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Submission to the 'Inquiry into the investment of Commonwealth and State funds in passenger transport infrastructure and services'

My submission is as a member of the public who lives in a Canberra suburb — I am now retired. My preference has always been to use public transport where possible and I quite often managed to do this around Australia while travelling on public service duty. I also use a bicycle for local transport. I have a strong personal interest in transport systems and railways in particular. My submission therefore draws on my personal experience and knowledge.

Key Points

The following are my key points in response from my responses to your Terms of Reference:

- Public transport in Australia is hard to use for the uninitiated!
- Effective public transport service provides an integrated service – ticketing, timetabling and good connections.
- Australian public transport suffers from underinvestment and is fragmented.
- Climate change and Peak Oil increases the need for more effective public transport.
- Public transport needs to be closely coupled to urban planning.
- The Commonwealth Government should help fund public transport infrastructure both at national and urban/regional levels.
- The Commonwealth Government should help fund public transport service in outer metropolitan areas and in regional and rural areas where public transport is lacking or deficient.
- The Commonwealth Government should foster uniform public transport service standards across the nation.
- Switzerland is the best example of integrated public transport at the national and regional levels.

The following is my more detailed response to the terms of reference:

a. an audit of the state of public transport in Australia

Post World War II, most transport investment has been into roads. Australian society has become very car dependent for transport and a pattern of low density, suburban living has evolved. Other than for commuting in the major cities, public transport services have had a residual, marginal function.

Public transport has not kept pace with the great growth of the capital cities. In particular, the outer low density suburbs are difficult to service with public transport. Many low income households are located in the outer edges and cars are near mandatory for access to work, schools, shops and services. The older, denser core of the cities benefit from established rail, tram and bus networks. **This results in a major equity problem** — the less well-off have to spend proportionately more on transport and often have little or no access to effective public transport.

Smaller cities and country towns often have sparse and costly local bus services.

Train and bus services between regional centres and country towns are patchy and very often non-existent. Regional air services have declined. Coastal shipping has reduced to a few bulk freight flows. Again, **an equity issue** – some towns are on transport corridors while other similar sized towns are unserviced.

Inter-city train services are slow and uncompetitive – they are constrained by steam age rail alignments. Long distance services are now focussed on an upmarket tourist experience. Intrastate services cater for mostly the concessional market. There are a few exceptions such as Victoria's high speed regional trains. State Governments have concentrated their efforts (such as they are) on the capital city services and have not had much interest in developing interstate corridors.

Integration between public transport operators and modes is generally poor. Ticketing systems vary, timetable and route information display is often lacking.

Public transport in Australia is hard to use for the uninitiated!

Germany and Switzerland are great examples of effective public transport:

- Services are arranged regionally (even across national borders)
- Regular interval service throughout the week on most routes
- Integrated ticketing across modes – coupled with initiatives such as weekend family tickets, half-fare passes to reward regular travellers.
- Good connections — in Switzerland trains connect with rural buses, lake ferries, mountain railways, cable cars — everything!
- Consistent signage with timetable and route information at every stop
- Easy access for prams, wheelchairs and bicycles — which also works well for us tourists with baggage.

Switzerland provides an integrated, seamless service for passengers across a range of operators (government and private) and modes.

Effective public transport service provides an integrated service – ticketing, timetabling and good connections.

b. current and historic levels of public investment in private vehicle and public transport services and infrastructure

Post World War II, most transport investment has been into roads. Australian society has become very car dependent for transport and a pattern of low density, suburban living has evolved. Other than for commuting in the major cities, public transport services have had a residual, marginal function.

At first use of cars worked well and was much more convenient and effective than public transport. The more cars are used and the bigger the cities get, the faster congestion and costs of parking grew *(as an aside, this is one of the major uncounted costs of our current massive immigration programme)*. Much of the convenience of car travel has been lost. Buses also are caught up in the congestion and have become less competitive.

Rail networks have had little development. A notable exception is the complete renovation of the Perth suburban network. In Melbourne a couple of tram lines were converted to light rail systems over former rail lines. In Sydney, the East Hills line was extended through to Campbelltown and the Chatswood-Ryde line is near completion — the extension to Parramatta has been abandoned.

However despite the neglect, train services have become competitive again because of congestion and petrol costs. Similarly, Brisbane's busways with their dedicated rights of way have been successful. Traffic has grown enormously in the last few years.

Public transport investment in Australia appears puny compared to what has been achieved in the European Community — a growing network of high speed inter-city trains, metros and light rail systems built in many cities. Even the USA has built light rail systems in many cities with significant federal funding.

Europe has developed high speed rail networks which have eliminated much short haul air routes — aircraft dump their greenhouse gases at high altitude which are 2-3 times more damaging than at ground level. High speed rail can compete with air on journeys up to about three hours: Melbourne-Canberra-Sydney, Sydney-Brisbane and possibly Melbourne-Adelaide fit this envelope. The main regional cities on the lines would also greatly benefit.

Australian public transport suffers from underinvestment and is fragmented.

c. an assessment of the benefits of public passenger transport, including integration with bicycle and pedestrian initiatives

Climate change together with Peak Oil makes car-based suburbia increasingly unsustainable. Transport is a major energy user and therefore is a significant producer of greenhouse gas emissions. Increased utilisation of public transport offers potential to reduce energy use.

