

Right track but wrong assumptions

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Eddington's report
neglects greenhouse
emission targets.

THE Eddington report contains the right approach to reducing greenhouse emissions from transport, but the assumptions it makes deserve to be challenged.

They are, in some cases, far too timid, in other cases over-optimistic and, in general, heavily biased towards business as usual. Eddington's approach, which is correct, is to propose a bundle of changes that could lead to a reduction in emissions from transport.

These changes are: reducing travel demand, boosting public transport share, improving vehicle technologies, and increasing vehicle occupancy.

The first problem with the Eddington treatment is that there are no targets. There is no answer to the reasonable question: how much could the transport sector reasonably be expected to contribute to reducing greenhouse gases?

Of course, the answer depends on government policies, including the imposition of

a cap on emissions under Ross Garnaut's emissions trading scheme, and State Government policies on infrastructure development.

We know that under the Garnaut regime the price of fuel is set to escalate, on top of any rise resulting from peak oil. But much also depends on the State Government's infrastructure priorities: cycling and walking, public transport, or more roads to ease congestion.

The Eddington report quotes Britain's Stern report on the economics of climate change as saying: "Transport is one of the more expensive sectors to cut emissions from because the low carbon technologies tend to be expensive and the welfare costs of reducing demand for travel are high."

However, a recent report by McKinsey and Company disagrees, showing that several transport changes are cost negative — that is, they involve a saving to the economy. Trading down to smaller, more fuel-efficient cars, shifting to public

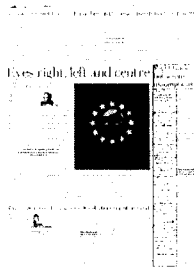
transport and walking or cycling for short journeys will save people money.

Moreover, the principal difficulty of change in the transport sector has nothing to do with technology, and everything to do with the "path dependence" of public policy: governments and the road lobby go on doing the same thing year after year, pouring billions of dollars into road construction and pretending it is a good investment. For climate change, it is a shockingly bad investment and a waste of taxpayers' money.

On travel demand management, the Eddington report says: "There is little evidence to suggest that Australians will significantly adjust their travel patterns on the basis of environmental concerns."

There is actually no evidence at all, because public policy has subsidised increased travel. If it stopped doing that, travel patterns would change.

On boosting public transport share, the report correctly attri-



butes greenhouse improvement from this source to increased patronage — essentially numbers of passengers per engine (engines emit gas, not vehicles). But Eddington simply accepts the argument that the public transport system is already functioning at full capacity, and has nothing to say about the improvements to the network necessary to induce more people to use the system during off-peak hours.

Even the 1969 Melbourne Transportation Plan knew that feeder buses were a necessary part of an effective public transport system: "The recommended plan places major emphasis on bus/rail co-ordination and the complementary role of the feeder buses in making rail travel more attractive to the public."

The Eddington report is over-optimistic in embracing change in land-use density to bring about change in travel. Despite the best of intentions, Melbourne 2030 has been completely unable to increase density around railway stations. Every attempt at intensification is met by intense public resistance.

In contrast, vast new swathes of land have been released for development on Melbourne's urban fringe — without a plan to provide public transport to these areas that could connect the residents to the rapid rail network. Changing density is a failed solution.

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The only avenue for major improvement in greenhouse emissions envisaged is in vehicle technology. Eddington expects improvements to begin in 2009. While one can understand Eddington's enthusiasm, serious doubts have been raised about whether car technology and infrastructure can respond quickly enough to provide "green mobility".

Hybrids offer only a small improvement. There are now major doubts about hydrogen fuel cell technology, so the new orthodoxy is electric cars.

The bottom line probably is that there will be a long period in which old vehicle technology winds down and new technology kicks in. Meanwhile, it is the consumers who will ultimately have to pay, and it is not going to be cheap.

Eddington recognises the virtues of foot transport but undervalues the contribution that a major public policy effort could make to increasing cycling and walking for short trips. As is now well known, trips under two kilometres account for half of all trips in Melbourne.

When it comes to climate change mitigation, Eddington is on the right track. But let's not just accept his assumptions.

There needs to be a serious debate about feasible targets for greenhouse mitigation from the transport sector so that the sector can respond in the best way when Garnaut's emissions trading regime begins.

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