

The city is choking thanks to our idea of transport nirvana

February 17, 2010

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At our behest, successive state governments have been pursuing a magnificent dream, to make Sydney a place fit for cars to be driven on all occasions. Now the *Herald*-commissioned independent inquiry headed by Ron Christie has exposed that dream for what it is: the wrong tram (forgive me).

It's not just a dream incapable of being realised, it's one that's made our present transport problems worse rather than better and offers no answer to the looming worsening of those problems.

You and I, our parents and our children, are the car-driving generations. Young people long to get a driver's licence (and a car) at the earliest possible moment; elderly people fight hard to keep their licences. As our affluence has grown we've got closer to our nirvana: one car per adult.



Illustration: Kerrie Leishman.

We'd like to drive our cars everywhere we go - even to work. This preference is constrained only by the time it takes (the congestion we encounter) and the difficulties we face finding or affording a place to park - although there was a surge in the use of public transport the last time petrol prices shot up.

For years we've pressured our politicians to reduce travel times and congestion by building more and wider expressways. And for years they've obliged without it doing any lasting good. Why not? Because of our insatiable preference to drive.

As soon as the new highway has cut the time it takes to get from A to B, more people decide to drive rather than use public transport, thus forcing travel times back up. Studies suggest that motorists keep piling in until travel times are pretty much back to where they were.

But the inquiry's report advises that our pursuit of a world fit for universal motoring is unattainable for another reason: a big city's sheer lack of space in the main places we want to drive to.

The streets of the denser centres of Sydney simply don't have room for everyone to claim 12 to 15 square metres of road space so they can travel in a separate vehicle, nor the same amount of space so they can park their vehicle at their destination.

"The sheer limits of urban space - quite apart from other cost and sustainability issues - mean that urban centres *must* rely on a suite of transport options in which the private car will play a diminishing role as densities rise," the Christie report says.

There's more. Successive governments' pursuit of road-based solutions to Sydney's growing mobility problems has come at the expense of the expansion, improvement and even adequate maintenance of public transport systems, which has worsened the problems.

Building roads and neglecting public transport turns population increase into urban sprawl, with widely dispersed residences and jobs. This encourages more car use and, indeed, locks many parts of Sydney into dependence on cars.

Neglect of public transport causes a movement *away* from it, which is then reinforced by deteriorating service frequencies, service quality, travel times and even the cancellation of off-peak services. So we've had both pull factors (we prefer our cars) and push factors (reduced quality and availability) worsening public transport and compounding our problems.

The report says that "even if it were assumed that private vehicle travel will continue to be as viable and affordable as today ... adding to or extending Sydney's radial freeway and toll-road system would be an expensive way of providing *at best* very short-term and geographically limited improvements".

And, of course, we *can't* assume car travel will stay viable and affordable. Our heavy dependence on car travel is unsustainable. Curbs on greenhouse gas emissions will force up its price, as will the growing shortage of world oil reserves.

Add the projected growth in Sydney's population - a 40 per cent increase to

6 million in the next 30 years - much of which will be accommodated by higher-density living, add the much higher proportion of elderly people, and you see why we need to switch to a different tram, as other big cities that have pursued road-based solutions are doing.

That still leaves a role for cars, of course. As the report says, not all of Sydney is dense, nor should it be. "In lower-density suburbs, for trips not going into urban centres, the private car is likely to remain a dominant mode of travel," it says.

The challenges we face in getting our transport arrangements back on track are considerable and costly. We need catch-up measures to correct the under-investment in public transport infrastructure for the present population, as well as measures to accommodate future population growth.

We need extensions of the public transport system into outer areas as well as significant enhancement of the system in inner areas. This will leave little room for the building of further freeways or tollways.

We need more investment in all modes of public transport - rail, light rail, buses, ferries and even, well down the track, metros - but according to a carefully considered, long-term plan establishing a clear order of priority.

We need less rivalry and more co-operation and co-ordination between the modes so that an

ill-fitting collection of systems becomes a single, seamless one. It's not possible for all journeys to be completed without the need to change within a mode or between modes. This requires integrated

timetables, accurate and timely provision of information about disruptions and, above all, an integrated fare and ticketing system.

All of this will cost and there's no one to pay for it but us. There'll be carrots (more and better quality train and bus travel) and sticks (rising levels of road congestion for those who persist with cars).

