

Senate Rural and Regional Affairs Committee February 2009

Inquiry into the investment of Commonwealth and State funds in public passenger transport infrastructure and services

Submission from

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Audit of current situation

The Commonwealth government has traditionally provided funds for roads but not public transport. There has been a long neglect of the development of high quality public transport infrastructure by state governments across Australia. This is partially due to inadequate funding, but also due to assumptions (both implicit and at times explicit) that contemporary transport policy should be focused on more roads and freeways, and that continuing increases in car use and ownership are somehow inevitable and/or desirable. Global warming, peak oil, and the concept of sustainability expose these assumptions as ill-founded.

Spectacularly misnamed, freeways are neither free of costs nor can they promise untrammelled movement. The idea that building freeways and more roads will 'solve' the problem of traffic congestion is a delusion that has dominated transport policy and distorted urban and regional development. One of the many consequences of continued government road-focused policy and funding is underinvestment in public transport. Inadequate funding has resulted in overcrowded, infrequent, unreliable and/or slow public transport (which in turn produces reduced mode share and public reputation), and areas with no public transport.

There is a large body of international and Australian research that details the impact of car dominated transport systems. The adverse effects include deaths and injuries due to road crashes, greenhouse gas emissions, other air pollution, traffic congestion, lack of urban amenity, unhealthy weight gain and an insufficient level of physical activity for a growing part of the population, and the economic, social and educational exclusion of people and places without public transport (1, 2, 3).

Public transport systems in Australia have been characterised by a lack of integration between their components. Rail, bus, tram, ferry, separated cycle ways and walking paths all have specific and complementary roles to play in integrated transport systems. However, misguided management decisions have resulted in these different modes competing for funds and patronage, and at times duplicating routes and functions.

In general, separated cycle ways and walking paths have been seen as 'recreational' and not an essential component of integrated public transport systems for everyday travel. Walking and cycling are seen as forms of 'active travel', but public transport is sometimes incorrectly omitted from definitions of active travel. Walking or cycling together with the use of public transport has the potential to facilitate a shift from cars to sustainable and active travel, especially for the many people who live too far away from workplaces and other key destinations to rely on cycling and walking for their transport. Separated cycle ways and walking paths that link with bus stops and train stations are needed to facilitate a population wide shift from car travel to active travel.

In Australia many local government bodies support sustainable and active travel and have committed funds and policy to its development. Some councils, including large ones such as City of Sydney, Brisbane City and Melbourne, are spending substantial funds to build separated cycle ways and walking paths. Revitalisation of Australia's public transport systems needs collaboration between Commonwealth, state and local levels of government.

Assessment of benefits of public transport

Developing high quality public transport and reducing government and organisational support for car dependence will bring multiple benefits to many government policy areas. Such areas include reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, health, education, employment, rural and regional areas, urban planning and amenity, and social inclusion. The key position of improved public transport infrastructure in achieving both reduction of carbon emissions and economic and social development means it should be a national priority for the Commonwealth government.

Measures by which the Commonwealth Government could facilitate improvement in public transport services and infrastructure

The need for increased Commonwealth involvement

Contemporary, high quality, integrated and effective public transport systems are essential for Australia's economy, the protection of its environment and to realise a wide range of social and health benefits for the population. Significant expansion and upgrading of public transport infrastructure in Australia is a national issue and so needs Commonwealth government involvement.

Provide funds and policy direction

The Commonwealth government needs to assist state and local governments by providing funds and policy direction on contemporary, high quality and integrated public transport infrastructure linked to separated cycle ways and walking paths.

Include public transport infrastructure as part of a 'green jobs' initiative

The Commonwealth government has contributed funds to help develop a 'green car'. Further investment in public transport infrastructure would not only develop 'green jobs' but have more sustainable consequences. Why not encourage/assist Australian companies to design and build environmentally friendly train carriages, trams, buses and bicycles? When public funds are used to stimulate the economy, it makes sense to consider the environmental value of the goods produced, as well as the economic value of their exchange.

How Commonwealth Government legislation, taxes and other measures could improve public transport systems and use

Remove current incentives for car dependence

There are a number of organisational practices, supported by governments and corporations that encourage the continuation of car dependence. The inclusion of cars in salary packages is seen as a mark of high status in employment. Rarely do employing organisations provide similar incentives for their employees to use active travel (public transport, walking and/or cycling) instead of cars.

The Commonwealth government can play a significant role in changing these circumstances by changing its Fringe Benefits Tax concessions that currently provide incentives for increased car travel. Via this scheme taxpayers are subsidising the business and private car travel of individuals who are at the higher end of the income gradient. This is poor policy.

Develop incentives for increased public transport use

The Commonwealth could adjust its taxation arrangements to allow tax rebates and/or salary packaging of annual or periodical public transport tickets.

Commonwealth public sector agencies to model organisational support for sustainable and active travel and public transport

The Commonwealth government, through its large number of organisations and employees, has wide scope to model organisational support for sustainable and active travel, including increased public transport use. Such practices could include

- Winding back policies that subsidise or encourage car use
- Provision of annual or periodical public transport tickets via direct salary deduction or salary packaging
- Location of Commonwealth agencies within easy access to public transport. Services, particularly those used by the public, (such as Medicare agencies, Centrelink offices, regional offices of departments and post offices) should be accessible to all people via public transport
- Commonwealth agencies to measure their carbon emissions, including transport related emissions, and to plan and report on reductions
- Support for cycling, such as provision of bike racks and end of trip facilities such as showers, lockers, ironing equipment. The measures cost far less than car parking facilities
- Innovative employment policies such as flexible working hours, part time work and working from home. These measures help reduce car use and enable people to travel on public transport at times other than peak hours.

Commonwealth funded programs on active travel

The Commonwealth has funded a number of programs, within the portfolio of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, that have sought to encourage active travel and reduce car use. These programs have been mostly cost-shared with the states, and implemented by state or regional agencies.

The amount of funds and the scale of active travel programs in Australia to date have been very small (4). As well, most of these programs have been overly focused on individuals and individualised marketing techniques, and so have not had the conceptual or operational capacity for substantial change. To achieve a significant shift from car use to active travel would require a different conceptual approach and improvements in quality of design, scale and funds (5).

In addition, these programs have not had funds for or worked with organisations that could make improvements to the physical environment and/or public transport systems, which has diminished their effectiveness. In countries such as USA and UK, programs on active and safe travel to school and other destinations include funds for infrastructure improvements (6, 7).

If the Commonwealth wishes to continue running programs to reduce car use, these programs should be reconceptualised and informed by international examples of better practice, such as the Mobility Management programs developed in the European Commission (8).

Examples of government and organisational support for public transport use

The British National Health Service adopted its *NHS Carbon Reduction Strategy for England* on 27 January 2009. The Strategy requires all NHS agencies and services to improve energy efficiency and reduce carbon emissions (9). One of the ten areas of action is *Low Carbon Travel, Transport and Access*. NHS organisations are to be 'exemplar in leading the population-wide shift to more active and low carbon travel

such as public transport, cycling and walking' (10). The Commonwealth government could develop similar requirements for its own departments and agencies.

References

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