent analysis and commentary; misleading criteria.

I suspect the real reasons for the recommendations have not been disclosed to yourself, let alone the public. Those reasons are likely associated with hiding the problems of the NSW Government’s ‘Metro’ policy and of frustrating the Commonwealth until it comes around to the State’s preference of an east-west link to the airport.

The possibility of this hidden agenda is supported by the fact that obvious options for Western Sydney rail – including to the new airport - were not considered.

Among these options is the use of tracks by different fleets – as done elsewhere. Another is to build on the existing network and create a loop to provide direct access between Badgerys Creek and most major centres in Western Sydney – Blacktown, Parramatta, Fairfield and Liverpool.

It would be scandalous if instead of considering proper options the study recommended disadvantaging Western Sydney in an effort to cover-up problems with Metro.

It would be doubly scandalous if the Commonwealth was party to this.

While I appreciate your best intentions for ‘city deals’ these possibilities threaten permanent damage to Western Sydney and destruction of the credibility of Commonwealth urban policies. ‘City deals’ would be seen as pork barrelling and, in this case, primarily concerned with political protection of the State Government.

In these circumstances, support for any ‘business case’ is well wide of the mark. It risks locking in the idiocy of creating several isolated rail systems in Western Sydney.

I ask for a formal public inquiry into relevant matters before even more permanent damage is inflicted on Sydney.

A more detailed explanation of these points is attached, along with an article posted on Mr John Menadue’s AO Pearls and Irritations site. I would be happy to expand on any of these points and am writing in similar terms to relevant Commonwealth and NSW Opposition representatives.

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cc.

The Hon. Paul Fletcher MP

Minister for Urban Infrastructure and Cities

## Attachment 1: More detailed explanation

## Western Sydney city deal – rail

As hype clears from the Western Sydney ‘city deal’ announcement its time to look at what it means.

The big issues relate to rail.

The Prime Minister wants trains running to a new Western Sydney airport at Badgerys Creek when it opens in 2026. Yet far from the necessary billions of dollars, the Commonwealth’s commitment is to a ‘business case’ for a line between St Marys and the airport.

The cost is an outlandish $50million, but that is the good news.

Which is swamped by bad news: the rail study behind the ‘deal’ – presented a year late.

It recommended a line between Badgerys Creek and St Marys. That makes sense.

This might later extend to Schofields and in 15-20 years south to Macarthur. Those following Sydney’s transport sagas know this means ‘not in your lifetime’.

The scheme – 75 km of line - is to cost around $20billion.

The obvious option - a 14km extension of the existing Leppington line to Badgerys Creek costing only a quarter of this - was rejected. That is very odd.

Stranger still is the proposal that any extension of the Leppington line stop 7km short of the new airport.

Below the surface this presents a world of trouble for Western Sydney.

The starting point is: new lines in Western Sydney are not to join the under-construction Metro or existing railway.

Not joining Metro is understandable. Metro’s reach is limited, its trains relatively slow with few seats and with new tunnels reportedly so small as to forever isolate it from other lines.

Yet not joining the existing system is nigh impossible to understand.

The study’s explanation boiled down to double-deckers on the existing system being unsuited to airports.

This excuse is ludicrous. For one thing extending existing lines to Badgerys Creek does not mean only double-deck trains would operate to the airport. Single-deck trains can and do use the existing system.

The study apparently did not see any difference between track and trains. A failure so incomprehensible as to suggest clandestine motives.

Among which may be to cover-up Metro’s real consequences.

Consideration of linking new and existing lines would reveal whether enhancements necessary to take more trains from Western Sydney are prevented by Metro.

This is not fanciful. The possibility of a Metro in the CBD and across the harbour preventing necessary enhancements to the existing railway – perhaps needlessly - was warned about by the Sydney Morning Herald’s 2010 public inquiry led by Mr Ron Christie AO.

Among other things, such an impact would destroy the credibility of the Governments’ ‘three cities’ policy.

Why?

Metro offers few seats per line – not just per train. Metro is less suitable than other trains for trips over 20 minutes. It might be fine for short journeys – which is why metro trains are usually limited to small, highly built-up areas like central London or Paris. But few seats are not fine for commuting, the critical matter for Western Sydney residents. Few seats mean more commuters need to drive – or stay at home.

Western Sydney needs trains with lots of seats. It doesn’t need the study’s fantasies like Metro to Liverpool, 20-minute rides from Parramatta to the CBD or make-believe terminology like ‘fast’ and ‘light’ Metro.

Few seats – Metro - would change the ’30 minute’ city idea from one of no need to make public transport trips beyond 30 minutes to one where it is impractical to travel for any longer. The ‘three cities’ policy would be to confine Western Sydney people to ‘their area’. Meanwhile those outside Sydney - from the Central Coast, Illawarra and Blue Mountains - would still be able to comfortably commute to the city!

