# Quo vadis?

*Legend has it that Charlton Heston flashed a Rolex wristwatch in Ben Hur’s chariot race…….*

Just like the legend, the recent Budget showed a flash of insight and modern thinking amid endless prattle by others about outdated ideas like more Commonwealth road spending.

The flash, overlooked by the media, was in the announcement of a Commonwealth ‘rail fund’. It was the reference to rail connections between capital cities and regional centres which may promote sensible decentralisation.[[1]](#endnote-1)

It follows two other Prime Ministerial ‘Rolex’ moments. One was a comment that the Commonwealth might invest in - lend to or own - infrastructure projects.

The other was that the Government is to establish an infrastructure and projects agency in the Prime Minister’s Department. The agency is to advise on project investment financing. No ATM there!

Part of the agency’s establishment is to be funded from money from the Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development programs. Ouch![[2]](#endnote-2)

What for Infrastructure Australia; the Federal infrastructure adviser who is yet to articulate a post-William’s distinction between gifts to states and the Government’s proper role?[[3]](#endnote-3)

The states, whose cooperation is needed by the Commonwealth, are confecting outrage. Such ‘hostility’ is normally a sign the Government is on the right track.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Meanwhile back in the more usual scenes of the ‘sword and sandal era’ infrastructure discussion in Australia...….

….. today marks the occasion of the 7th meeting of the Transport and Infrastructure Council comprising all relevant Commonwealth and State Ministers….. the new Commonwealth investment idea and agency escaped mention in the communique.[[5]](#endnote-5)

….. in NSW the big recent excitement is the state government’s move to privatise buses in Sydney’s inner west…. displaying all the charm of bankers, the government communicated a lame excuse instead of real reasons for this simple, necessary move….. there followed claims the government forgot to tell those most likely to be affected and reneged on written assurances to workers…… the result was a bus strike. ….. arguably the best candidates for bus privatisation in Sydney, in the eastern suburbs and in Premier’s electorate, were overlooked. [[6]](#endnote-6)

It seems likely the Commonwealth’s flash of insight is associated with Badgerys Creek airport and rail in western Sydney. A joint Commonwealth-state rail study is to provide advice to Governments soon. There are reports of friction between the Governments. Sydney metro, with its touted driverless trains and supposed gauge break, is probably a source of some difficult issues. Another likely source is the state’s 2012 rail plan which ignored the possibility of a western Sydney airport. The matter is far more important than Ministerial Council and bus ruckuses de jour. Yet official information dried up in October last year.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Eventually all Australian governments might modernise the content and approach to infrastructure policy; discussants might even follow. They might focus on important issues rather than old sideshows and ancient agendas. They might start a new movie where ‘policy wristwatches’ such as worn by the Prime Minister are unremarkable.

Eventually, probably not yet.

Mr Heston says he didn’t wear a watch in the famous scene. The Rolex story was made up. The idea of modern life creeping into great movies of yore, attractive if anachronistic, is just an urban myth.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Hopefully the Federal flash of insight and modern thinking won’t be our version of the Ben Hur watch. Hence the question about infrastructure agencies: quo vadis?

J Austen

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1. ‘*The Turnbull-Joyce Government recognises the important role that rail can play in connecting capital cities and regional centres. These connections provide a means to rejuvenate regional centres while mitigating population growth pressures in our major cities including congestion, housing affordability, job accessibility and liveability……Under the 2017–18 Budget's Faster Rail initiative, the Government has committed $20 million to support the development of up to three formal business cases for faster rail connections between our major cities and regional centres. The Government will call for submissions from state governments and the private sector later this year.’*

   <http://minister.infrastructure.gov.au/pf/releases/2017/may/budget-infra_03-2017.aspx> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See: [http://www.budget.gov.au/2017-18/content/bp2/download/bp2.pdf at p141](http://www.budget.gov.au/2017-18/content/bp2/download/bp2.pdf%20at%20p141).

