# JOHN AUSTEN – OUTER URBAN TRANSPORT

*A recent report on outer urban public transport provides some interesting information – but much better understanding and analysis is needed before more resources are wasted and communities made worse off.*

In October, Infrastructure Australia released a second ['reform series report' on public transport](#_top), this time considering ‘outer’ urban areas.

The report was as quickly picked up as forgotten by the media - after blaring most areas, and nearly most people, in Australia’s cities suffer ‘[transport disadvantage](https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/sydney-s-great-divide-public-transport-leaves-outer-suburbs-behind-20181023-p50beu.html)’.

**The report**

The report presents maps of:

* outer metropolitan areas, defined as those at least one-hour travel time from the CBD – around half the residents of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth live in such areas;
* transport disadvantage, defined as public transport services that were infrequent and/or took considerable time to get to the CBD.

Outer areas largely coincide with transport disadvantage. The explanation - public transport is relatively costly in suburbs which tend to:

* be newer and larger in area;
* have lower population densities;
* have fewer public transport routes.

Recommendations relating to transport services and urban land use are made for all Australian Governments.

**Comment**

As was the case for its earlier effort on [public transport franchising](#_top), it is surprising to see such a report from Infrastructure Australia:

* Infrastructure Australia is a Commonwealth organisation, yet the report – like previous publications - provides no ‘line of sight’ between the Commonwealth and public transport and no reason for Canberra’s involvement;
* the economic case for infrastructure to allow higher mobility - speeds - *within* outer areas is relatively weak as congestion costs are low;
* the most efficient public transport *within* outer areas is smaller vehicles e.g. buses, which raise no particular infrastructure issue.

The present report is better researched than the franchising one. It recites many matters (which should be) well known to transport policy makers.

However, it is confused about metropolitan travel and transport systems – notably the implications of differences between travel within an area and travel across areas.

Some conclusions are not supported by facts, for example:

* the idea that benefits of passenger interchanging are undervalued and should be promoted. If anything, Australian commuter interchanging is substantially overvalued as evidenced by studies here assuming a much lower ‘transfer time penalty’ (the cost of interchange) than in the UK;
* the view that metro rail is more flexible than suburban rail and can form the basis of a trunk or intercity system. In fact, the opposite is the case.

Several other elements are misleading e.g.

* average metropolitan travel times grossly understate actual commuting times to centres;
* commuting capacity is determined by seats, unlike the report which presents capacity as total passenger room (include standing) – the report’s numbers (Table 4) are dubious as well;
* use of the hierarchy of transport types to promote rail commuter ‘interchanging’. Running commuter trains through centres – instead of requiring passenger interchange at the (19th century) edge of cities – is likely to maximise access and capacity e.g. RER in Paris.

Some important matters are not mentioned in the report:

* it is possible, in some cases likely, that car use is economically, socially and environmentally superior to public transport *within* outer urban areas;
* the marginal benefit of connectivity *to* major centres – access, not mobility/speed – is likely to be high for outer urban areas;
* public transport is important for access to central city areas because road routes approaching centres tend to be congested and parking in centres is difficult;
* connectivity of outer with central city areas relates to commuting. Often lack of public transport capacity in central areas is the key issue;
* lack of infrastructure capacity in central areas becomes manifested in other urban areas by a lack of seats, which effectively reduces access from those areas;
* in Sydney, introduction of a peculiar Metro rail system will reduce outer urban residents’ access to central areas by introducing a break of gauge - which lessens network reach and potential - and by having few seats;
* as in previous reports, Infrastructure Australia ignored its own earlier suggestion of assessing projects ‘as if there was road pricing’.

## Conclusion

The topic is more important than the title suggests. The subject under discussion is not ‘far flung’ suburbia, but a large proportion of Australia’s population.

The report does not do the subject justice. Its partial recitation of orthodoxy, errors and omissions suggest a bias against commuting.

What is needed for more effective policy is:

* clearer differentiation of local travel from commuting, to allow consideration of the range of relevant matters e.g metropolitan networks, and the desirability of reducing car use to and within major centres;
* robust and open examination of issues such as arising from Sydney Metro;
* consideration of what infrastructure would (not) be needed if there was road pricing;
* a proper argument for proper Commonwealth involvement.

In the absence of these, half of the population of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth remain vulnerable to whims and nonsense such as:

* advisers and governments ignoring issues as relating only to ‘the boondocks’;
* careless and contemptuous attitudes such as apparent in the joint Commonwealth/NSW [Western Sydney rail study](#_top) or proposals from the [Greater Sydney Commission and Transport for NSW;](https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-trouble-in-nsw-infrastructure-paradise-part-2/)
* Commonwealth flip flopping via edicts such as ‘congestion is a State issue’ or ‘the Commonwealth should ‘stick to its knitting’ which is supposedly [road funding](https://theconversation.com/its-not-in-the-knitting-urban-rails-growing-significance-13754);
* ‘technological solutions’ for inner urban areas that reduce the effectiveness of networks and thus impede accessibility – Sydney Metro being a current example.

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