

Clean green transport, where is the strategy?

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It appears that the federal government is at last beginning to take note of the growing community anxiety about climate change. But so far the main debates have centred on power stations, water and agriculture. Nothing of substance has been said about the transport sector. So where is the strategy to reduce greenhouse emissions from transport? The Victorian Government has a strategy, but does it go far enough?

In this cruel world of climate change, successful greenhouse action on transport is vital, not only for environmental but also for economic reasons. Victoria has much to do. the most basic measure of strategic success is the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. What has happened? Since 1990, huge new estates have been built in outer Melbourne without public transport and serviced by freeways, many constructed with federal funds. The journey to work from outer to inner suburbs - still generating morning and evening peak flows - is now overwhelmingly dominated by car travel. Between 1990 and 2000 Melbourne's greenhouse emissions from all modes of passenger transport grew by more than 10% (from 2806 to 3093 kgs per person). They certainly grew still further by 2006. As a matter of fact the worst greenhouse offender was not Melbourne but Canberra, where emissions from passenger transport grew by 14% to 3260 kg per person (1990-2000). A greenhouse strategy is supposed to reduce emissions not increase them, and eventually this reduction must be by around 60% on the base year of 1990 by 2050; that is to about 1100 kgs per person per year from urban transport.

Transport greenhouse emissions are currently out of control. They show no signs of stabilising, let alone reducing. Overall, Australia-wide greenhouse emissions from transport are growing by a million tonnes each year. The latest reliable national figures for urban passenger transport are from 1999 and show that cars then generated on average 210 grams of greenhouse gas per passenger per kilometre, light rail (trams) 181 grams, heavy rail 163 grams and buses 114 grams; for walking and cycling - routinely left out of transport calculations - zero grams.

These figures need to be broken down for each metropolitan capital. It is likely that Melbourne's rail and tramway systems, powered by greenhouse polluting brown coal, will not look particularly good. But whichever way you look at it, cars are not good greenhouse citizens. Large cars or off-road vehicles - overwhelmingly used on-road - can produce almost 400 grams per passenger kilometre. As we know, such cars have been the major growth sector since 1999, and four wheel drives continue to receive tax subsidies from Canberra. By contrast, the well known petrol-electric hybrids, such as the Toyota Prius emit a little over 100 grams in operation, and LPG is lighter on emissions too. It is the hybrids and other fuel efficient vehicles that

should be receiving subsidies, not the Toorak tractors. So, controlling climate change requires big federal government incentives now to skew the marketplace in favour of smaller, greenhouse-efficient vehicles. We need both long term goals and practical strategies for achieving them. We need short term targets and detailed, publicly available information about greenhouse performance to tell us whether or not we are on track.

Switching modes from the car to public transport, cycling and walking is the shortest route to emissions reduction. But smart switching is required. Many local journeys now made by car could be made on foot or bike if only a major program were developed to make such journeys absolutely safe. Band-aid solutions won't do any more. Public transport systems have to provide a service throughout the day, but there are still large daily peaks, and therefore also troughs, in usage. It costs the same in greenhouse gas emissions to run a train, tram or bus occupied by just a few people as when the passengers are crammed in during peak hours. So smoothing out the peaks and troughs to increase the average numbers of people occupying public transport vehicles is crucial to greenhouse strategy. So too is reducing unnecessary trips to work. When routine Australian business services can be shifted to Bombay or Newcastle upon Tyne because of the advance of remote communications, so too can they be conducted anywhere in Melbourne from home, with visits to the office two or three days a week instead of five or six.

Happily, reducing greenhouse emissions from transport is also mostly consistent with reducing financial costs, making businesses more rather than less competitive, and providing workers with a healthier and less stressful lifestyle. But it needs governments at state and federal levels to work together to produce comprehensive greenhouse reduction strategies in the transport sector, and use their regulatory power to create a level marketplace playing field for all.

Old ways of thinking must be changed too. Perhaps what's most disturbing about the greenhouse-transport issue is that the mindset of the major parties appears to be that electors are still primarily concerned with easy motoring. Victorian voters are entitled to wonder when their major parties are going to connect the dots on climate change and transport. As the UK's recent Stern Report on climate change described, the only way to minimise the costs of climate change is to act early. Congestion of the roads is no longer the number one urban transport problem. The problem is congestion of the air!

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