**High Speed Rail – shooting a corpse? – 8 June 2020**

*The Grattan Institute’s recent condemnation of high-speed rail is fair enough.  However, its further speculations on ‘renovating regional rail’ and urban commuting need questioning.*

**The report**

Grattan’s [Fast train fever report](https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-high-speed-rail-shooting-a-corpse/#_top) pointed out reasons inter-capital high-speed rail should be discarded by Australia.  Populations are too small and distances between populations too vast – facts rendering international examples irrelevant.  Costs – potentially over $120 billion – are orders of magnitude more than conceivable benefits.  The author noted a new high-speed rail proposal is raised about every 10 years, it gets studied and then is killed off – which is more or less its state today.

Such views are uncontroversial – despite the Opposition’s increasingly [desperate](https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-high-speed-rail-shooting-a-corpse/#_top) pleas to reanimate the high-speed rail corpse, most recently to combat the effects of a virus.

Grattan’s report noted the association of high-speed hype with hopes of boosting towns along routes – and defraying some costs from ‘value capture’.  It argued the experience of decentralisation policies – since the 1970s – shows wishes of real estate bonanzas and of easing pressures in cities like Melbourne and Sydney are unlikely to be fulfilled.

It suggested better prospects may lie in ‘renovating rail’ to allow faster trips between big cities and nearby regions.

All this is familiar to [readers](https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-high-speed-rail-shooting-a-corpse/#_top) of *Pearls* etc.  Yet the point of making such observations now is unclear.  They are not pressing or important rail – let alone transport – issues.

My comments below relate to NSW – others can speak about Victoria.

**Unreleased studies**

Grattan noted several ‘renovating rail’ studies had been recently commissioned – some with Commonwealth support.  Among these were Sydney-Newcastle/ Wollongong/ Canberra/ Parkes.

The NSW studies, led by an expert from the United Kingdom, were provided to the State Government at the end of [last year](https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-high-speed-rail-shooting-a-corpse/#_top).   NSW is commissioning further work on two routes: [Sydney-Newcastle/Canberra.](https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-high-speed-rail-shooting-a-corpse/#_top)

Despite the results being unknown, Grattan urged caution about ‘renovating rail’.  Its key argument – renovations are unlikely to entirely meet proponent desires – is not convincing.  The better question is about facts rather than wishes: do benefits exceed costs?

Its comments on NSW issues could have been better informed.  Among them was:

*‘The destinations where rail renovations would lead to the most feasible commutes are Wollongong…..,  Commuting from other destinations would be feasible for some people in some circumstances. Newcastle would still be a very long train ride away from Sydney, as would Central Coast towns on the same line. Difficult topography remains a significant barrier’.*

While not downplaying Wollongong prospects, I suspect this is wrong.  The Central Coast has roughly the same population as Wollongong, is roughly the same distance from Sydney’s CBD, and its ‘train terrain’ is probably not much more challenging.

The key difference between the lines through the Central Coast and Wollongong is the much larger population further along the former.  The line through the Central Coast goes to Newcastle and has a catchment around 1 million people – more than double Wollongong’s 400,000.  Of course, both are many orders of magnitude better prospects for rail improvements than places like Bathurst/Orange – around 100 km further from Sydney with a combined population less than 100,000 with a route density just one-twentieth of Newcastle/Central Coast.

Large populations like around Newcastle or Wollongong offer fundamentally different prospects to most decentralisation proposals made since the 1970s.  They indicate facilities and attractions of real cities, including jet airports and world-scale seaports – rather than what is available in rural areas with their much smaller towns.  Old decentralisation examples like Bathurst or Wodonga – cited by Grattan – are of limited relevance to them.

**The urban problem**

Grattan argued for attention to be given to improving outer suburban commuting instead of just ‘renovating rail’.  Its case – there are more suburban commuters – reveals another blind spot.

For one thing what (should) matter are the benefits and costs of proposals.

Regarding benefits, while there are many Sydney suburban commuters, the vast majority do not travel to the CBD. Sydney has other commute-to-centres – Macquarie Park, Randwick, Parramatta, Bankstown, Liverpool etc.  It is not clear suburban commuters would benefit more by faster rail trips to the CBD than more suitable public transport journeys to such centres.

The costs of improving commuting to central Sydney reflect the fact that rail is no longer a blank canvass.  Sydney Metro has prejudiced other potential commuter rail improvements throughout the metropolitan area.  The State Government’s irrational [Metro fetish](https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-high-speed-rail-shooting-a-corpse/#_top) threatens the rest.

The destructive effect on other railways and on commuting of the Government’s Metro ‘plan’ may be the reason for the non-release of the NSW studies – an [echo](https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-high-speed-rail-shooting-a-corpse/#_top) of previous suppression of a report on Metro from a United Kingdom expert.

That urban rail is a blind spot in the report is further shown by Grattan’s considerable understatement of Metro’s financial cost – put at around $9billion.  In reality, Sydney Metro estimated financial costs are at least $57billion ($17billion for the existing project, $20billion for West Metro and $20billion for Metro to Badgerys Creek).

When these Sydney costs are added to the Melbourne loop’s (low ball) price tag of $50 billion or so, it becomes apparent that financial costs of current urban rail proposals in just these two cities approach that of any prospective high-speed rail boondoggle.  And not one proposal has been properly assessed.

Dubious if not downright bad big city projects – motorways too – threaten to actually cost Australia far more than any bill for an imaginary high-speed train.

**Conclusion**

Grattan’s criticisms of high-speed rail were common sense and not new.

Its foray into ‘rail renovation’ was premature and, for at least NSW, not fully informed.

The report downplayed the key transport threat to Australia – outrageously stupid and costly urban rail and road projects ‘justified’ by Premiers shrieking [‘jobs’](https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-high-speed-rail-shooting-a-corpse/#_top).   Most are likely to prove even worse in a [COVID affected world.](https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-high-speed-rail-shooting-a-corpse/#_top)

Grattan’s shot at the high-speed rail corpse was a little careless about hitting real live prospects – rapid rail to second-tier cities.

Those who want to start a transport shootout would be better advised to aim at ‘living dead’ zombie proposals – preposterous city projects.