

What Public Transport Needs is Strong Leadership

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Melbourne will not get a better public transport system until two things occur: first, powerful integrated leadership within the bureaucracy; and second, a new model of partnership with the private sector.

In Victoria under the Bracks Government, land use planning has been separated from transport planning. Land use planning is carried out by the Department of Sustainability and Environment, while transport planning is the responsibility of the Department of Infrastructure. The split results in a metropolitan plan (Melbourne 2030) that depends for its success on the provision of effective public transport, but with no capacity to provide it.

In Western Australia, land use and transport planning are fully integrated in the Department of Planning and Infrastructure. Both functions are brought together through the agency of a high level Policy Group under the Deputy Director General. So Perth's metropolitan plan for 'Network City' has a much better chance of success than Melbourne's '2030' plan.

Within the Victorian Department of Infrastructure, the planning of public transport is weak, while the planning of roads is strong. Take a look at the website of the Department of Infrastructure. The organisational chart reveals much about the relative status and power of roads versus public transport.

The head of VicRoads (The Roads Corporation of Victoria) talks directly to the Minister for Transport. Roads are centrally planned. The 'Public Transport' bureau on the other hand is a small office, dealing mainly with contracts with the private sector operators. It is a step down the hierarchy, the equal of six other sub-offices reporting to the Secretary (including 'Planning and Policy' and 'Multimedia Victoria'), and only through him to the Minister.

In the WA model, public transport is the responsibility of a single powerful agency, the Public Transport Authority. The delivery of all modes of public transport in Perth is co-ordinated by a single urban transport authority, Transperth. 'The Transperth integrated public transport network is centrally controlled, planned, marketed and co-ordinated by the Transperth branch of the PTA'.

Victoria's is the only privatised public transport system in Australia, and experience suggests it is no improvement on the fully publicly owned and operated systems of the other states. The privatisation of rail and tramways was accomplished under the Kennett Government through the sale of franchises to private companies (the British model). This is neither efficient nor fair, since some areas inevitably become well served by public transport while others are plunged into transport poverty.

In order to help the public transport system as a whole compete effectively with the car in service quality and convenience, there really is no alternative to central planning and co-ordination of routes and timetables. This reflects the fact that metropolitan public transport is a natural monopoly. The failed privatisation of public transport in Melbourne has devolved over time into two private monopolies supported by the government — an essentially uncompetitive situation.

What is needed is a system that combines the advantages of competition with those of central planning. The system now favoured by the European Union is not the British system of franchises but the German system of sub-contracts. In this the planning of routes and timetables is organised by the small central planning unit of a 'Transport Community'.

'Transport Community' is the best available translation of the German word *Verkehrsverbund*, meaning that all the transport providers understand that they can get more people on to the trains, trams and buses by giving the power to plan to the 'community of stakeholders' — mostly the transport service providers. The Transport Community then sells under contract the

right to provide transport services for each route and timetable, in a competitive process, to the highest bidder. The variation in profitability of routes is ironed out in advance by subsidies, which go with the contracts. Transport providers can be private, local government or community operators.

This system is the most effective way of providing high quality public transport services to places of low population density. The most successful example in Europe is the Canton of Zürich in Switzerland whose overall population density is about half that of Melbourne. Of course land use planning must also be integrated with transport planning; but this can be done on the basis of the WA model.

Melbournians may decide that public transport is old fashioned and should be abandoned — as John Cox argues. Some may think that the freedom of movement offered by the car is worth all the hassles of commuting, the pollution, the road crashes, the congestion, the unfairness to non-drivers — and hang the expense! But, if we do opt to maintain a public transport system, then surely Melbourne as a world-class city deserves the best available. The Perth and German models are worth exploring, and should be adopted.

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