But here's the good news: both the public's submissions to the inquiry and the inquiry's opinion polling show most Sydneysiders have got the message. Now all that remains is for light to dawn in the minds of our politicians.

Ross Gittins is the *Herald's* economics editor.

Comments

61 comments so far

Morning Ross, as usual a well written article that is well pitched. You missed something out, though: why do the 'planners' ignore the positive impact that small (under 125cc or fully electric powered) scooters and motorcycles can make to the transport chaos. These vehicles take up less than 20% of the space of the 4wd behemoths and emit a tiny fraction of the greenhouse gases - both in their use and original manufacture. Sydney is too hilly for many otherwise well-meaning people to cycle, but small powered vehicles are not overly fast, do not damage the roads and could be incorporated into bus and cycleways. If the main message is about tolerance and co-operation, why do powered two wheelers lose out again and again in the debate?

Duped | Sydney - February 17, 2010, 7:17AM

I don't have a car but I'm beginning to wonder if I should buy one as I've moved into a new area that is difficult to get to the shops. With most local village shops within 15 mins walk having closed down, I am forced to travel further to a large shopping center.

Another problem with a culture of everyone owning a car, it encourages super centers and the death of local shops and businesses. How wonderful it would be if village communities could spring back to life.

AI | Sydney - February 17, 2010, 7:47AM

It is heartening to note the Herald's focus on public issues.

I wrote a paper, 'A Holistic Approach On Urban Transport' that discusses some/ more of these issues. The work includes axiomatic models. There is great deal of work necessary for Sydney to analyse, model and forecast the traffic loads and thereby drawing a blueprint for Transport Infrastructure. The paper presents case for stronger public transportation and argues for climatic control, fossil fuels usage reduction and a pleasure of commuting to the users.

Though it was written 23 years ago, I am finding it difficult to bring it to main stream public education. Any chance the Herald gives opportunity to share this work?

Saradhi Motamarri | Ryde - February 17, 2010, 8:07AM

I don't drive and probably never will as a primary mode of transport. I simply can't understand why someone would take on the frustrating task of driving to & from work everyday (something you have to focus on) when they could be sitting on a bus or train doing something much more enjoyable (my favourite is reading). I agree that the rise of 'Super Centres' encourages/forces people to drive for their groceries etc, though some folk are just plain lazy. My local supermarket is within 10min walk and I take my own little trolley- too easy! Yet I constantly see other locals rocking up in their cars. Bikes are also great for local trips, quick, easy and you don't have to pay for parking. Plus you can have that biscuit with you coffee guilt free as you will have burnt it off by the time you get home!

Dasher - February 17, 2010, 8:39AM

Ross, another interesting independent report has just been published: "The Oil Crunch: A Wake-up Call for the UK Economy" endorsed by major transport and construction planners. The report is at: <http://peakoiltaskforce.net/download-the-report/2010-peak-oil-report/>.

Peak oil is expected to occur in 2012 - 2013 and the report urges rapid development of efficient and effective public transport and a change of fuel type for the majority of vehicles.

The report warns that nations who do not make these changes will be left behind socially and economically.

JoJo | Sydney - February 17, 2010, 8:36AM

Spot on Duped at 7:17am. From little things, big things grow. How about: (i) a weight based or cc based road/registration tax that is highly skewed against unnecessarily large private vehicles; (ii) free tolls for 125-150cc vehicles; (iii) more dedicated free parking in quality locations in key urban centres for 125-150cc vehicles, and (iv) traffic lights geared in favour to green light starts for 125-150cc vehicles on our main roadways. Very cheap to introduce and effective in reducing congestion on our roads that only manages 40k/h average speeds during peak periods. Cheap to own and operate. Safety improved by sheer numbers of small cc vehicles. Having ridden in grid-locked large centres in S-E-Asia on a 100cc motorbike the advantages are very evident.

DaddyC - February 17, 2010, 8:35AM

Cities around the globe support cycling as one of many modes of transport. Not a mention of bicycles in the article by an economic writer who should do some extra reading on the economic benefits of bicycles. Most of Sydney is easily ridden on bicycle, the inclusion in public infrastructure planning of bicycle road building would greatly enhance the economic bottom line. They have low embedded energy costs, require small amounts of fuel input, you can fit four to five on a moving stream of traffic in the space a motor car takes up. You can park up to twenty in the space a motorcar is parked in. A bicycle uses 1% of the materials a lightweight four seat four cylinder car uses. And if it rains - you get wet. No one ever shrunk in the rain. Be like those hillbillies and rednecks in Amsterdam, Copenhagen, and other unsophisticated world cities and jump on a bike to get where you want to go in a fraction of the time it takes to load up the car, fuel it, park it and pay for it.

