## ‘Its time’ – for change. The case of Sydney metro

*While there has been noisy backlash in Sydney over state government decisions on matters like greyhound racing and drinking laws, more consequential moves as introduction of metro railways draw less attention. ‘Its time’ this changed.*

We are told that governments should patiently take the public into their confidence when promoting change.

In NSW failure to do so led to sectional outrage over matters like a ban on greyhound racing, local government amalgamation, drinking laws and cutting down trees in inner city parks. The sell-out of Newcastle via a 47 year privatisation penalty hasn’t elicited such uproar, thus far.

Moving up the consequence scale, a similar failure is contributing to resistance against Westconnex. $16.8billion (construction cost estimate) says it will go ahead regardless.

Yet the biggest transport show in Sydney is the railway. The big railway issue, metro, is much more important than all the above matters combined. And like those other matters the NSW government in recently released material is failing to take the public fully into its confidence.

The material includes a discussion paper on western Sydney rail needs jointly sponsored by the Commonwealth. There is also a summary business case for extending the under-construction Northwest metro from Chatswood: via a new line under the harbour through the CBD to Sydenham, then taking over the existing line to Bankstown.[[1]](#endnote-1)

### Sydney rail plans

The last serious public look at Sydney rail issues, in 2010, was led by Ron Christie AM former head of the NSW railways and road authority. It was done for the Sydney Morning Herald, probably in frustration of the notorious failures of the then state Labor government.

The Inquiry report should be read and understood by everybody interested in transport.

It considered in depth the pros and cons of metros, modern single deck trains but with limited seating, now spruiked by the Coalition government as an answer to Sydney’s transport woes.

It included very serious claims such as:

* Debate on transport being stifled by internal ‘dictates’;
* Some plans to introduce metro might harm commuting in Sydney.

A proper approach to introducing metros would lay these fears to rest. It would loudly rebut speculation that motives for key decisions, taken in 2012, extend to matters like industrial relations and privatisation. This has not happened.

### Metro questions

The current plans for metros do differ from those considered by Christie’s Inquiry. However, in the light of the Inquiry two fundamental questions about the plans need to be answered clearly:

* Will metro tunnels be sufficiently large to allow future potential use by other trains?
* Does the CBD-harbour metro route allow another CBD-harbour crossing for commuter trains?

These matters will be vitally important to most people in Sydney and everyone in western Sydney for generations to come. Why?

One part of the answer is technical: Sydney commuter trains largely depend on harbour crossings.

The other part is prosaic: people can probably sit on commuter trains but maybe not on metro trains.

Proposed metro trains have less than half the seats of Sydney’s double deck commuter trains. Even accounting for more metro trains being able to run, seat capacity on a metro line could be 20 to 40 percent less than on a commuter train line.

Some people are likely to avoid commuting by metro because seating is a key issue for train trips, especially trips taking longer than 20 minutes such as from most of Sydney to the CBD. Without reasonable surety of seating they may prefer to drive or stay put, rather than stand in carriages for a long time.

Hence the answer to the questions of metro tunnels and CBD route will affect whether people, especially in western Sydney, may *ever* be able to effectively access – commute to - the employment and education which would benefit both them and Australia. A metro lock-in might lock out people with no real options other than using rail; given Sydney’s size and car traffic, their number might be legion.

It is not merely a matter of Sydney’s CBD. Travel to Badgerys Creek airport and commuting to the global arc or to the second CBD, Parramatta, also depends on such answers. The potential of Parramatta is in question. So much for Commissioner Turnbull’s vision of three cities in Sydney. If metros (or light rail) undermine commuting her idea begins to sound like several islands.

## No answers – yet

The recently released material, while glossy, doesn’t give answers. Together with a recent flurry of promotional activity it might in fact raise questions.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The business case presented ‘analysis’ of alternatives to the Chatswood-harbour crossing-CBD etc. metro proposal. The only real option, another commuter railway including a harbour crossing, was omitted. Oversight or ‘dictate’?

Sadly there are reports that the new metro tunnels will be too small to ever handle double deck commuter trains. A reversal of Bradfield’s ideas? In the early 20th century Bradfield, of harbour bridge fame, built Sydney railway tunnels to be capable of handling much bigger trains than those of his day. Trains such as today’s double deck commuter trains.

Are some pictures in the brochures worth thousands of words? The discussion paper has thirteen photos of trains but none are of a metro. The business case has a picture of people *standing among empty metro seats*, an unlikely scenario. It also has a metro tunnelling machine on the page headed rail network challenges; will this prove to be all too true? Who knows?

This for projects with a financial cost north of $20billion. And possibly $25billion more for western Sydney rail.

## Public interest?

In recent days there were calls for remembrance of former Prime Minister Whitlam.

Where was the discussion about the coincidence of these issues – the most consequential for Sydney since before the Great Depression - with Whitlam’s interests in railways, western Sydney, and the role of the Commonwealth?

Whitlam’s Government made an offer to NSW to build and pay for a major railway focussed on Parramatta. The potential for such a railway may soon be gone forever. Again, who knows?[[3]](#endnote-3)

The obvious disgrace is that the public has not been clearly told one way or the other and instead is treated to glitzy promotional material. Which it pays for.

There is another disgrace: the lack of interest in such issues while attention is diverted to sideshows like the antics of US presidential candidates and he said/she said games in Canberra.

Like the fathers of the NSW railways, Whitton and Bradfield, Whitlam might be turning in his grave. Not just because of the possible lasting damage to railways, to ordinary people and to western Sydney, but because of apathy in the commentariat, the community and most of all the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth, whose Government represents you and is set to spend your money to ‘help’ Sydney rail.

‘Its time’ this changed. The Commonwealth shouldn’t stand for state government nonsense even if Sydney’s commuters may need to. Unless there are real answers to real questions soon a public inquiry led by its Parliament is in order.

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1. Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development, Transport for NSW, *Western Sydney Rail Needs Scoping Study Discussion Paper*, September 2016, (Discussion paper) at: <http://www.westernsydneyrail.transport.nsw.gov.au/>

Transport for NSW, *Final Business Case Summary*, October 2016, at <http://www.sydneymetro.info/sites/default/files/Sydney%20Metro%20CSW%20Business%20Case%20Summary.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Independent Public Inquiry into a Long Term Transport Plan for Sydney, Final Report,* May 2010 (Christie Inquiry) at: <http://www.catalyst.com.au/> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.whitlam.org/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/185462/4-_Railway_to_Parra_1974_pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)