# John Austen: NSW infrastructure paradise revisited

*This is an update on Sydney’s infrastructure puff piece saga.*

*Previous articles concluded the secretive NSW Government led by the Hon. Gladys Berejiklian MP does not understand infrastructure. The draft 40-year plans for transport and for the Sydney region are a mess, involve kindergarten errors and contradict each other.* *https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-trouble-in-nsw-infrastructure-paradise-part-2/*

*It now looks like the wheels are falling off. The Commonwealth must step in if only for its own sake.*

While the public was to be ‘consulted’ on the State’s draft plans for just 6 weeks – until early December - this proved too long a period for the NSW Government to resist making decisions undermining their own stated intentions. Three have surfaced so far.

A first is the rejection of a private – the only - proposal to link Port Botany and Kingsford Smith airport to Westconnex; a motorway at one time supposedly justified by the links. The Government says the links will be done in house.

Some imply this is a reaction to public realisation of Sydney’s reputation as global leader in private sector toll charges; the links would have been tolled in addition to Westconnex tolls. Nonetheless the airport and Botany road links won’t be free – the public will somehow pay - up to $2bn.

It is a short segue to a second decision: a car registration rebate for those paying more than $1300 a year in tolls. Motorists each gain around $360; taxpayers pay $100m. Questions again turned to whether this is a knee jerk reaction to people becoming fatigued – of tolls and irrational transport policy.

The difficulty this might cause road pricing, or just proper road charging, was overlooked.

Also overlooked was a better case for a rebate. Trucks could be double-charged – they pay through the national heavy vehicle charging system – up to $13,000 - and also pay tolls. If there is to be ‘toll-relief’ it should be for trucks; to get them off local streets – surely more important than getting cars onto motorways?

The third decision involves a housing release of land ‘earmarked’ for a rail corridor vital to Badgerys Creek airport and Sydney’s west. The corridor, identified by Infrastructure Australia as one to keep for rail, may well be – or have been – the most important in Sydney. The decision is further proof of conflict between transport and urban planning in Sydney. There is speculation the decision might also be aimed at sidelining Commonwealth interests.

The decisions reek of insincerity about ‘consultation’ and may presage panic.

As if to highlight this, last week saw new NSW infrastructure chaos.

It started with the Hon. Phillip Ruddock, Immigration Minister during some Howard years, now mayor of Hornsby in Sydney’s north, blasting people from over the water – here the Hawkesbury River - for parking in his shire. One wag said it allows Mr Ruddock to paraphrase a famous dictum: he will decide who parks in Hornsby and the circumstances in which they park.

The press thinks the ‘drive to Hornsby, park and catch the train’ phenomenon is due to lack of parking spaces at Central Coast stations. Perhaps true, but could abominably slow and crowded trains also be a factor?

With beyond $50bn for Metro, Westconnex et al. – benefitting affluent inner metropolitan types - who could blame NSW for having a bare cupboard when it comes to trains or car parks for the Central Coast or western Sydney?

Perhaps nobody could have blamed the State Government if it cried poor - until they heard news about its decision to demolish and rebuild two stadiums in Sydney at a cost of over $2bn. ‘Reasons’ included age, shortage of ladies toilets and an undefined risk of ‘losing’ a grand final football game to another city. The infrastructure club must be overjoyed – paradise delivering again!

To transport observers, a familiar story. Announcement? Via Cabinet leak. Options? None! In Sydney’s demographic east? Tick! A ‘crowning jewel’? Yes! Friday afternoon news? Made it!

Worthwhile? Bagatelle - as shown by the astute remark: ‘the Government still needed to assess whether (a retractable roof) would stack up financially’.

Why not call stadiums ‘infrastructure’ to remove all questions about the demolition/rebuild? However, there are some differences.

One difference is the soon-to-be-closed Olympic Stadium is a grand old dame compared with rail’s ephemeral starlets. At 17 it is more than twice the age of the soon-to-be-closed Epping-Chatswood line.

The other difference is there is no report – yet – of school students being offered lessons about how to promote the stadium demolition/rebuild. Unlike the report of help in writing advertisements/putting on plays to promote the North-West Metro.

There is more, too much to mention here. Except the Government – as if channelling a previous Labor administration – re-unveiled a Parramatta-Sydney Metro. Despite being ‘top priority’, its route and timing remain unclear.

The publicity, as usual, omits mentions about on-board seating and has all sorts of ‘information’ about tunnelling – except for the only bits that matter: are the tunnels big enough to ever handle normal trains? do they prevent other rail tunnels in Sydney city? Worse, tucked away in the fine print is an ominous note; the much touted 30-Metro-trains-per-hour capacity is ‘*under the CBD’* i.e. not everywhere?

The Metro re-announcement attracted new speculation: was the motive to put another shot across the Commonwealth’s bows re rail in western Sydney? Readers of Pearls etc. might recall a joint Commonwealth-State ‘scoping study’ set up to look at relevant issues. Its report is more than a year late. For months both Governments have claimed to be finalising it; the public might see something ….. eventually!

Meanwhile counter stories circulated; about the Commonwealth having a better grasp (than NSW) about the needs of western Sydney in general and Badgery’s Creek ‘Aerotropolis’ (their word not mine) in particular.

Unfortunately, the Commonwealth Minister, the Hon. Paul Fletcher MP, conveyed the opposite to the local press. The message heard was the only task is to get people from over his way – near the harbour - to the new airport. Like NSW, he seemed to forget several million people already live in western Sydney - so annoying the locals the words ‘Royal Commission’ appeared in print.

It is an increasingly ugly scene for Sydney’s west.

Infrastructure howlers are coming into public view. ‘Discipline’ is faltering. All while the public is supposedly being consulted on ’40-year plans’.

With such behaviour now, what when the pressure is on? When important rail lines are closed for months to turn them into a Metro with few seats, that doesn’t get to the city and might cause chaos at big stations like Chatswood. Just before an election.

The saying was ‘a week is a long time in politics’. A week is now also a long time in NSW infrastructure.

Sydney infrastructure policy, profitable - perhaps funny - only to those on the great gravy train, is almost beyond the point of no return.

It looks like a circus without a ringmaster. The Commonwealth should know its repeated boasts of a yet-to-be-disclosed ‘city deal’ put it in the Grand Parade of performers.

However, it has no visible support. Its once prominent adviser, Infrastructure Australia, went missing after hastily endorsing Metro – backing NSW - in an extraordinarily flimsy report. It has not even commented on NSW possibly ruining the pivotal corridor it wanted protected. Can it now pretend to be a mere spectator? <https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-infrastructure-advice-worse-than-expected/>

From early last year, Luke Fraser and I consistently warned about the situation becoming an unprecedented, unparalleled mess <https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-and-luke-fraser-urbane-transport-police-part-3-of-3/>

Does anyone think Prime Ministers like Keating or Howard would have tolerated what is being inflicted on western Sydney? Or that that an Anderson or Albanese Ministerial size boot would not have been firmly -repeatedly - administered to bureaucratic and NSW backsides long ago?

My advice to the present Prime Minister as he nears the circus big top: grab the whip of well-informed public opinion before the only role left is for clowns.

Minister Fletcher must step in now and stop the nonsense by ordering an independent inquiry to inform the public - if only to prevent attempts by NSW to further sideline his Government and set-up scapegoats.

John Austen was head of economic policy at Infrastructure Australia until 2014.  Prior to that he was in the NSW transport and rail bureaucracy for a considerable time. He is now a happily-retired Sydney western suburbs dweller.