Gilbert Grace | Sydney - February 17, 2010, 8:33AM

I wish the SMH's sister publication, The Age, would commission a similar independent inquiry for Melbourne. Somewhat perversely, in recent years Melbourne's public transport has become more like Sydney's. Privatisation has fragmented the system to the point where any semblance of coordination between modes that existed is now gone. The only remaining acknowledgement that public transport is a natural monopoly is the ticketing system. But even that is under threat, with the new 'Myki' smartcard currently only able to operate on the train system. The problems that Sydney faces are the same problems that Melbourne faces. Why are our two most important cities getting it so wrong, when our smaller cities (in particular Perth and Adelaide) are getting it so right?

Two-and-a-half years ago, at the age of 29, I finally cracked and got my license and a car. I now try to avoid using public transport wherever possible, because it's just not taken seriously by our governments. They still see it as a welfare provision for losers.

Vaughan | Seddon, Vic. - February 17, 2010, 9:00AM

This is a very timely editorial. Just a couple of comments regarding transport generally, I live in the far south west of Sydney and yet it is cheaper for my wife and I to drive into town than it is to catch a train. Admittedly we have the advantage of free parking but the truth remains that in the ring suburbs the cost is an important factor.

It is absurd that public transport is a less cost effective option for a working couple.

Secondly, the M5 toll ends at King Georges Rd and that is where the congestion kicks in that can sometimes back up all the way to Liverpool. Either all of this road should have a toll or none of it. The poorer south-west suburbs pay for the southern suburbs use of this road

Finally for experts to call for a congestion tax which will add yet another cost for the poorer working families in the distant suburbs is just not logical. Invariably those calling for such a tax come from the inner city and don't get the tyranny of distance.

We need better and cheaper public transport options and planned infrastructure out here. The Camden local government area is going to see an increase of 50,000 households over the next 10 years and yet there is no plan for improving transport in this region other than adding some traffic lights to Camden Valley Way.

Not surprisingly these meagre improvements are on the road. There is nothing planned for the pitiful public transport of this region.

The government's lack of focus is ensuring increasing gridlock and petrol use for decades to come. Sydney needs a multi-decade transport plan not these pointless band-aid fixes.

Alvin | Camden - February 17, 2010, 9:01AM

The argument about the unsustainability of cars overlooks improved technology in the car and moves to vehicles with greater fuel efficiency. If peak oil or an ETS causes significant oil price rises, new technologies and/or alternative fuels (ie electrical cars, hybrids, hydrogen cells, gas powered) will become more cost competitive. We have already seen trend from increases in petrol prices a trend to smaller cars with greater fuel efficiency.

Public transport is good if you work in the CBD or have a direct service from your home to place of work. But more and more people are working in other locations (ie business parks) which don't lend themselves to public transport. The debate seems to overlook

Anthony | Parramatta - February 17, 2010, 9:23AM

I would love to catch public transport to work (Chatswood) but since the Metro line idea extending to Castle Hill has been scrapped, that won't be happening. And driving on the M2 in the morning is hardly classified as driving - having to pay at least \$5 each way to sit in a parking lot. The toll for the M4 has just been lifted, the toll for the M2 keeps increasing, there is no direct public transport with no hope of a train line - what are we meant to do? We can't all ride to work.

Rel | Sydney - February 17, 2010, 9:25AM

Great article ! How many articles and reports do we need to convince the government that they must have the courage to rethink and create a good public transport solution .Even at \$60millions loss the metro put aside is already a positive step. Now we have to catch up with 30 years of negligence and it can be done. If the Chinese, supposedly a developing nation can built the fastest train , we must be able to build a proper public transport for Australian cities. If we cant do it , employ experts from Europe or Asia to advise. Put the money in , even if it is increasing our national debt. Investments for the future cost ! We all know in private business that we must borrow to expand.

I also note DaddyC comment in regard to small 2 wheel powered vehicles that we found common in Europe. Lets drop the age of riding to 14 for up to 50cc powered bike like in most European countries. That would give our youth more independence and would take a lot of car off the road. Lets shift off the car based economy. A recent survey in France showed that car use is dropping in all major cities as good alternative public transport solutions have really reduced cost and time of travel.

