# Trouble in infrastructure paradise, NSW

Sydney readers are being subjected to an onslaught of infrastructure puff pieces featuring former Transport Minister now Premier the Hon. Gladys Berejiklian MP.

It coincides with a desire to ‘showcase the Government’s infrastructure credentials’ and raise the Premier’s profile. It also coincides with big swings against her Government in by-elections. But the major projects currently underway in Sydney are characterised by poor planning and a failure to link key nodes, lack of cost control, and a loss of interoperability in the rail system.

This is the first of two articles on the matter. The second will deal with the transport and metropolitan ‘plans’ just released by the Government.

Among the smoke and mirrors there is good news. Day to day public transport, such as train operations and railway stations, has improved. The opal card solved a running sore of outdated ticketing. While traffic remains slow, gridlock is rare. [[1]](#endnote-1)

At the operational level things are going reasonably. The Government deserves credit as it is no easy thing in Sydney.

Not so for transport system development. There the Berejiklian Government seems to be trying to hide a train wreck.

Since taking office in 2011, the Coalition has been keen to avoid the public perception of the Carr etc. Labor administrations; of announcing and re-announcing plans before doing nothing.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The pendulum certainly swung. Now there are half explanations of half-baked plans seemingly as reason to do anything.

The treatment of Newcastle was an unfortunate signpost. For the sake of a quick buck that city’s future is jeopardised by restrictions that drastically constrain the ability of its port to compete with Port Botany for container traffic. A token light rail project, notable for its idiotic shortness, outrageous cost and inadequate substitution for a torn-up real rail line is among recompense for the Hunter.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The style of Newcastle’s sell-out is noteworthy; the restrictions were kept secret, the now Premier being ‘careful’ not to tell when asked in Parliamentary proceedings. Eventually the truth was disclosed by the local media. There followed Government denials then comments such as: preventing business was good for Newcastle; heading off a ‘cargo cult’; port restrictions have no effect (if so why have them and why hide them?).[[4]](#endnote-4)

Echoes can be seen in three groups of projects.

Road projects, led by Westconnex, is a first group.

Westconnex, still in flux years after announcement, is synonymous with: cost overruns; creation of ever more road ‘needs’; construction angst. It embodies ‘drive to CBD’ ideas abandoned elsewhere half a century ago.[[5]](#endnote-5)

One NSW auditor general inquiry has been completed, another is in prospect and there has been one about Commonwealth support. Yet the Government appears emboldened by tabloid praise for its gargantuan spending; announcing other multi-billion-dollar road projects.[[6]](#endnote-6)

A second group of projects, started when Ms Berejiklian was Transport Minister, involve light rail in Sydney. Some make sense, others do not.

Her Government is ‘pulling out all stops’ to avoid disclosures about light rail. Understandably there is a field day of speculation about what is being hidden.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Then there is rail. The centrepiece, Metro, raises questions including why Ms Berejiklian ignored warnings from experts, why the small tunnels and whether the purpose of the latest $12billion extension is to bail out a terrible mistake. There must be a public inquiry.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The concomitant failure to expand the existing railway, instead cannibalising and wrecking parts of it – as if someone has a hidden agenda about something – is looking particularly stupid. The Government is relying on its commuter trains for salvation as Metro chaos looms – before the next election.[[9]](#endnote-9)

The common themes of these groups include: projects in the wrong places; secrecy; community disquiet. Rather than ‘scope creep’ there is scope explosion as big new projects are dreamt up to cover the inevitable problems of wretched ideas.

While some point fingers at the bureaucracy for individual issues, there is a deeper cause. The State Government does not understand infrastructure – or that projects have implications beyond their boundaries.

This is demonstrated clearly at the new airport site, Badgery’s Creek, which is shadowed by darkening infrastructure clouds.