A side effect of the international financial crisis has been a reduction in oil demand and a fall in petrol pump prices. Meanwhile the giant oil fields continue to decline. The financial crisis has curtailed oil field exploration and development — few new large oil fields are being discovered in any case. Likewise refinery development has slowed. Thus when the world economy recovers, oil supply will be constrained and diesel and petrol prices can be expected to soar, probably well above mid-2008 levels. Peak Oil will have arrived where demand increasingly exceeds supply. Amongst other things, car commuting from outer metropolitan suburbs will be increasingly unaffordable.

For public transport to become effective, a change in urban form is needed towards higher density, mixed use centres. Done well, much of transport demand can be eliminated as

shopping, schools and other services are in easy walking or cycling range. Canberra's bus network ACTION is progressively bicycle racks on their buses. They are very useful in extending the range of cyclists. This helps counter the effects of low density (meaning long distances) in Australian cities compared with European cities and is a cost-effective fix. Some USA cities also use bus bike racks. This is well worth doing in other Australian cities.

Another factor, the population is ageing and an increasing proportion will be unable to maintain their driving licences and will become dependent on public transport.

Rail systems (light or heavy) have advantages in that their routes are defined and they are capable of moving large numbers of people. New systems can be heavily automated. Rail also lends itself to electrification which can be generated by renewable sources. Stations can be made into centres of activity — capture of increased land and property values can help fund the system.

With increasing density, transport corridors between centres can support high frequency, high demand services. Cars become marginalised in such an environment.

Urban form cannot be changed quickly but can evolve with redevelopment. Most household now comprise 1-2 persons and there is a strong trend back to the inner city which can drive the change.

Climate change and Peak Oil increases the need for more effective public transport.

Public transport needs to be closely coupled to urban planning.

d. measures by which the Commonwealth Government could facilitate improvement in public transport services and infrastructure

Public transport services are delivered at the state and local government level. They are constrained by limited revenue sources — the Commonwealth has much stronger revenue streams in comparison.

Roles for the Commonwealth Government should be:

- Help fund major public transport infrastructure: high speed inter-city rail, urban rail systems (heavy rail, metros, light rail as appropriate), busways and bus lanes to bypass congestion. Some of these could be implemented as Public Private Partnerships.
- Establish a Sustainability Centre of Excellence to promote better urban design which must include effective integration of public transport. The Centre should draw on examples of best practice in the States and Territories, and overseas.
- Set standards/guidelines for service levels throughout all urban areas: frequencies, route design, integrated ticketing, signage and information displays. The aim is to make public transport consistent and familiar for users who move between systems or visit other cities. For example, electronic ticketing should work across all systems – similarly to E-Tags which can be used on all toll roads.
- Similarly service level standards need to be developed for regional and rural networks. These should be constructed on hub and spoke principles such as Countrylink rail and road services but on a more thoroughgoing basis. A subsidy program will be needed to extend coverage.
- Sponsor a national internet based service providing timetable and route information for all surface public transport operators (air services are already well catered for) and provide a booking service for inter-town services. Swiss Railways offer such a service (www.sbb.ch/en/) as do German Railways (www.auskunft.bahn.de/bin/query.exe/en).

I use them for planning travel anywhere in Europe and they are very flexible and effective.

The Commonwealth Government should help fund public transport infrastructure both at national and urban/regional levels.

The Commonwealth Government should help fund public transport service in outer metropolitan areas and in regional and rural areas where public transport is lacking or deficient.

The Commonwealth Government should foster uniform public transport service standards across the nation.

e. the role of Commonwealth Government legislation, taxation, subsidies, policies and other mechanisms that either discourage or encourage public passenger transport

The Commonwealth's main transport interests have been in developing the national highway network. In recent times, some smaller funding has been applied to the interstate rail network. A range of tax concessions have grown up which tend to support the road industry such as FBT concessions on company cars, income tax deductions for cars which are more generous for high usage options, diesel rebates in remote areas. Roads are developed on grant principles while rail is often on a loan basis.

Preferably, discriminating concessions should be wound back. If too difficult politically, a second best solution is to give matching concessions to public transport operations, such as making public transport seasonal tickets deductible.

In general, the Commonwealth has had little involvement in public passenger transport and there is scope for more involvement as described my response to item 'c' above.

The extensive transport policy biases to private transport should either be wound back or equivalent benefits (second best solution) given to public transport users.

f. best practice international examples of public transport services and infrastructure

The European Community is investing in pan-European transport corridors in recognition that nations focus their investment within their borders and do not value the benefits that accrue beyond their borders. A similar pattern occurs with Australian States and the Commonwealth needs to promote the inter-state links. This already happens fairly well for roads but rail investment is lacking.

The European high speed railway networks are growing in effectiveness as the systems link up across national borders and interworking between the systems grows. Similarly, the Japanese high speed network effectiveness has grown as it has expanded across the country.

Both the EC and the USA have federal subsidy programs for building urban transit systems in conjunction with regional and city governments.

As already described, Switzerland is an excellent example of integrated public transport systems for ticketing, timetables and connections between modes. Much of this is organised at a regional level and Zurich is a particularly outstanding example. Germany also has high levels of integration which is often organised at a regional level. In some cases, regional arrangements can overlap into adjacent nations such as the Czech Republic, Switzerland and France.

The regional model is being increasingly adopted in France, Spain, Portugal and other European countries.

Honk Kong and Singapore are also good examples of integrated public transport systems.

Both Germany and Switzerland railways have excellent national timetabling, trip planning and reservation systems. These systems provide information on railways across Europe.

Switzerland is the best example of integrated public transport at the national and regional levels.

Thank you for this opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry,

HENRY HATCH