# Big things in transport

Both Commonwealth Government and Opposition are expressing new interest in city transport.

Some believe the Commonwealth’s role is in big transport projects in big cities. They wish its cash and ‘balance sheet’ be made available for ‘productivity’ projects in state capitals. The Prime Minister recently proposed a variant; the Commonwealth supporting projects including on the basis of it collecting higher taxes and / or ‘value capture’. And an ambition of a 30 minute city.

The case of Sydney shows practical issues such that this may be wishful thinking. If the Commonwealth feels a need to ‘invest’ it would do better to look in second tier cities.

## Sydney - overview

The Commonwealth’s national land transport network in Sydney includes some roads that don’t exist and omits vital roads that do; like across the harbour. Any relation between the network and spending to reduce travel time, the subject of a recent advertising blitz, appears coincidental.

Of the twenty five Sydney ‘initiatives’ in Infrastructure Australia’s 15 year plan only one, Badgery’s Creek airport, was identified by the Commonwealth. NSW identified all proposals for: the national network; Commonwealth rail lines; infrastructure needed for airports.

Not the best start. Perhaps Commonwealth interests lie in big projects like Westconnex and metro?

Westconnex conceived as a $10 billion urban renewal project is now largely put as trying to reduce travel time between the western suburbs and CBD. Cost: near $17 billion.

A well-known principle is that new roads should not lead cars to near the centre of big cities. It seems this principle is overlooked by Westconnex. Nonetheless an economic study claims positive net benefits. Returns to governments will be minimal in comparison. No matter, the Commonwealth promised billions in funding years before the study was completed.

The other big project, metro, entails changing the idea for a rail line in north-west Sydney, a change that may prove momentous. The old idea was for a line to connect to the extensive commuter system. Now the line is to be a metro; incompatible with the commuter system, indeed *reducing* that system by taking some existing line and stations.

The state recently announced an extension of the metro to Bankstown. Probably necessary; a metro restricted to north-west suburbia would be a laughing stock. It is to: take at least one other commuter line; have a harbour crossing that may further stunt commuter rail.

Metro ideas in Sydney have quite a recent history; including public warnings against ‘breaks of gauge’. The current plan not only ignores such warnings but reportedly prevents rectification of breaks virtually forever, by eg. small tunnels. The critical unexplained decisions, possibly the most consequential in post war Australian transport, will affect the metropolitan area and all transport systems in it, including aviation, for at least the remainder of the century. Construction cost; for a single line around $20 billion so far.

Commonwealth, adviser etc. views? The latest reports seem unaware of key issues. As if metro was just another project, an industry opportunity. Officials will join a taskforce to look at rail in western Sydney. And the Prime Minister announced some Commonwealth funding for Sydney metro. Too little, too late to influence pivotal decisions?

No surprise then that media reports place the Sydney metro project next to the Melbourne ‘Metro’ project; apparently ignorant of the key difference – in Melbourne ‘Metro’ is a brand name. The project in Melbourne aims to improve and extend the existing rail system, not create a new railway that is incompatible with it.

## So?

On economic grounds Commonwealth financial support for Westconnex was premature and possibly unnecessary. There is a case it is unwise.

Its lack of interest in metro until after critical decisions were made may cause long regret. If it is not interested in decisions as important as for metro why be involved in infrastructure at all? Value capture or not, there can be a severe economic cost of breaking gauge. Showing, as clearly as at the time of federation, commercial benefit for a government is not merit for the public.

Proponents of ‘big things’ may argue the Commonwealth: need not say anything about projects; ‘role’ is optional; is limited to spending. If so they condone cardinal failures in national governance. A role carries a responsibility to exercise it.

If the Commonwealth has any role in big things, it should ask for and publish answers about more than just claimed benefits and costs and how much it is spending. For Westconnex: CBD traffic. For metro: break of gauge. For both: geography of opportunity in Sydney in the 21st century. With several billion dollars of public funds to be outlaid by the Commonwealth it’s not as if such questions and answers are frivolous.

Answers require an understanding of Sydney transport rather than abilities to print or read brochures. Or hand out gifts to state projects. Failure to play a decisive role in big projects, scant input to the national plan, and a farcical national network suggest the Commonwealth has no such understanding.

The proposed 30 minute city concept is further evidence. 30 minutes is the same as the ‘constant’ average travel time theorised by Marchetti; maybe no coincidence. The theory is built on historical examples of overseas cities, showing more road building does not really change things. Relevant ideas are economic (equilibrium) not engineering or planning. Implying the few ways to permanently alter travel times include transport pricing and changing attitudes. So how might this link with an infrastructure plan and deal making, even if funded by value capture?

The Prime Minister said the Commonwealth will not be an ATM for states. Excellent! But where is the Constitutional bedrock for his proposals? In the absence of such bedrock they risk being a passing fad like the national urban policy. A proper understanding of, not just ‘agreement’ about, responsibility is necessary to underpin a useful Commonwealth role in urban affairs.

Even if Commonwealth responsibility was resolved capability is an issue. While many wish him well, the Prime Minister is up against it. Lack of continuity in substantive research and policy may have led to ad-hoc spending dominating Commonwealth policy. Resulting in flip flops about: road only / public transport; connectivity / cities. Policy has been reversed with change of Government, even within a term of Government. Not cured by a ‘big things’ doctrine, an economic assessment mousetrap, or reliance on deal making.

But an election cometh, and with it temptation.

For the coming election transport promises would be best limited to responsibilities; trade and commerce; interoperability; ownership of assets; government accountability. Not ‘big things’, ‘the private sector says’ or, worst of all, ‘every player wins a prize’.

These matters are easier addressed in cities such as Townsville and Wollongong than in Sydney or Melbourne. Examples of things to do: inclusion on the national network; adequate port access. Cities such as Newcastle and Geelong could contribute to decongestion if there were better public transport links with the nearby capital; higher speed trains.

The Commonwealth’s transport interest in such cities today? Limited at best. For Newcastle: it *advertised* it was doing nothing, recently changed to doing little; Infrastructure Australia’s priority list has virtually nothing other than bypasses of the area; the high speed rail study has an odd location well away from the city for the station. The study also puts forward what appears to be a mistaken view that connection of Sydney and Canberra is the top economic priority, even though it is a dead end line which is more costly and would have lower demand than the link with Newcastle.

Surprising? Hardly; neither the city, its (world’s largest coal export) port, or the main RAAF fighter base at nearby Williamtown is on the designated national road network.

A poor effort. To date.

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