

Transport Challenges facing the CBD
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Sydney is commonly touted as Australia's world city. It is Australia's primary international gateway for tourism, attracts the largest share of overseas migrants, and houses a large number of Asia-pacific headquarters of international firms, as well as of major Australian companies.

Sydney CBD is the undisputed powerhouse of global Australia, with 4.8 million sq.m. of office space, compared with 3.6 million in Melbourne and 1.7 million in Brisbane. With the unique attractions of the harbour, the Opera House and the Rocks, it is also the focus of tourism for the city and the country. CBD retail has revived, while there has been a return to inner city living.

During the 1990's Sydney and its CBD grew rapidly, with 60,000 extra jobs in the City of Sydney and rapidly increasing tourism, culminating in the highly successful 2000 Olympic Games. Not only did we have a great party, the trains actually ran on time and performed magnificently.

But since then, some of the gloss has rubbed off. Economic growth has slowed, congestion has worsened, the public transport system has suffered major problems, and problems with the cross-city tunnel have raised as yet unresolved policy issues for transport in our city.

Current Transport Issues

How can this have happened so quickly? To see what went wrong, we need to look at the urban policy mix adopted over the last fifteen years.

On the housing front, Governments have pursued urban consolidation policies, despite sometimes vociferous opposition from local communities. The market responded with a major apartment boom, much of it in and around key centres or along key rail or bus corridors. The share of development applications for units, terraces and townhouses rose from 30% in 1986 to nearly 70% by 2004. This has since fallen to just over 60% by the middle of this year. Future demographic and social trends indicate it is likely to remain broadly between 60% and 70% in the future. For example ABS forecasts indicate that virtually all the population growth in Australia for the next twenty-five years will occur in one or two-person households, with the number of people living in the conventional Mum, Dad and kids type families remaining constant at 10 million.

On the employment front, the policy has been to accommodate the market. Growth of the services economy means virtually all new jobs have been in the business services, retail and community services sectors. The private sector sees the value of locating many of these jobs in centres. For example there has been major retail investment in the CBD, Parramatta, Bondi Junction, Chatswood, Castle Hill, and other locations, mostly very close to existing centres and public transport nodes. Office growth was strong in the 1990's in Sydney CBD as well as in key business parks such as Norwest.

However on the transport front, while there have been a few public transport projects completed, such as the airport rail line, the Liverpool- Parramatta bus transitway and an embryonic light rail line from Central to Lilyfield, the main emphasis has been on motorways to speed up cars. Starting with the harbour tunnel, over \$10 billion has been invested in the M2, M4, M5, M7, Eastern Distributor and Cross City Tunnel, with the Lane Cove Tunnel due to open shortly. Meanwhile our trains, which were already 25% slower than comparable trains in Perth and Brisbane, were slowed down even further and services cut, while we are still struggling to embrace integrated ticketing and fare collection.

The combination of these land use and transport trends has not been ideal. Higher population densities, particularly around stations, and job growth in the CBD and other key centres has supported public transport, and indeed patronage on both rail and bus increased strongly in the 1990's. But the lack of investment in public transport meant capacity began to be reached by 2000, with overcrowding and falling reliability. This pushed more people back onto the road system. While the growth of the motorway network has helped accommodated this to date, this has been at the expense of rising road congestion generally, with 20% growth in traffic volumes on inner city roads during the 1990's. Furthermore the share of trips by walking, cycling and public transport in Sydney has fallen, and the share by car has risen.

While there have been many calls to make Sydney's transport and land use systems more, rather than less, sustainable, two recent trends act as wake-up calls: global warming and peak oil.

The evidence for global warming is now overwhelming, along with the realisation that this is due to unsustainable energy use. What is not yet well understood is that public transport in Sydney is 2.8 times more energy efficient per passenger kilometre than cars, with the ration being 4:1 in peak hours. Pedestrians and cyclists use almost no energy.

The sudden rise in oil prices to US\$75 a barrel brought home the risks faced by those countries and cities which are too heavily dependent on petroleum, while the impact at the petrol pump has begun to be felt in travel patterns. Public transport is up, and driving is down.

We urgently need to shift our transport priorities to recognise these realities.

What other cities are doing

While Sydney has been caught in a time warp, other cities are moving rapidly to change their ways.

- Cities like Singapore, London and most recently Stockholm have introduced congestion charging in their CBD and central areas, in combination with measures to improve public transport. These have been highly successful and are likely to be copied by more and more cities who realise that too many cars in central areas is a recipe for congested, unliveable and unattractive places that fail on economic, environmental and amenity grounds.

- More than 100 cities world wide have introduced new light rail, or expanded their existing light rail or tramway systems. This is because of light rail's zero emissions, high capacity, passenger appeal, and proven track record in attracting transit-oriented development along its routes.
- Many cities are also expanding their heavy rail and metro systems, and a few are building busways or guided busways with complete separation from cars.
- Pedestrianized city centres are also expanding, along with safe routes for cyclists.

In short, the days of unlimited motoring are over. Studies in Sydney show that the overall costs per passenger kilometre, including both private costs, public costs and externalities, are 47c for rail, 57c for buses and 86c for cars. The social, environmental and economic costs of cars are simply too high to be ignored.

That does not mean there is no place for cars, which will remain important and indeed the most common form of medium-distance cross-suburb trips. But we can shift some of our short trips to walking and cycling, and some of our longer trips, especially those to centres, to public transport.

To do this requires a new vision for Sydney, backed by a concerted effort over several decades. What could this look like for Sydney? In my view, we need to aim for a future in which:

- The highest transport priorities are for pedestrians, followed by cyclists, public transport, road freight and cars.
- Our city centres, particularly our CBD, are transformed into places for people rather than places for cars.
- Public transport is expanded both in extent and in capacity, is given faster and more frequent services, and is integrated into a truly seamless system.
- Motorists are required to pay closer to the full costs of their travel every time they make a trip, to encourage more rational behaviour.
- Land uses are further encouraged to support the transport system and vice versa. This means continuing the policies of favouring commercial and retail investment in key centres, extending the high quality public transport system to cover those centres not on the network, and encouraging high quality urban consolidation in centres and along public transport corridors.

How would we achieve this? Obviously money is one pre-requisite. But in addition, we need a closer partnership and real trust between the government and the community it serves. Real progress can only be made when there is full information and meaningful consultation. Decision-makers can no longer hide behind convenient myths such as "that people love their cars". Investment should be driven by a comprehensive plan, agreed in a bipartisan fashion, rather than by the financial opportunities provided by "the deal".

Is this too much to ask of government? I think not. Other cities are rising to the challenge. Our near neighbour to the north, Brisbane, and our arch rival to the South, Melbourne, are both embracing sustainable transport solutions and will happily take over the mantle of Australia's global city. We are all in this challenge together. Sydney rose to the challenge of the Olympics and performed brilliantly. We need to

do that again, for the far more important challenge of developing a world class transport system for a world class city.