To the extent Metro affects the existing system it disadvantages everyone in Western Sydney – it reduces their ability to access opportunities elsewhere. This is the upshot of opinion pieces by experts such as Dr Dick Day and John Brew.

Is it telling the study did not use seating as criteria to assess options? Or the Greater Sydney Commission and Transport for NSW – both NSW Government agencies – present the public with conflicting rail policies?

In its eagerness to avoid discussing links to the existing system the study also ignored options unconstrained by Metro.

For example, linking Badgerys Creek with St Marys, Blacktown, Parramatta, Fairfield, and Liverpool by extending the Leppington line and enhancing existing lines - to form a loop with tracks usable by single and double-deck trains - like Bradfield’s plan for Sydney. Complemented by a short link from Liverpool to the East Hills line, this would radically improve Western Sydney commuting and travel to airports.

Readers may recall the Sydney Morning Herald saying previous metro proposals had: *‘‘a bizarre premise that Sydney needs to create an entirely new public transport system*”.

A premise which is the central tenet of Metro - initiated in 2012 while the then and now Premiers opposed a new airport in Western Sydney!

If that premise is bizarre, what about three new systems – as recommended by the study?

The study was jointly conducted by the NSW and Commonwealth Governments.

That NSW would perhaps not want consideration of the best options for Western Sydney is explained by the above.

The Commonwealth has no such excuse. The study recommendations virtually guarantee the north-south line will fail, loss of value of Commonwealth investments and opportunities for integrated development squandered.

That it lacked either the wit or the guts to require the study to put real issues before the public says much. It is a failure consistent with the absence of foundations for its flaccid urban role. ‘City deals’ look like a new pork barrel where keeping the right States ‘sweet’ is all important.

In this case, keeping the NSW Government on-side may result in permanent damage to Western Sydney.

The sooner there is an independent public inquiry to get to the bottom of Sydney rail the better.

*John Austen is a former adviser to Commonwealth and State Governments on rail matters. He lives in Western Sydney. More details are at: thejadebeagle.com*

Attachment 2: Article for Pearls and Irritations

# JOHN AUSTEN – More on the Sydney transport mess-the Western Sydney dud ‘deal’

[11 April 2018](https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-more-on-the-sydney-transport-mess-the-western-sydney-dud-deal/)

*Announcement of a Western Sydney ‘city deal’ by the Prime Minister and Premier was touted as securing a rail line through Badgerys Creek airport. It does not. In fact, it merely committed to yet another review about what to do. That may turn out to be lucky for taxpayers and Sydney.*

I previously commented on the problems arising from NSW rail policy; for example, Metro makes planning for Badgerys Creek airport difficult. <https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-the-commonwealth-is-meddling-in-nsw-rail-at-last/>

The Western Sydney ‘city deal’ is another case in point.

The ‘deal’s’ transport aspects reflect an ‘outcomes report’ of the joint Commonwealth/ NSW Western Sydney rail study – which was more than a year late.

<https://www.transport.nsw.gov.au/projects/current-projects/western-sydney-rail-needs-scoping-study>

The ‘outcomes report’ rightly concluded that the first rail lines through Badgerys Creek airport should follow a north-south axis.

There is only one possibility for the north segment: airport-St Marys. The media reported a $20bn spend to ensure this segment is operating when the airport opens. In fact, it will probably cost $10bn and the only commitment is for further study.

Beyond this, the report is highly problematic. Its recommendations would:

* introduce further breaks of rail gauge in Sydney – resulting in yet another independent rail system;
* hinder airport development;
* impede transport in southwestern Sydney;
* probably waste $20bn.

Two omissions from the report are responsible for, or cover-up, these problems: the lack of proper maps and failure to use seating as a measure of rail capacity.

A possible explanation of how these contributed to the fiasco follows.

The report recommended a ‘preferred rail network’ for western Sydney. While the inclusion of the north segment from the airport is straightforward, two options for a south segment were considered; Macarthur and Leppington (near Liverpool).

The report put Macarthur as its preferred network via a 35km segment to the airport. The cost, not specified, is probably in the order of $10bn. Such a line may eventually be necessary for commuters to jobs etc. in Parramatta and north-west Sydney.

Leppington, despite being much less than half the distance and cost of a Macarthur line, was not included. Extraordinarily, the study assumed this line should stop 7km short of the airport. Its $2bn cost would supposedly increase by $4bn to extend it to the airport – likely a gross exaggeration.

The report offered some explanations for rejecting Leppington – but they are not believable.

It said:

* expected demand on the Leppington segment would be less than demand on both the Macarthur and St Marys segments – hardly a surprise since it compares one segment against two;
* planning for Western Sydney Airport provided for only two rail lines to the airport. It didn’t say why;
* there are significant road investments around Leppington. This is no argument for preferring Macarthur over Leppington as there are significant road investments near both places;
* current CBD-Leppington services – using double-deck trains – are not convenient for airport passengers. This ignores the fact that such services could easily be changed to single-deck trains.