To achieve a good solution, the government will have to have the courage of confronting local communities. It will have to prove that their transport solution is cost efficient for all individuals as well as an environmental long term benefit.

Arnold | Sydney - February 17, 2010, 9:29AM

It appears today that only when we have reached near crisis levels in any particular area of our shared public lives, do the politicians begin to stir and think about how the crisis might be addressed. At such times, the politicians do not seek wisdom from those who might have specialist knowledge in the area concerned, but consult the oracles such as the shock jocks, the party hacks and those with vested interests in the status quo. They then produce half baked proposals that are announced prior to any serious consultation or study, and then proceed to lock themselves into these non-solutions through the expenditure of large sums of public monies. Then, at the last moment again, they begin to see the folly of their earlier actions and, after wasting possibly hundreds of millions of those scarce public dollars, do they leap on to the next ill-thought out non-solution.

The current political class has, as I have said more than once, have mistaken management for leadership, and they haven't even done that well!

Lesm | *Balmain - February 17, 2010, 9:34AM*

Traffic does always expand to fill new roads because the population is rising. If the population of Sydney could be moderated by the expansion of other cities in NSW, then the problem would begin to solve itself. The question to answer is one of planning development outside the Sydney basin where the cost of transport infrastructure is halved. The further issue is the inability of town planners to look at solutions to our increasing population beyond the Sydney basin.

Erin | *Sydney - February 17, 2010, 9:35AM*

Agree wholeheartedly about the scooter and moped comment.

Plus, how many times can the bicycle argument be made? I cycle regularly to the city from Manly and it's actually not that hard despite the hills. I am saving money and staying fit, all in the same time it takes to get the bus in to work.

There is all this angst towards cyclists, but really, consider the space they'd take up if you took each cyclist off the road and put them in a car instead. I really do my best to keep out of the way of drivers and I hope others do the same, but drivers should be thanking us for being one less of them rather than shaking their fists because we slow them down for five seconds.

Please keep the promotion of safe cycling on the agenda.

CS | *Manly Vale - February 17, 2010, 9:37AM*

To reduce travel time and congestion, we should relocate government offices from the City to suburbs say at 25 kms from the City so that traffic would flow from the inner and outer suburbs towards the offices instead of everyone heading towards the City in the morning. We should also make it easy for people to move closer by replacing property transfer stamp duty with an annual land tax.

Car City | *Melbourne - February 17, 2010, 9:50AM*

I don't think the government needs to confront the local communities. Most people I talk to would love to have alternative modes of transport considered.

But whichever the RTA has planning powers new roads will always be top of the list instead of being considered only when no other solution is possible. We need an integrated planning department that covers all forms of transport - including shipping and airports, bicycles cars, motorbikes and scooters, buses, and trams. maybe even smaller local buses. The RTA should be responsible for building and maintaining infrastructure only. Planning needs to be removed from their charter

Serenity | *St Peters, Sydney, NSW - February 17, 2010, 10:07AM*

Its not car based-transport which is the target of the Christie Report Ross, it's The Metro. When the Metro network is more developed, it will have far greater positive impact and replace far more cars than anything proposed by the Christie report.

But the Metro is dead, we know that. However I expect to see stories like this morning's front page and commentary like yours Ross, everyday until that is official.

It been a strange experience watching the Herald go after the Metro like a savage rottweiler. There's been a mixture of corrosive cynicism involved , politics of course, and most recently (East Asian " bad, European "good"), racism.

I never thought I'd live to see the day when so many people were taking such pleasure in killing off a major public transport improvement.

Sydney is loser, and so too, perversely, is The Herald.

Russell | *Drummoyne - February 17, 2010, 10:07AM*

In response to Dasher, the reason I drive is to avoid the 1 kilometer walk in hilly terrain to a bus stop that is already crowded. Once there, I have to wait for the now reduced service (every 45 minutes) which may or may not come and may or may not be full.

Suddenly the 15 minute drive takes over an hour or more, that is the problem with buses in Sydney. I can alternatively catch a bus almost at my door to a train station and catch a train but of course until recently there was no intergration of ticketing, but that has now changed. Of course the catch is when I get to the train station the North Shore line trains are often almost to capacity and again the 15 minute journey can take 30 minutes to an hour. All this for a trip from Lane Cove to North Sydney! I used to work in Strathfield and that involved a bus, train (Change at Central) and another bus, that was an interesting and long trip. Very good for catching up on your reading if the train wasn't packed and the bus driver wasn't doing his very best Stig impersonation.

