# **Sydney Metro etc. update?**

## Introduction

From the outset in 2012, doubts about Sydney Metro rail arose from Government prevarications and misinformation. Among the concerns: Metro imposes unnecessary financial costs over $40bn; jeopardises transport throughout Sydney; creates permanent disadvantage in Western Sydney.

This note looks at what light might be shed on the issues by recent developments in: a Parliamentary Inquiry; land deals near Western Sydney Airport; Inquiries by the Independent Commission Against Corruption and by NSW Parliament (into Council grants).

## Parliamentary Inquiry

In April 2020, a NSW Legislative Council Inquiry reported on the proposed conversion of the Sydenham-Bankstown line to Sydney Metro. It recommended against conversion.

The Committee majority were not convinced by summaries of what purported to be a business case and ‘independent assessment’. Government members dissented, claiming the Inquiry was politically motivated.

Given the evidence, the majority drew the only sensible conclusion. Yet the Committee report did not really understand the conversion. It was unaware of the key issue: misallocation of the most important transport infrastructure in Sydney, preventing continuity of public transport through the global arc from Kingsford Smith Airport through the CBD to North Ryde.

The lack of awareness reflected it not appreciating the defining aspect of Sydney Metro: small tunnels preventing other Sydney trains using its infrastructure. This is somewhat understandable as that aspect is so peculiar, unnecessary, hidden and unexplained as to be almost unbelievable. Even Government members found it hard to believe.

The Government’s response, on 8 October, rejected the Committee’s recommendations without addressing the substantive issues raised in the Inquiry.

It is difficult not to ask about the still-hidden reasons for Metro mania. Speculation, unchallenged at the Inquiry and Government response, has Sydney Metro arising from a bureaucratic spat and continuing for fear of admitting gullibility. That is, policy was assumed to be based on vanity.

## Federal Land deals

A recent furore concerned the Commonwealth Department of Infrastructure etc. buying land near the Western Sydney Airport site for more than $30m when was worth less than $3m.

Those following the Sydney Metro story might not be surprised. The same portfolio is to part with $5.25bn for a stand-alone Sydney Metro line from St Marys to the Airport - the most outlandishly stupid infrastructure idea in Australia - eschewing a long-established plan, spending many $bn more than needed, and preventing Western Sydney Airport being readily accessed by public transport.

The contribution is on the back of a March 2018 study report jointly authored by Transport for NSW and the Department. The study - likely rigged to achieve a pre-ordained result - fabricated a preposterous reason for not connecting the Airport with the Sydney rail network: single deck trains cannot run on tracks used by double deck trains. That idiocy was later recited by the Minister.

The Departmental purchase of land and study were made in roughly the same area and time. Coincidence? Hopefully nothing more, given the enormous project expenditures and consequences especially as I warned the Minister the study was so odd he should ‘*commence an investigation into what lies behind the advice’.*

## Inquiries

On 12 October, at the NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption, Ms Berejiklian revealed a hitherto secret personal relationship between herself and Mr Daryl Maguire from 2014/15 and 2018.

Mr Maguire is under investigation by the Commission for e.g. property deals: between 2013-2016 in a (former) local government area where most of stations on the Sydenham-Bankstown line are located; in the Western Sydney Airport area. The Australian Federal Police contacted the Commission to consider any links between Mr Maguire and the Department’s land purchase.

Premier Berejiklian’s admissions to the Corruption Commission about her relationship with Mr Maguire led to her latest ‘hand on heart’ *“…I have done nothing wrong. I never have and I never will”*

pronouncement. This apparently reflected a desire to diminish adverse inferences that might be drawn from her not declaring the relationship with Mr Maguire under NSW Parliamentary codes.

Another inquiry, by a Parliamentary Committee into Council Grants, soon raised more questions about other non-disclosures - at least of people - under the Premier’s control. The Government’s unwillingness/inability to produce documented approvals for pre-election Council grants of at least $140m led to its Leader in the Upper House being suspended from Parliament.

The Premier denies responsibility for the grants, which might be arguable on ‘careful’ language. Yet the grants seem to have paid on the basis of emails from her office with relevant notes shredded. Even if the Premier is not responsible for the grants, information in the public domain points to substantial problems in public administration starting with her office and continuing through reports of reluctance to assist the inquiry.

The point of referring to the inquiries is not to gossip about relationships nor doubt the Premier conducts herself in a dignified manner and has good communication skills. It is that at times her Government’s ‘careful’ language is difficult for me to understand. At times, especially regarding infrastructure policy, the words have other than ordinary meanings and do not accord with normal inferences from available facts. It is also at times she claims to have been unaware of critical matters in her administration.

## Conclusions

None of the significant issues regarding Sydney Metro have been resolved by recent events. Indeed, those events add to the necessity and urgency of an open pubic inquiry with judicial powers.

The Parliamentary Inquiry into the Sydenham-Bankstown conversion to Sydney Metro came to the right conclusion – the project should not go ahead. However, it apparently did not understand the issues arising from peculiar decisions that are yet to be explained – some eight years after they were made. This Inquiry is no substitute for a proper and thorough investigation.

At the least, there are coincidences between the Commonwealth Department’s improper purchase of land near the Western Sydney Airport and its inexplicable advice regarding rail lines to that Airport – same time, same area, same Department.

Current Corruption Commission inquiries also point to coincides between two Sydney Metro projects and Mr Maguire’s property activities – in the Bankstown and Western Sydney Airport areas.

The Premier’s revelations to the Commission, and the Government’s lack of cooperation with the Parliamentary inquiry into Council grants are consistent with a culture of secrecy, which is at the core of the problems of Sydney Metro.

Reduced population and travel projections in the light of Covid, make it opportune to revisit Sydney transport plans. A formal inquiry is needed, and the Premier’s reputation for hard work and strong communication is no reason to hold-off.

Metro projects should be stopped immediately, and the Commonwealth should suspend funding to all NSW infrastructure projects – pending the results of thorough investigations including into possible malfeasance.

J Austen

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