The last point is astonishing. It suggests ignorance of the most basic rail principles: that infrastructure should be used by a variety of fleets and that rail lines can merge via a junction.

Any competent analysis would have considered better options than stopping the Leppington line short of the airport e.g.:

* the Leppington line being used by airport friendly fleet e.g. single deck trains;
* a junction between Leppington and Macarthur lines – so trains on either could run to the airport. This would maximise the capacity and flexibility of airport rail services;
* a circular route Leppington-Airport-St Marys-Parramatta-Liverpool. This would pick up far more demand from Western Sydney than the proposed plan – by also covering the Fairfield and Liverpool districts using existing lines. If supplemented by a very short connection from near Liverpool to the East Hills line it would also pick-up demand between centres in southern Sydney e.g. Bankstown, Hurstville, Sutherland and the airport as well as Parramatta.

As it is almost impossible to believe any report could be so incompetent, there probably are undisclosed reasons for the recommendations. One possibility is to avoid investing in rail in south-west Sydney. The Macarthur segment is pencilled for 15-20 years from now – those following Sydney’s airports’ saga know this is code for ‘not in your lifetime’ due to ‘budget constraints’. This argument is much easier for a $10bn Macarthur line than a $2bn Leppington line.

Another possible motive is an ideology of constraining Sydney trains and creating separate train systems.

Sydney Trains – which operates the existing CBD-Leppington line – seems anathema to the State Government.

The Government probably thinks: Sydney trains cannot be allowed to run to the airport, therefore, any airport line must not connect to Leppington. Fine print buried deep in the report, indicating an airport line will be separated from Sydney Trains, supports this theory.

But such reasons would entail terrible mistakes reducing the viability of the railway, impacting the commercial potential of the airport and ‘aerotropolis’ and adversely affecting Western Sydney.

First, Leppington trains would carry many more airline passenger who would pay station access fees (like at Kingsford Smith) than Macarthur trains. If any trains are to go to the airport they should be from Leppington.

Second, contrary to what is assumed by the report, there is no impediment to single-deck ‘airport’ trains using the Leppington line. Sydney Trains predecessors for many years ran single deck trains. And other (single-deck) train operators can and do use Sydney Trains’ lines – there long established NSW Rail Access Undertaking was set up for this very purpose!

Is it possible the report transposed Macarthur and Leppington options – to connect the wrong place to the airport – because an ideology-blinded it to the difference between trains and tracks? Leading to an idiotic view that single-deck trains can’t run on ‘double-deck tracks’? The result of which is the shortest, most cost-effective route to the airport with the best prospects for viability and offering maximum upside for the airport has been sidelined in favour of a $20bn grand scheme?

Incredible? It would not be the first howler in recent years. There are numerous examples:

* a north-west rail line rather than augmentation of Parramatta-CBD;
* the wrong type of capacity – a Metro in suburbia;
* a timetable that ignored resource constraints; and most recently
* spending over $2.3bn on trains that can’t use tunnels on the lines in which they were to operate <https://www.smh.com.au/national/engineer-could-have-put-nsw-on-right-track-before-we-bought-2-billion-worth-of-new-trains-20180308-p4z3gx.html>.

The ‘outcomes report’ reeks of disdain for Western Sydney. Further proof is: first, reiteration of the thought-bubble of extending the Metro from Bankstown to Liverpool, a multi-billion-dollar project probably reducing capacity from Bankstown inbound; and second, a failure to identify any line between Parramatta and the northwest, even though one is considered essential by planners.

The Prime Minister should be furious at the junk he has been presented with. While very keen to make a real announcement, he was left with no choice but to ask for further ‘work’.

NSW might be happy as this will defer a confronting reality until after the next State election.

I previously recommended the Prime Minister grab the whip hand and be the ringmaster of the NSW rail circus rather than joining the clowns.

This ‘outcomes report’ misinforms the public and cannot be part of a proper ‘city deal’. This is what happens when policy is developed behind closed doors. It again demonstrates the need for an open public inquiry to prevent wastage of at least another $20bn of taxpayers’ money and further irresponsibility by a State Government wrecking the future of Western Sydney and going from one mess to another in Sydney transport.

It all started in 2012 with a hasty switch from a long-standing and well-understood Sydney rail plan to an unusual ‘Metro’ scheme amid the State Government opposing another airport for Sydney! <https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-badgerys-creek-testing-times/>

*John Austen is a happily retired former official living in the Macarthur area of Western Sydney. He was Director of Economic Policy for Infrastructure Australia from its inception in 2008 until his retirement in 2014.*