So I think in short, there is a lot of work that needs to be done before the car culture can be replaced.

James | *Lane Cove - February 17, 2010, 10:09AM*

It seems to me that a part of our problem can simply be solved by using the 50% of our transport infrastructure that is under utilized morning and evening. Drive along the M2, M4, M5 in the morning and the outbound lanes are empty, the same for the trains and buses. The reverse is true in the evenings. Spend the money on creating more Business Parks like Nowest - what's wrong with putting these at Picton, Windsor, Penrith, Gosford etc. The transport infrastructure is largely in place already all we need to do is turn the flow around! Less costly, shorter travel times, quicker and less controversial to implement.

Bowral Blacks | *Bowral NSW - February 17, 2010, 10:16AM*

A well written piece, thank you Ross. One thing that you didn't mention is that all things cost money. But, governments (and oppositions) are fixated on not building up any net (or even gross) debt. Back when state governments didn't balk at borrowing 60 per cent of gross state product, train, tram (OK, some cities ripped them out), bus and ferry systems were built. In some cities you can actually tell where urban development got to in the 1960s because that's where the rail and tram lines end.

Nowadays, governments are worried that Moodys or S&P might lower their credit rating. Well, these are the same organisations that called sub-prime loans AAA bonds! Why do they have any credibility left at all?

there is a difference between good debt and bad debt. Borrowing to increase the overall and long-term productive capacity of the economy is not bad debt. Borrowing to give us all some Christmas spending money is bad debt. Borrowing to build school halls without investing in what goes on inside them is bad debt. Borrowing to build ports, rail lines, tram lines and linking in newer suburbs to the transport network is good debt.

In general, those investments that have a 50 year lifespan or more and can be financed over a period shorter than that, and return to the economy more than its cost, is good investment and worth borrowing for.

We need a sensible debate about debt in this country, not one of hysteria.

LuxuryYacht | Inner Melbourne - February 17, 2010, 10:18AM

Re "Duped" on the 125cc Scooter.

I agree, scooters (and motorbikes), take up less space in the city, and are perfect commuting vehicles. But, in a similar way to some cyclists, they are ignorant of the physics of the vehicles around them, and risk causing accidents. This may be because many of the new generation of riders have never held a drivers licence.

On three separate occasions since Christmas, I've had a scooter sit in my blind spot, only to swerve in front of me as I pulled up behind the car in front - usually coming to a stop at red light, Suddenly, my breaking distance is reduced from 15-20m to 5m.

If it wasn't for my quick reactions, and good antilock breaks, I would have hit them.

Sure, if I'd have hit them, I'd have been in the wrong, but they'd have been crushed between two 1.5 tonne cars. Holding the moral highground is really irrelevant when half your bones are broken.

Now, look around at the number of people who drive while talking on the phone, or with iPod headphones in their ears. Look at the number of cars with less than great brakes, especially older cars with no ABS.

The solution? Firstly, police the laws we have, both for the bike riders (lanesplitting and changing lanes while unsafe) and cars (phones, ipods). Secondly, ensure that all two wheelers do at least a basic driving course - particularly to understand where blind spots are and how big they are, and to experience breaking distance, even from a slow speed.

Understand that cars don't stop on a dime, even from slow speeds such as 30 - 40km/h. And don't put your bike into a situation where you could be crushed.

Matt | Glebe - February 17, 2010, 10:27AM

Russell - The reasons the Metro must die:

1) It is a tactical solution, not a strategic solution. It fixes a single problem but is not expandable or integrable into future fix. The area where it works well - inner sydney - is already well served. The area where its needed - outer western and north-western Sydney - is too distant and too spread-out to be served by a metro. Once you get over around 800m - 1km between stations, you should look at heavy rail:

(About the only place a metro would work well is the CBD, extended down to Alexandria, Green Square and the Airport. Something tells me the privateers who built the \$10 a station rail-line would be upset at that.)

2) The opportunity cost. This is the loss incurred by not going for the "second best" option. In this case, heavy rail. In short - if we let them build the metro, there will be \$5 Billion fewer dollars to put into heavy rail, and governments will hide behind the expenditure.

How often have you heard the election pitch that "we spent \$x million on blah blah blah". Doesn't matter if they fail to solve the problem, as long as they throw money at it.

