

Transport's Catch 22

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The outer suburbs are caught in a Catch 22 situation. The State Government will not seriously fund outer suburban public transport until the public starts using it. But the public, understandably, will not use it when it is slow, infrequent and inconvenient because it is hopelessly under-funded.

The peak of oil production is now damaging Melbourne's outer suburban economy. In future global warming will be an even bigger threat. The solution is high quality public transport. But to get it, outer suburbanites are going to have put strong pressure on the State Government.

'Peak of oil' means that however much the oil companies may want to produce more oil, they can't. All oil fields reach a peak of production, then decline. Oil provinces — whole regions of oil production like the South West USA or the North Sea — reach a peak of production and then decline. Now the whole world has reached a peak. No new oil provinces are being discovered. World oil production has peaked, while demand from the USA, Europe and especially China and India continues to grow.

Static supply plus rising demand equals just one thing: rising price. We have not a price 'spike', but a price mountain. The final price summit is not yet in sight. It will not be reached until demand declines. And it will only decline when an alternative is found to car-dependent cities. Meanwhile outer suburbanites will bear the highest cost as rising petrol prices drain their wallets.

Paradoxically, the peak of oil is good for climate change because the rising oil price acts as a carbon tax, discouraging the use of petrol (which produces greenhouse gas) and forcing the public to seek alternative and less environmentally damaging transport modes. It will also save lives. If,

worldwide, half the journeys now made by car were made by public transport, something like half a million lives would be saved each year.

Let's be clear. Every household should own a car to escape from city life, but not have to use it for every single journey no matter how short, or how congested the road. Melbournians, no matter where they live, should be able to rely on a public transport system that works something like this.

You set off from home and walk on a well-maintained footpath down a pleasant suburban street for up to ten minutes to the bus stop. You wait for a bus for no more than five minutes. You have a good expectation of getting a seat and you settle down to a short trip of not more than fifteen minutes, and review a report or read a few pages of a novel, or just listen to your favourite music – or both read and listen.

Maybe you meet a workmate or neighbour and exchange some scuttlebutt. Then comes the change – you step off the bus and walk directly to the train platform wielding your season ticket, which is valid for the whole metropolitan system. The train enters within a minute or so, and you then board and sit down to continue your novel or report, and encounter more acquaintances to chat to if you feel like it. No journey takes more than an hour.

To have journeys like this requires:

- A rapid bus network using bus-only lanes, with a service every ten minutes that operates until late at night and at weekends.
- A bus system that connects precisely with the suburban railway timetable.
- A safe, pleasant walking and cycling environment connected to bus stops and train stations.
- A network of public transport routes along which shopping centres, medium density housing (for those that want it) and entertainment centres can develop.

The last of these is in fact just what the State Government wants Melbourne to have (Melbourne's metropolitan plan *Melbourne 2030*). But it can't deliver it because the State's town planners don't control transport planning. Transport planning, if it can be called that, is about spending large amounts of money on motorways in the utterly mistaken belief that this will somehow liberate motorists.

There is no serious plan for public transport in Melbourne and the Government has invested very little in improving public transport. If the Federal and State governments spent half as much annually on urban public transport as they do on building urban motorways we could have a public transport system such as I have described. And that would do much more to relieve congestion on the existing roads than building more superhighways.

Democratic governments don't act unless the voters demand it. The outer suburbs are in a strong position because they include the swinging seats that determine which party rules. Outer suburban voters can put pressure on governments, both Federal and State, by telling them loud and clear that they will not put up with third rate public transport any longer. Outer suburban local governments must find a united voice and lobby the State Government. If they want to be re-elected the Bracks and Howard governments must listen and put serious money into public transport for the outer suburbs.

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