In 2012, Transport Minister Berejiklian backed Premier O’Farrell’s insistence of no second airport in Sydney. Around that time Ms Berejiklian announced Metro; rendering problematic good rail connections between any new airport and the rest of Sydney. Four years later, well after the State recanted its opposition and the Commonwealth announced the Badgerys Creek go-ahead, Metro plans still ignored the possibility of a western Sydney airport.[[10]](#endnote-10)

The presumption of incompatibility between the State’s rail ‘plan’ and Badgery’s Creek airport has not been rebutted. While Commonwealth and NSW officials are supposedly looking at options, their sole product - a ‘discussion paper’ published more than a year ago - was an insult to themselves and to western Sydney. The only ‘action’ in the interim; a bizarre comment by the current Transport Minister - NSW knows best![[11]](#endnote-11)

There has been a prolonged spiel for ‘three cities’ one of which is to centre on the new airport. A later post will look at the just released cities plan in more detail. However, much seems to hang on the idea of a ’30 minute city’ which arguably is based on a fundamental misconception that could set up mind-boggling *further* waste on infrastructure in a split metropolis. [[12]](#endnote-12)

The infrastructure hype included brazen invocation of the name of great engineer John Bradfield. Yet his city underground included over-size tunnels to take trains much bigger than those in use; no mere replica of some railway built in a vastly different far distant city. His harbour bridge united separate districts into a *single* Sydney and improved access for many. That legacy is being reversed in detail and in aggregate.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Nonetheless, tens of billions is being spent on building stuff and hardhats - a paradise for the infrastructure club. To help finance the extravaganza the Government sold off valuable assets.

Some privatisations make sense. Buses are an example. Yet bus privatisation is limited to the inner west – it has not extended to the wealthy eastern suburbs or north shore, location of the Premier’s electorate.[[14]](#endnote-14)

The big privatisation was of ‘poles and wires’. The sale returns probably reflect prior State overinvestment in the network; also reason for galloping power prices. At least some of today’s high electricity costs are due to the mania to build big transport things in Sydney.[[15]](#endnote-15)

The press praise the Premier as diligent and personable.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Transport service delivery has improved. Some projects are worthwhile; Northconnex, rail fleet renewal and rural highway upgrades are examples.

All well and good, but this is no reason to overlook big failures or succumb to bob-the-builder propaganda.

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1. The Opal card, electronic ticketing for Sydney public transport, was introduced from 2012. It progressively replaced notoriously difficult ticketing systems; separate tickets for buses and trains. The old bus tickets, many of which were bought on board, slowed bus services considerably. The old rail tickets were point to point – allowing for around 90,000 tickets for each of many classes such as singles, returns, pensioner etc. Apart from railway stations there were very limited places for buying rail tickets leading to substantial queues at rail ticket offices / machines especially on Monday mornings.

   The Grattan Institute recently reported on traffic speeds in parts of Sydney; <https://grattan.edu.au/report/stuck-in-traffic/>.

   [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The criticisms extended to failing to deliver a single line; not all were entirely accurate. See for example: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/factcheck/2015-03-23/did-labor-fail-to-deliver-a-single-train-line3f/6276858> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For the Newcastle port restrictions see: <http://www.thejadebeagle.com/time-for-federal-action-newcastle-port.html>.

   The light rail line between Hamilton and Newcastle is 2.3km or 2.7 km long. The former rail line between Broadmeadow and Newcastle station was around 5km long. Closure of the rail line is estimated to cost $210m, construction of the light rail line (and fleet?) $250m and operational cost $250m partly offset by land sales $45m. Gross benefits are reported to be $260m. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-09-21/newcastle-light-rail-costs-revealed-in-cabinet-documents/8965576> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See: <https://johnmenadue.com/john-menadue-privatisation-and-the-hobbling-of-newcastle-port/>

   For careful: <https://www.containerterminalpolicyinnsw.com.au/government-responses/#1472857777536-00e9504b-050b>

   For cargo cult etc. see: <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/Hansard/Pages/HansardResult.aspx#/docid/HANSARD-1820781676-70175/link/1> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See: <http://www.thejadebeagle.com/macro-micro-westconnex-and-westies.html> and <http://www.thejadebeagle.com/wonderland-glory-and-evaluation.html>

