# Improving the Hume Highway

*The value of infrastructure depends on how well it is used. Australia’s main infrastructure problem is misuse of what we have; a symptom of an absence of sensible policies, advisory deficits and propensity to build monuments to keep the concrete flowing.*

*This article, about the Hume Highway, is the first in a series on this issue. Misuse of the Hume, Australia’s most important highway, has damaged the rail and trucking industries, caused harmful traffic in Sydney and led to sub-optimal locations of industry. The solutions – highway charging and removal of unnecessary truck restrictions – are well known; the continuing stubborn inaction on these is a sad reflection on Australia’s infrastructure advisers and decision makers.*

At 840km between Sydney and Melbourne the Hume is Australia’s most important highway. Tens of billions of dollars – including Commonwealth funds - were spent on a duplication completed in 2013. A dual carriageway bypasses all towns on its route with posted speeds generally 110kmh.

While there are substantial car numbers in the urban areas at either end, in reality it is a truck route as anyone driving on it at night will tell.

It is a good trucking route. By joining cities of approximately the same size it avoids the typical transport problem of full loads in one direction and empty loads in the other. The full route can be covered within a single driver shift; allowing departure from one capital at close of business and arrival at the other by opening time.

Around 90 percent of Sydney-Melbourne freight is by truck, mostly on the Hume. Improvements to the road, and more recently the Pacific, have improved truck competitiveness vis a vis both the (inland) Newell Highway and railways. The result is more trucks on this route and through Sydney.

Truck transit through Sydney is a problem not only for traffic congestion and loss of amenity but also for emissions. Sydney is in a basin with an airshed where air pollution accumulates towards its growing south west - near the Hume. From a national and regional perspective, the less traffic that transits the basin the better.

These problems are given as justifications for more public spending on infrastructure; on Sydney roads, rail lines and the inland rail route. They also are referred to in proposals to spend more on the Newell Highway. The official thinking is simply ‘build-build-build’. Problems are shunted from one area to another. This is clearly a failure of national policy and a waste of Australia’s resources.

The problems could be better mitigated by proper use of the Hume requiring two policy – non-build – measures.

First, high truck numbers on the Hume may reflect cross subsidisation from other roads. This will be further aggravated by enormous taxpayer funded improvements – cross subsidies to - the Pacific Highway. Proper truck charging on these highways is needed.

The bureaucracy’s position is that we should wait for a universal – all roads, all trucks (even all vehicles) – charging scheme. This is rubbish and should be condemned. It is irresponsible to wait.

Second, truck sizes on the Hume are unduly restricted. It is possible – and highly desirable - for new generation larger trucks to use the route at least between Moorebank/Eastern Creek in Sydney and Broadmeadows in Melbourne. Removal of unnecessary restrictions will result in fewer trucks. One such type of truck – capable of carrying two shipping containers - is already in use on local roads in my suburb!

Infrastructure Australia called for removal of unnecessary restrictions several years ago but has since gone quiet. Nonetheless, there is no doubt all the bureaucracies know exactly how to make it happen.

Current policies have led to misuse of the Hume – too many under productive trucks.

This should appal the Commonwealth which spent so many billions of public money on upgrading the highway.

While the Hume is ‘owned’ by the States, necessary actions are within the Commonwealth’s power.

If the Commonwealth was charitable it would demand action within the next 6 months under threat of legislation to override recalcitrants.

If I was Prime Minister, there would be less charity. Advisers would be called in today and told to fix it. All road funding would stop until misuse of the Hume was corrected.

**J Austen**

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Disclaimer: I frequently drive on the Hume and Pacific Highways.