# John Austen - post-election infrastructure review

*The NSW and Federal 2019 elections saw the return of Coalition Governments. My perspective – from western Sydney – is: Coalition infrastructure policies have been dreadful, Labor’s offerings weren’t any better.*

Much has been written on Labor’s lack of success. Whatever the reasons, Labor made no real attempt to hold State or Commonwealth Governments to account for infrastructure debacles.

State Labor pointed to the waste of demolishing and rebuilding a football stadium, delays in opening a tram line and local community opposition to WestConnex.

Its stadiums commentary did not impress as many people as Sydney Morning Herald [columnists](#_top) would have liked. Criticism of the tram line omitted the critical issue - the Government was preparing to [pay around $600m](#_top) to stop being sued by the builder. The arguments about WestConnex fell flat after a contentious [Parliamentary inquiry](#_top) of which Labor made little.

Perhaps tellingly, these issues only concerned inner Sydney.

At the Federal level, Labor’s criticisms were limited to muttering about [Infrastructure Australia's board](#_top), lack of progress with a high-speed rail ‘vision’ and lower spending.

Its argument about Infrastructure Australia’s membership missed the point - appallingly bad project assessments, mis-governance and the need for [public inquiries into infrastructure proposals.](#_top) The less said about [Labor's high-speed rail 'vision'](#_top) the better. In the circumstances much is to be said for reducing public infrastructure spending.

Neither State nor Federal Labor pointed to the big problems in Coalition policy raised in Pearls etc like: restrictions on [Newcastle Port](#_top); Sydney [Metro](#_top); senior public servants joining what some consider lobby groups.

The Governments must have felt like they were being savaged by dead sheep.

These failures implied Labor’s infrastructure ideas were removed from what it put as big picture issues – climate change, a ‘fair go’, and better government.

The imperative of dealing with climate change requires diversification of coal regions. The obvious start – not mentioned by Labor - is to reverse Coalition policy which prevents diversification of Australia’s largest coal facility - Newcastle Port.

While Labor’s talked about a ‘fair go’, its support of Sydney Metro projects gave the lie to this. Sydney Metro projects permanently preclude many Western Sydney residents from getting a fair go – by reducing their access to opportunity. The reason is Metro lines offer relatively few seats – yet seating is vital for travel from Western Sydney to opportunities in the city and global arc.

Worse, Metro tunnel etc. dimensions permanently prevent trains with higher capacity, or more seats, from using its lines. Worst of all is the possibility Metro routes preclude construction of other lines which could be used by trains which offer adequate seats - through the city. These are matters specifically warned about by eminent experts [and by John Menadue and myself many times in Pearls etc.](#_top) yet were ignored by Labor.

Also ignored were gross problems evident in the infrastructure field, making Labor’s arguments for improved public sector governance look shallow – at best.

The failures were accentuated by infrastructure proposals no better than the Coalition’s.

Especially at the Federal level, Labor proposals were about scattering pork far and wide. There were promises to use your money for all sorts of things on a [long list](#_top) – like hitherto unknown Commonwealth responsibilities such as extending bicycle paths and ‘nation-building’ carparks at random suburban railway stations. The proposals looked like the result of a trawl of electorate and council etc. project wish lists.

Labor also [talked big on cities.](#_top) Yet shorn of hype, both its State and Federal campaigns resolved to repeating the trite ‘cities are important’ line and wishy-washy promises to spend some money on bits and pieces in several hundred localities.

It might be thought Labor’s approach of including a few big public transport projects - not just roads - in its largesse list was better than the Coalition’s. However, at least some project proposals – the Melbourne rail loop, [Western Sydney rail](#_top) etc. – are dubious if not downright bad, even before considering their unwarranted and astronomical costs. As none have been properly assessed the offer of support was irresponsible.

Despite cheers for the proposed spendathon from ‘urbanists’ and infrastructure lobbyists - but few voters - there appeared no relation of Labor or Coalition city (or regional) transport proposals to existing State or Commonwealth purposes, such as facilitation of trade and commerce via vehicle and infrastructure interoperability.

Moreover, there continues – after decades – reluctance to explain what new ‘city’ or ‘regional’ *responsibilities* a Commonwealth (Labor) Government could or should take on – as distinct from spasmodic, superficial glad-handing activities. There seems no comprehension that responsibility involves rather more than just handing out your money.

At State and Federal levels, Oppositions ready for Government would have publicly demolished current idiotic infrastructure policies and provided credible alternatives. They would have informed themselves about real issues and visibly stood-up for communities outside inner cities – to show they cared.

Instead, all that could be heard in Western Sydney – *formerly* Labor heartland - was the sound of a light tap on Government wrists with a soggy lettuce, meek ‘me too’ acceptance of the Coalition’s outrageous stupidities and supercilious talk of ‘nation building’ as if there was some merit in the infrastructure fiasco being proposed.

The noise merely confirmed to voters in the Badlands of the western suburbs that ‘infrastructure policy’ is not magic. Smooth ‘golden words’ about infrastructure just cover-up another way to use your money to buy political support, brag about spending and peddle ‘job creation’ beat-ups – rather than do anything of substance or value to the community.

Labor has much to do on infrastructure to be ready for Government in the future.

John Austen is a happily retired former NSW and Commonwealth official living in Western Sydney.