

The Debate on Public Transport We Need

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There has been no real debate on the future of Melbourne's public transport system, only arguments and assertions fired through the press from within bunkers. The public deserve to see both sides of the issue thrashed out in a public forum as soon as possible before November 30th when the current franchises expire.

A recent example of the current exchange will suffice. Quoting Paul Mees, Christopher Scanlon asserts that the mechanical troubles of the Siemens trains are symptomatic of the failure of privatization. Liam McKay responds: 'the claim by Paul Mees that Victoria's Public Transport Division "employs 10 times as many as the equivalent organization in Zurich" is a furphy. It is disingenuous of Dr Mees to compare PTD with a specialist committee (Zurich's ZVV) and pretend that they do the same thing. The claim that the PTD could be replaced by just 34 staff is rubbish and an insult to the people who work in Victoria's public transport system'. There is no analysis of the facts backing McKay's assertions. These are not arguments in a debate but claims, hearsay, and counter-claims. The real debate is between Paul Mees and the current Director of Public Transport, or at least a well informed advocate of privatized public transport with access to the facts.

Paul Mees has put forward the following arguments backed by substantial analysis.

1. Government subsidies to public transport have more than doubled since privatization. This is exactly the opposite of what was meant to occur.
2. The public transport system would be better managed and co-ordinated, and, would deliver a better service for less expenditure, and with a smaller staff, if a Zurich style public agency were put in charge of the planning of the whole system (buses, trams and trains).
2. Some proposed investments in Melbourne's public transport system, for instance the triplication of the Dandenong rail line, are irrational and can only be defended on the assumption that the current management system is incompetent.

Mees may or may not be right, but he has established a prima facie case that must now be answered.

The Bracks Government has done some fine things for public transport. The country rail system has been saved from a history of utter neglect. If the cost of fixing it greatly exceeded the projected expenditure, it was because of the

political tendency in liberal democracy to underestimate the likely cost of programs at election time. The rail system may not have assisted much faster travel – that would have cost billions more. But hundreds of kilometres of rail track and signalling have been upgraded and the rolling stock modernized. The new Southern Cross station is a magnificent building, competitive with the best in the world such as the new St Pancras station in London that will shortly reopen as London's TGV (very fast train) terminal. The metropolitan transport plan – though many would have liked expenditure on public transport to be brought forward – is a strong statement of faith in the future of public transport in Melbourne.

However, in the metropolitan transport system there are two Melbournes, inner and outer. Inner Melbourne has a fine public transport system. Outer Melbourne residents are expected to fund their own transport by using their cars. If Mees is right, Melbourne could afford a public transport system in which the necessary investment takes place to give outer Melbourne good access to trains and trams. That really is the issue.

The public has heard arguments *against* privatization. Mees's paper is available on the GAMUT website (www.gamutcentre.org). What are the arguments *in favour*? Surely before the government takes a decision the public has a right to know.

With a view to facilitating a real debate, on behalf of the research centre (GAMUT) I direct, I offer to bring the designer of the Zurich system to Melbourne to explain how that system works, and to place Paul Mees on a platform to defend his arguments. I invite a protagonist of privatization to defend its record, and to publish that defence. The debate should be chaired by a neutral party nominated by the government and acceptable to both sides. I offer to publish on our website the papers for this debate and the proceedings of the debate.

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