# Sydney Metro: the $66billion dollar questions – Part 2

*Reports on a NSW Government announcement - if believed – destroy even the Government’s own flawed case for Sydney Metro. This is the second of two short articles on that matter. For buffs, a bigger one will follow.*

Part 1 supported John Menadue’s call for a proper a public inquiry into Sydney Metro. <https://johnmenadue.com/john-menadue-sydney-metro-a-forty-billion-dollar-deception/#comments>

**The visible Metro problem**

Metro threatens to divide Sydney – its lack of seats will make travel difficult – an enduring problem for people and development in Sydney’s West. Who would outlay $60billion for this?

This is not to say a rapid transit/metro (lower case) system, properly located and configured to supplement existing transport networks would be out of place in Sydney’s inner areas – say around the CBD, to Kingsford Smith airport or to Strathfield with stations close together – provided cost and economic merit was scrupulously addressed. Like Infrastructure NSW’s expert said. <http://www.infrastructure.nsw.gov.au/media/1161/interfleet__summary.pdf>

It does mean, however, that the Sydney variant – ‘Metro’ – reaching well into suburbia with stations far apart is almost certainly the wrong railway in the wrong place – irrespective of cost or alleged merit.

Yet instead of facing up to real issues the public is insulted with propaganda and fantasies.

Recent reports – if true - mean contrary to all the spin, Metro is wrong for Sydney even on the State Government’s facile criteria – the number of trains it can operate per line.

These reports say Sydney Trains – with enhancements – could eventually run more trains per line than Metro. Other reports imply Paris’ RER – with double-decks - could run more trains than Metro. Meaning a Sydney Trains or RER type railway – a ‘Paris option’ - could carry vastly more people than Metro.

The NSW Government can hardly discount such reports – it announced $880m to start the enhancements it describes as ‘Paris’ technology!

If the reports are remotely true there was never a proper case for any Metro project in Sydney.

If so, all Metro projects must be stopped now. And not merely because they waste enormous amounts of money. An even more important reason is further work on Metro projects might make any ‘Paris option’ far more difficult.

How?

**The hidden problem?**

First, as noted in the previous post Metro reputedly is building tunnels too small for double-deck Sydney Trains.

Second, there remains unanswered – to my knowledge – the question of whether

Metro forever precludes all (other) new tunnels in the city needed for double-decks.

If it does it could wreck any potential of future decent rail services from Western Sydney, with attendant consequences for the several million additional people expected to live there. This is a real question raised previously by real experts [https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/37406431 at pp.194, 200](https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/37406431%20at%20pp.194%2C%20200).

These matters need to be immediately cleared up.

**The break of gauge**

To be clear, Metro is not, unlike then Transport Minister Berejiklian’s claim in 2012, part of a ‘three tier railway’. When she became Minister Sydney already had a three-tier railway; local, express and inter-urban services.

No, Metro is a different railway separated by gauge - much more permanently than the 19th century folly of different track widths - apparently by tunnels 20km or more long.

To be even more clear, the ‘plan’ initiated when she was Transport Minister is not for one rail network with three tiers, but for several rail networks separated by gauge breaks. At last count there will be at least four: freight, Sydney Metro, (at least) another Metro in Western Sydney and Sydney Trains. And Sydney Trains will continue to have three service tiers!

Yes, Infrastructure NSW’s expert did consider a ‘three tier’ proposition. But was it aware of the break of gauge - tunnel size and (possible) CBD route - issues? Its report makes no suggestion it was. <http://www.infrastructure.nsw.gov.au/media/1161/interfleet__summary.pdf>

Metro is the first real break of gauge in Sydney’s history.

The breaks among Australia’s colonial rail gauges led to a Commonwealth Royal Commission in the 1920s - and later inquiries - about how to correct that aberration e.g. [http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/free.nsf/0/3a8ad68c49af21e4ca2575d100196729/$FILE/13010\_1967\_RailwayGaugeUnification.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/free.nsf/0/3a8ad68c49af21e4ca2575d100196729/%24FILE/13010_1967_RailwayGaugeUnification.pdf)

If the reports are true – if Metro is even arguably inferior to and/or blocks out alternatives – a similarly empowered inquiry into it may be inevitable. Perhaps not now, but at some time.

**Explanations are needed from NSW advisors**

Decision makers won’t be the only ones with some explaining to do when it happens.

An October 2012 Infrastructure NSW document seems to have cut and pasted ‘information’ from Transport for NSW to support the idea of a metro system in a ‘three tier railway’ (again!). Its own experts noted that it is possible to substantially increase Sydney Trains capacity via the types of enhancements now being funded. In fact, that is what their experts recommended should take priority with single deck trains (e.g. metro) only to be introduced as one of the last steps -5th in an 8 stage program.

The Infrastructure NSW document estimates of capacity – e.g. 20 Sydney Trains per hour - in doubt at the time, would, if the latest reports are right, be shot to pieces undermining its three tier and metro conclusions. <http://www.infrastructure.nsw.gov.au/media/1138/sis_report_section80_print.pdf>, e.g. Table 8.5.

The Infrastructure NSW document did not apparently refer to an expert report said to be commissioned by Transport for NSW the previous year (and finalised for distribution in July - prior to the document) which also throws doubt on the ‘information’ used.

Moreover, that expert report warned about turn-up-and-go capacity claims noting problems in Tokyo. The Infrastructure NSW document does refer to a 2012 study by the same author on a different topic.