   <http://www.afr.com/news/policy/budget/budget-2017-sydney-airport-and-inland-rail-part-of-75b-infrastructure-spending-20170505-gvzedj> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Williams is a 2014 High Court of Australia decision throwing into doubt some practices of Commonwealth Government spending and long held assumptions about Commonwealth purposes. It was not discussed in Infrastructure Australia’s Australian Infrastructure Plan. Compare: <http://infrastructureaustralia.gov.au/policy-publications/publications/files/Australian_Infrastructure_Plan.pdf> with <http://www.thejadebeagle.com/williams-case.html> and <http://www.thejadebeagle.com/big-things.html>. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Examples of the unhappiness are claims of:

   Commonwealth and state Governments ‘at odds’ over infrastructure: <http://www.afr.com/news/states-and-turnbull-government-at-odds-over-infrastructure-spending-20170518-gw7omf> with special mention of NSW;

   ‘Ratting on Victoria’: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/budget-2017/infrastructure/budget-2017-turnbull-accused-of-ratting-on-victoria-funds/news-story/6d1fd9b0bccead672868e45be6c35ef7>

   ‘Dudding South Australia’: <http://www.news.com.au/national/breaking-news/turnbull-under-fire-over-dudding-sa/news-story/b03d0b4937e8d67042af1e1e3e8e0fe9>

   Not answering the Queensland ‘challenge’: <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/queenslands-cross-river-challenge-unanswered-20170509-gw10la.html> . [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. ‘*Council confirmed the primary role that state/territory governments have for planning rail networks, and agreed to working in partnership with the Australian Government to inform future investment priorities, including through the development of Urban Rail Plans for our five largest cities and their surrounding regions*.’

   <http://transportinfrastructurecouncil.gov.au/communique/files/Council_7th_Communique_19_May_2017.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Reasons for privatisation are outlined in governance at <http://www.thejadebeagle.com/governance.html>.

   The reason offered by the state government was the number of complaints received about bus services in the inner west and poor on-time running; reports did not have the government identifying the nature of or reason for these results see: <http://www.transport.nsw.gov.au/newsroom/media-releases/inner-west-buses-be-opened-worlds-best-operators>. Is it possible that some of the government’s projects may be causing traffic congestion and therefore bus delays in this area? Regarding consultation claims see, for example: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-05-17/inner-west-sydney-bus-drivers-strike-after-privatisation-call/8534548>.

   The bus strike: <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/sydney-bus-strike-transport-minister-demands-drivers-get-back-to-work/news-story/af2275fb841b94984d186171cce2888d>.

   For bus routes in the Premier’s electorate see: <http://www.sydneybuses.info/routes/15326_STA_region_web_map_north_20161207.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Proposed timing of advice to Governments, mid 2017, is at: <http://www.westernsydneyrail.transport.nsw.gov.au/>.

   For friction between Governments, the following is from the Australian Financial Review article in note iv (above):

   *‘A major sticking point is building an airport rail link in time for its 2026 opening. A joint scoping study is under way into possible routes, when it should be built and how it should be funded.*

   *The budget did not include any funding for a train line and Mr Constance told*The Australian Financial Review*this week NSW did not have the "headroom" for the airport link while it was making immediate investments in Sydney's rail network to meet passenger demand.*

   *But a federal government source countered that, if Mr Constance "wants to make a commitment to better rail in western Sydney, he can do it in next month's NSW budget", which was in healthier fiscal shape.’*

   For Sydney metro being a source of issues: the metro is by far the largest ‘investment’ by the state in Sydney rail (although it would be inaccurate to claim that it is part of the Sydney rail network) at a financial cost of $20bn plus; if there is a lack of headroom (as argued by the Minister) metro the central result of the 2012 rail plan is likely a principal cause. Previous articles have outlined technical issues arising from reported incompatibility of metro and Sydney rail network gauges and the problems these may cause for rail to Badgery’s Creek. See for example: <http://www.thejadebeagle.com/badgerys-creek.html>.

   Compare the assertion of ‘*the primary role that state/territory governments have for planning rail networks*’ (note v above) with the following text from the Badgerys Creek article:

   ‘*Previous articles have commented on some public aspects of the NSW state government’s rail plan, Sydney’s rail future released in 2012.*

   *Remarkably the plan did not recognise the possibility of a new airport at Badgerys Creek though it had long been mooted, even recommended. The state government’s Transport Minister, the Hon Gladys Berejiklian, MP had ‘reiterated’ opposition to a second airport in the Sydney basin.*

   *More remarkably, the state’s (summary) ‘business case’ for a City and south-west metro, made public well after the Commonwealth’s go-ahead announcement, appears ignorant of the proposed airport. As if a new major airport would have no impact on passenger flows or the operation of Sydney’s transport network(s).’* [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. http://blog.onlineclock.net/ben-hur-wristwatch/ [↑](#endnote-ref-8)