**John Austen: Metro – public inquiry please**

*Some recent opinion pieces effectively called for a stop to criticism of the NSW Government’s approach to Sydney railways – in particular Metro – and for everyone to get onboard the transport ‘revolution’. I can’t agree.*

Pearls and Irritations has carried a number of posts on the problems Metro poses for Sydney’s existing railway (Sydney Trains), metropolitan growth and for major new developments such as Badgerys Creek airport. The reasons include Metro:

* distracts from a now pressing need to deal with growing demand from Sydney’s west and far south-west. Metro is adding new rail capacity but in the wrong places eg. in the north-west;
* adds the wrong type of capacity for such demand. It offers far fewer seats than Sydney Trains – meaning its passengers will need to stand for long times;
* reduces the capacity of the Sydney Trains system to deal with this growth – by taking over vital parts of that network;
* may reinforce the above by preventing Sydney Trains from ever acquiring critical new line capacity eg. by sterilising the very few potential routes under the CBD that are needed to run trains from the west and south-west.

The long-term effect may be to create social and economic divides by effectively restricting the access of many – especially in Sydney’s west - to better education and employment opportunities in the east. West-east travel involves commuter journeys of over 20 minutes on board; such commuters require plenty of seats. Sydney Trains type systems have plenty of seats, Metro type systems don’t.

Already Metro is causing serious planning problems. It is a reason for an almost year long delay in the Commonwealth-State western Sydney rail study report – there is a squabble about whether Metro is suitable for long trips from western Sydney or from Badgerys Creek airport.

Metro is also a problem for the draft 30-year plans by the Government’s Greater Sydney Commission and Transport Department. The plans contradict each other about future intentions; the Commission suggested all Sydney rail will be converted to Metro without apparently understanding what it is!

This is not the only confusion; important parts of the story continually change – Government claims about Metro vary: ‘ultimate’ passenger capacity varies from an up-to-40,000 target to 46,000 per hour, the number of Metro trains has been 30, 20 and 15 per hour, there is no consistency in whether it is to be extended to Hurstville, Lidcombe, Cabramatta, Liverpool etc. Unsurprisingly cost estimates change. Etc.

Is there a need for a Metro to cause such problems? For example; if it took other routes to other places, or was done in a different sequence say starting with a line to Parramatta rather than Bankstown? We do not know.

The Government has ignored public warnings from experts about these matters – such as in the authoritative independent 2010 report on Sydney transport planning by Ron Christie et al. This does not inspire confidence. Together with the failure to explain pivotal matters - such as reasons for small tunnel sizes which forever prevent Sydney Trains using corridors it needs - this feeds speculation about hidden agendas. Credible people have made suggestions of motives such as personality clashes, anti-union views, a dislike of Sydney Trains, privatisation and real estate development. Some claim biases about train types. It is said proponents of new lines now refer to their ideas as ‘Metro’ – whether or not they want one – as Metro is the fashion.

Is it possible the Transport Minister at the time of the key decisions – now the Premier the Hon. Gladys Berejiklian MP – was hoodwinked into an ever-growing scheme she feels unable to stop?

There has been no credible assessment of Metro. Infrastructure Australia’s 2017 assessment ignored all these questions. While it expressed concern that NSW ignored options - which might have included a harbour crossing usable by Sydney Trains or extension of Metro to Kingsford Smith Airport instead of Bankstown - it nonetheless gave Metro a seal of approval.

The under-construction Metro is almost certainly uneconomic. The claimed benefit-cost ratio of 1.3:1.0 is only for a $12bn Chatswood-City-Bankstown extension to the original Rouse Hill-Chatswood project. The calculations are not public but no doubt a large ‘benefit’ arises from bailing out the fiasco that will result from the original $8bn project; thousands of passengers needing - for the first time – to change trains and rail systems at Chatswood to proceed a further 10 km to the City.

The State Government’s ideas are under increasing public challenge by experts.

My most recent post argued these ideas contributed to the January melt-down of the Sydney Trains system. <https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-nsw-needs-an-inquiry-into-sydney-transport/>

Some experts agree; the argument is effectively confirmed by the official report which points the finger at a timetable developed by the Government – not by Sydney Trains. The timetable tangles up trains on an inadequately resourced network. It will happen again – unless either the timetable is substantially revised and on-board crowding worsens or there is major investment in Sydney Trains. But with a Metro bill of around $40bn and rising, the necessary spending would be a budgetary stretch and take a long time to deliver. https://www.transport.nsw.gov.au/news-and-events/media-releases/report-actions-to-boost-rail-resilience

Perhaps to forestall an independent inquiry – now also called for by the Greens - the Government attempted to clarify matters via an opinion piece in the Sydney Morning Herald. <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/trains-every-two-minutes-sydney-metro-will-get-rid-of-troublesome-bottleneck-on-rail-network-20180206-h0utcq.html>

Unfortunately, this failed to clear up anything.

It said facts show Sydney can’t do without Metro, but did not provide any real facts in support.

Its fudged figures cast alternatives in a poor light - putting Sydney Trains capacity at least 5,000 passengers per hour per line below what experts say today and 10,000 (32%) below what a more modern Sydney Trains system could easily achieve. Tellingly, it did not mention the relevant capacity measure for commuters – seating – on which a Sydney Trains type system is far superior to Metro.

The opinion piece closed with:

*It's time to end the tired debate about whether Sydney's established double-deck train system needs a single-deck addition and focus on the transport revolution coming to this city.*

Even given dubious claims in the piece such as that fifteen options were considered by ‘experts’ - only four made it to the public domain (Metro apparently came 3rd) - this is as extraordinary as it is wrong:

* The established Sydney system is not (just) double-deck. It can be, has been and is used also by single-deck trains;
* Metro detracts from rather than adds to this system; and
* In serious company the Sydney double v. single-deck debate was settled years ago - in favour of double-decks. The only debate now is about why the Government doesn’t accept this. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-04-11/barry-ofarrell-sydney-trains-claim-doubtful/5371446>

Worse, the sentiment is misguided. Transport should be a means to an end. Who wants a ‘revolution’ if by artificially constraining commuting it creates economic and social disadvantage for millions of people?

The issues go beyond trains into the failure to provide proper – adequate, accurate and unbiassed - information about important proposals. Unless such information is published politicians will be locked into policies they don’t understand and the community will suffer.

In fairness, there is not enough space in a Sydney Morning Herald opinion piece to provide an explanation of how it has come to this. Answers to the important question – is there a better way? - can only be determined by an open public inquiry which gets to the real facts.

Those confident in their ‘facts’ surely would not object to being so vindicated?

***John Austen is a happily retired former official. He was Director of Economic Policy for Infrastructure Australia from its inception in 2008 until his retirement in 2014 and previously advised on NSW rail issues.  Further background is at:  thejadebeagle.com.***

[1] *Independent Public Inquiry into a Long Term Transport Plan for Sydney (Chair Ron Christie AM) Final Report May 2010*