   Road ‘needs’ include a west harbour tunnel <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/revealed-the-14-billion-western-harbour-tunnel-beaches-link-price-tag-20170717-gxcy6a.html> and a link to Port Botany <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-09-04/sydney-gateway-plan-reportedly-submitted-as-fears-grow-for-toll/8869066>

   Cost overruns: <https://theconversation.com/westconnex-audit-offers-another-17b-lesson-in-how-not-to-fund-infrastructure-73206>

   Angst includes about property acquisitions for construction: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-05-30/the-policy-and-politics-surrounding-sydneys-westconnex/7459952>

   [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For second NSW Auditor General inquiry: <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/nsw-auditorgeneral-to-inquire-into-westconnex-for-a-second-time-20171012-gyzqvb.html>.

   For new roads see note (v) above and <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/gladys-berejiklian-commits-to-first-stage-of-f6-extension-but-shelves-national-park-plan-20171016-gz2aon.html>. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See: <https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-nsw-rail-projects-a-lot-of-explaining-to-do/>

   The ‘all stops’ comment is from a recent series of articles in the Australian newspaper dealing with the CBD light rail; the most recent being <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/state-politics/berejiklians-light-rail-to-be-caught-short-in-peak-hour/news-story/c63d24157eb42a3684d5046a0f5fa37d>. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For metro see: <https://johnmenadue.com/john-menadue-it-is-scandalous-how-infrastructure-spending-escapes-proper-scrutiny/>; <http://www.thejadebeagle.com/sydney-2-exhibit-2-toucheth-not-the-monorail.html>; <http://www.thejadebeagle.com/toucheth-not-the-monorail-metro-summary-business-case.html>. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Construction of the north west segment of the metro will involve closure of the existing Epping Chatswood rail line for around seven months; prior to the State election. Following the opening of the segment travellers will have a new need to change trains at Chatswood: <http://www.news.com.au/finance/work/at-work/one-of-sydneys-newest-rail-lines-will-close-for-at-least-seven-months-just-a-few-years-after-it-opened/news-story/00a0c72cd72887774055d3439b8dd37d>.

   The Government recently announced an increase in public transport services including those provided by Sydney trains, to accommodate increased ridership: <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/sydney-train-commuters-staff-set-for-new-timetable-revolution-20170831-gy7ti9.html>

   l [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See: <https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-badgerys-creek-testing-times/> and

    <http://www.thejadebeagle.com/badgerys-creek.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. For the NSW Minister’s comment see: <https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-the-commonwealth-is-meddling-in-nsw-rail-at-last/> and

    <http://www.thejadebeagle.com/doubling-up.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The plan is for Sydney to be ‘divided’: <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/lucy-turnbull-unveils-plan-for-three-sydneys-20171022-gz5un4.html>, which may lead to replication of some infrastructure as well as infrastructure to allow access between areas.

    The fundamental flaw in the 30 minute city idea is that people may ‘naturally’ travel for longer and such a natural tendency may be very difficult to change for individuals and in aggregate. See: <https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-and-luke-fraser-urbane-transport-policy-part-1/> [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Bradfield oversaw construction of the Sydney city underground and Harbour Bridge when single deck trains were in use; they are now used by double deck trains. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For bus privatisation see: <https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-where-to-for-commonwealth-infrastructure-policy/> [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. The sale (long term lease) of NSW poles and wires returned more than officially expected; <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-05-11/nsw-poles-and-wires-raking-in-$2-billion-more-than-expected/8517330>.

    Chair of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, Rod Sims, claims that 41% of the increase in power prices over the past few years is due to network cost “*those poles and wires that run down your street are the main reason you are paying too much for your electricity*."

    <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-09-25/the-truth-about-soaring-power-prices/8979860> [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See: <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/what-gladys-berejiklian-as-transport-minister-tells-us-about-her-as-premier-20170121-gtw6lf.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-16)