# Yawn: reports about another ‘champion’ for road reform

It is increasingly hard to be polite about road ‘reform’ commentary. The latest episode, praise for the Minister for Urban Infrastructure, the Hon. Paul Fletcher MP, is enough to jade even a beagle.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The Minister has been placed in illustrious company, alongside no less than former Prime Minister the Hon. Paul Keating. For achieving ……. delivery of a speech at the Sydney Institute.

He, like others, says road spending is dissociated from road revenues. Yet, not as bolshie as the pack barking for ‘reform’ of all roads all at once (colloquially known as ‘splitting the transport policy atom’) he wants to look at a proposition first.

He echoes arguments that the imperative for change is the prospect of fuel excise revenues diminishing while demands for roads increase.

Pardon? If fuel excise is dissociated from road spending is that *his* problem?

True if the $11bn or so excise take declined Commonwealth revenues might fall; but out of a $357bn total it’s hardly the end of the fiscal world.

And the excise still would probably exceed Commonwealth roads spending, as the NRMA et al so helpfully remind us.

Anyway, aren’t revenue problems a Treasurer’s job? Treasurers like ….. Paul Keating once was?

Infrastructure Ministers are largely engaged in spending. Mostly on roads. Unaffected by road taxes according to the argument.

So the big question is: why the Minister’s interest? Keating might ask: where is the self-interest?

Could it be that bureaucracies are pulling the strings?

If spending and revenues were linked, would the Commonwealth infrastructure bureaucracy ask for more money to spend? Have they already started down this line by (wrongly) reporting the goods and services tax etc. as road related revenues? The commentariat hasn’t even tried to look for the wet lettuce to slap down this transgression.[[2]](#endnote-2)

State road bureaucracies, if self-interested, would ask for ‘direct charges’ to pay for road spending, and a ‘CSO’ to top up any shortfall. That is, keys to the bank. Ministers would nonetheless find some other pet projects irresistible. So more money for roads! Mmm, sounds familiar.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Better still for participants and spectators is the prospect of faux-fights within bureaucracies over ‘credit’ for / how to split the atom, who will get to spend the loot raised from road users, and allotting blame for the fallout once truckers and motorists see what a radioactive proposal means. The transport agency supremoes would wisely step in just in time to avert a meltdown probably advising that ‘reform’ be put on the backburner. Maybe commissioning a study or two in the interim with the infrastructure club to demonstrate commitment to progress.

Meanwhile real opportunities for reform; to bring road spending under control, charge for a very few roads or trial pricing at one or two chronically congested locations would be forgotten because of entertaining side shows reported by distracted commentariat and media. Who, when it comes to transport, seem to expect turkeys to vote for Christmas.

Yawn.

As someone would say: maybe a de-spivving exercise is in order. Then Minister Fletcher could at least see Keating’s footsteps.

Wake me up if that happens.

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6 October 2016

1. www.smh.com.au/comment/ministers-suggestion-of-new-road-user-charge-may-seem-outrageous-but-it-makes-sense-20160920-grk1bc.html [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For the transgression, see: *Zombie Road Apocalypso* at thejadebeagle.com. Among commentators, Luke Fraser and Dr Michael Keating AC are the honourable exceptions; publicly calling attention to the problem, see: http://johnmenadue.com/blog/?p=7787 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. CSO is community service obligation. The intention of the term is that a business is obliged to provide services to the community it otherwise would not. This has become popularised in the bureaucracy as meaning funding from government, with services to the community being a lesser matter. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)