# Infrastructure Australia’s national plan and transport – the need for another attempt

*Infrastructure Australia’s latest attempt at an infrastructure plan was passable, but Australia deserves better. There should be a new plan: without bias towards roads; aligned to proper transport policies; more attention to national issues; with recommendations for the Commonwealth. Real involvement of Parliament, especially the Senate, is needed*.

## The current plan

Infrastructure Australia’s latest infrastructure plan (early 2016) arose out of its national audit which identified ‘problems’ defined as impediments to economic contribution.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The subsequent plan grouped ‘problems’ into categories such as urban congestion, national connectivity, opportunity for growth and efficient markets. The basis for categorisation is unclear.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Transport featured prominently in the new plan reflecting an unusual view; that travel time savings equals higher economic activity. This creates a bias towards big cities and roads built for cars. There is also a further reason for scepticism about the results; previous reports probably exaggerated congestion costs.

An intention was for the plan to avoid a list dominated by state proposals. This was not achieved. State identified proposals again dominated.

As was the case in the initial 2007 infrastructure plan, very few problem solving proposals were recommended in the new plan. The following table summarises results.

**Australian infrastructure plan 2016, project proposals**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Proposals |
| Total | 90 |
| Capital cities | 62 |
| Roads | 36 |
| Ready to proceed\* | 2 |

\*the number of proposals ready to proceed etc. increased after release of the plan

The plan did not identify all relevant national infrastructure matters eg. defence and interoperability matters were overlooked. Its taxonomy did not cover the field of infrastructure problems and there were gaps within each category; eg; ‘opportunities for growth’ extend beyond Tasmania despite the impression created by the plan.

More generally, while the plan focused on potential projects some major transport policy issues were not recognised. For example the plan:

* recommended a national freight and logistics ‘strategy’ but did not mention pre-existing land freight and ports strategies;
* did not refer to the suggestion of assessing transport proposals ‘as if’ there was road pricing. It (incorrectly) regarded pricing as a mechanism to raise revenue to build more roads. Its call for an inquiry into road pricing was therefore incongruous;[[3]](#endnote-3)
* did not comment on significant, controversial infrastructure policy decisions such as the anti-competitive aspects of the Newcastle port sale, the size of the Sydney metro tunnels or Commonwealth Government ‘rewards’ for privatisation.

The real deficiency demonstrated by the audit and plan is a lack of connection between policy, program and projects. Projects can hinder policies and national advancement. The risk is highest where policies or methodologies are biased such as in projects for major urban roads or that impede interoperability. Failure to recognise this, in the plan or by commentators, suggests that the real infrastructure problem relates to advice not projects.

This suggestion is reinforced by inadequate involvement by, or proposals for, the Commonwealth. No document can claim to be a national plan unless it is informed by and identifies matters for national decision makers. This means understanding the issues decision makers need to deal with. Since 2014 such issues include revising the claimed roles of the Commonwealth. This was not mentioned in the plan.[[4]](#endnote-4)

These types of deficiencies increase the likelihood of continuing advisory debacles such as Infrastructure Australia and the Senate making opposed recommendations about FreightLink.

## A new plan please

A new plan is warranted. Apart from correcting biases such as towards urban cars it should:

* be informed by a public statement of the Government’s (a priori) views about Commonwealth infrastructure requirements and directions;
* make recommendations for the role of the Commonwealth and its Government, informed by published opinions regarding legal matters and federalism;
* be issued in draft form, with an invitation for public submissions.

The draft plan should be considered by Parliament, via the Senate, before it is finalised. Senate Committees are ideally placed to take submissions and evidence on the draft.

This approach would support previous suggestions that Infrastructure Australia advise and account to the Senate rather than the Government for matters outside Commonwealth responsibilities. For these matters Parliament should set criteria and processes for assessment and direct Infrastructure Australia about which proposals should be assessed.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Of course this presumes some understanding of the role of the Commonwealth which appears stubbornly absent.

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1. Australian infrastructure plan at: http://infrastructureaustralia.gov.au/policy-publications/publications/Australian-Infrastructure-Plan.aspx

   Audit at: thejadebeagle.com [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In 2007 Infrastructure Australia established a taxonomy to direct Government attention towards: international gateways; a national freight network; transforming our cities etc. The 2014 Williams (No.2) case renders that categorisation irrelevant for Commonwealth roles. The 2016 plan does not explain reasons for changing the taxonomy and does not account for the Williams case. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Road pricing at: http://johnmenadue.com/blog/?p=7193 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The Williams case and transport at: thejadebeagle.com [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Urbane transport at: http://johnmenadue.com/blog/?p=6688 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)