The Transport for NSW expert report, published by the Sydney Morning Herald, was cited in a 2014 ABC Fact Check report which was similarly sceptical about the State Government’s claims. <http://images.smh.com.au/file/2013/09/23/4770519/trains.pdf>

And why, other than the obvious of Sydney Trains potentially running more frequently, do I say Infrastructure NSW’s estimates of capacity were in ‘doubt’?

Because it said 20 Sydney Trains could carry 24,000 people – which as part 1 of this article noted is the Government’s view – 1,200 people per train. Yet the expert report commissioned by Transport for NSW seems to say 20 Sydney Trains could carry 28,000 people (1,400 people per train) – as does the 2014 ABC’s Fact Check report whose comparative table referencing the relevant expert implies double-decks could carry more than single decks per hour per line. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-04-11/barry-ofarrell-sydney-trains-claim-doubtful/5371446>

**Explanations are needed from Commonwealth advisors**

The relevant matters, especially options, should have been rigorously and publicly dealt with by Infrastructure Australia before giving the central Sydney segment – including a harbour crossing and CBD route - the green light. This did not happen – my post in Pearls and Irritations about that included:

*“Here is what the latest six-page Infrastructure Australia review of Metro said: “The qualitative analysis presented by the proponent states that a mass transit (metro) is the best option to address project objectives. While a qualitative assessment is sometimes sufficient to eliminate a number of options, Infrastructure Australia would have expected a more quantitative comparison of the plausible alternatives given the scale of the project.”*

<https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-infrastructure-advice-worse-than-expected/>

Reports about the ‘Paris’ technology lead to more questions about Infrastructure Australia’s summary assessment.

Like: how to reconcile support for what it calls a *‘standalone’* system while referring to former Transport Minister Berejiklian’s ‘Sydney’s Rail Futures’ document which seemingly condemned such a scheme in the following terms:

*‘an independent metro system would deliver few benefits in terms of service enhancement, capacity improvements or better operating efficiency on the existing rail network…’*

A scheme Sydney’s Rail Futures rated (on the Governments criteria!) clearly inferior to:

*‘Existing network, New CBD rail capacity and harbour crossing’.* <http://mysydneycbd.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/user-files/uploads/rail-future-web.pdf>

Do infrastructure advisers accept proponent claims substantially different to what the public is led to believe? How do they check information? <http://infrastructureaustralia.gov.au/projects/files/Sydney_Metro_City_Southwest_Summary.pdf>

Governments trumpet the ‘independence’ of their infrastructure experts, hence there is an issue of ‘when’ advisers knew – or should have known – what, and where it found out from.

Infrastructure Australia’s assessment summary was published in 2017, after: years of media and other reports raising unanswered questions about ‘Metro’ including tunnel dimensions; three years after ‘Fact Check’; five years after Infrastructure NSW’s report; seven years after Mr Christie’s public inquiry – to pronounce on Metro. Yet costs were described as *‘pending’*.

**Explanations are needed from Departments / study**

Departments – who are not independent of their Government - involved in the Western Sydney Rail Scoping study which this year published – to my mind – the strangest advice of all.

They rejected the obvious scheme instead they favoured a vastly more expensive ‘plan’ for the wrong railway in the wrong place cut off from the rest of the world - which probably lessens the future of the new airport and ‘aerotropolis’ – implicitly accepting one of the most preposterous propositions I have ever heard; single and double deck trains cannot use the same tracks.

Even more strangely, they recommended the best potential line stop 7km short of the airport. And, almost of course, the $20billion ask doesn’t have even the start of a semblance of a business case. <https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-more-on-the-sydney-transport-mess-the-western-sydney-dud-deal/>

**Further basic explanations are needed**

You might like to look for the real issues - like tunnel size, break of gauge or others outlined above – in the publications of the advisors.

But don’t bother looking for an answer to the question of whether ‘Metro’ financial costs, construction inconvenience etc. could have been substantially reduced if there was no attempt to (reportedly) preclude double-deck trains via engineering re-works on lines, stations etc. to be ‘converted’. Say if costs were minimised by just installing the Paris option and running single deck trains.

Because there is no indication this question has been raised.

**Undoing the damage**

Again, if the reports are true – which remains an if, it would be well past time for some people in the NSW and Commonwealth Governments and their organisations to offer the public sincere and humble apologies.

Then others can start to repair the damage to Sydney’s transport systems, its Western suburbs, the Commonwealth’s reputation and most of all the community’s trust.

The public inquiry into Sydney rail ‘plans’, long warranted, needs a proper framework to investigate what is involved in all this as well as work out what to do. Of course, there is a possibility such an inquiry could give the whole affair a clean bill of health, refute claims and inferences – including those made elsewhere over the years - and vindicate Governments and advisers.

I would sincerely welcome such a result.

But given what I have found in the public domain I do not know and cannot have any confidence. There needs to be more information – credible and authenticated – on a wide range of matters put into the public domain. Of course, I am ready to be corrected on this.

It would be a considerable understatement to call this an exercise in answering the $66billion dollar question.

Some $6billion more than in the first part of this article thanks to the Commonwealth Minister for Urban Infrastructure just increasing the prospective bill for Western Sydney Rail to $26billion in an attempt - with the NSW Government - to heckle his political opponents.

J Austen

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