We are all sick to death of hearing about "outcomes", but in the end, these are what that's important. If only they'd deliver them instead of repeating the word.

Yes, we need a solid, integrated, expandable public transport system, but even on four-year fixed terms, State Governments are working on cycles too small to ever address the issue. This needs to be taken out of the hands of the States, and given to somebody with the competence to actually complete the project.

Matt | Glebe - February 17, 2010, 10:39AM

Hi Ross

I think you're being overly generous in your allusion to governments "getting it" when it comes to the need to invest in public transport or alternative ways of getting around.

Over here we're having a second bridge built to faster connect more cars to yet more gridlock. Verity Firth has been told "build the bridge lose the seat" yet the powers that be have gone ahead anyway. Balmain will give her the flick, there'll be a higher level of congestion than currently exists, and we'd have blown the best part of 200 mill. So much for getting it.

A couple of people have written about the role of bikes - a cheap, fast, clean and efficient way of getting around for those of us lucky enough to live relatively centrally. A few years ago the RTA was spending 17c on bike facilities for every \$100 it spent on roads - how fair dinkum is that??

One of the other things that compromises the effectiveness of public transport, especially trains, is that they are so incredibly SLOW. I grew up north of London, about the same distance as Penrith is from Central. The journey in England takes 21 minutes - here it's 70. Good grief.

Until such time as our governments get serious about public transport we shall continue to suffer congestion, pollution and ridiculous travel times, but I don't see any evidence of real change yet I'm afraid.

daveinbalmain

daveinbalmain | balmain - February 17, 2010, 10:40AM

Public transport "solutions" are to the SMH what NRL stories are to the Daily Telegraph. It really is a hoot to see the po-faced SMH give its inner-city readers yet another ego massage: you're so wonderful because you all live close to major transport and isn't it awful that buses don't run from Pymont every 1.5 seconds?

Face facts: the eastern suburbs (Bondi to Canada Bay) are a hotbed of sanctimonious prats. More trains! More trams! ... but not if they bring more Westies to Bondi ... or if their construction affects our property values in Lilyfield or involves knocking down some heritage toilet block in Annandale ... or if we're actually asked to pay for them through higher ticket prices ...

I could go on, but I've just got to try that new brunch place in Darlinghurst that was featured in the GW.

Stiofan | Epping - February 17, 2010, 10:46AM

Decentralise instead of agonising about Sydney. From where I sit, Sydney is taking an excess of resources that should be shared with the rest of the State. Just the cost of the Lane Cove tunnel could have provided the water for 200 000 people to live over the 'other side' of the mountains and a far better return on investment.

Sean | Orange - February 17, 2010, 10:50AM

Sydney needs BOTH, a cheap accessible wide ranging integrated grid of roads and public transport. Cars, bike, scooters are NEVER going to go away, particularly as the arguments against cars disappear ie cheap, clean, small, cars being produced. Public transport in all its forms should be for the masses and be cheap and available. What our politicians need to recognise is we should have both systems. Real multilane (ie 4 or 6 lanes) freeways, NOT dual lane car parks. Freeways that link to each other and public transport hubs, that provide free, safe accessible parking. Do this and they will come. This should not be a utopian dream, it should be reality now. It shouldn't this hard, stop playing politics and just do it. I am sure you already have a transport plan stuffed away somewhere thats being hidden because it is just too politically difficult.

FredNerk - February 17, 2010, 10:47AM

Amen

Cid | Sydney - February 17, 2010, 11:06AM

Thanks for your comments, Matt, re the poor scooter/bike etiquette and agree with you. Bottom line here is that ALL road users have an obligation to be aware of those around them and how best to interact with them. Getting a licence for a bike or scooter is far harder than for a car with compulsory training - not a log book of learning their parents poor car driving habits! Maybe someone who has just been through the HART motorcycle training programme can comment on how blind spots are discussed as part of this training?

Having ridden bikes of all sizes for 30 years, I take full responsibility for my own actions - if I put myself in harm's way, then I must be accountable for what happens. And no, I do not condone the poor riding standards you have sadly witnessed, but been competent enough to avoid. Agree with the comments on older cars, iPods, phones etc. Only this morning I was behind a woman in her 2.5 tonne Touareg negotiating a tricky right turn while blathering away on her phone. \$80k worth of car and she could not use \$10 worth of earpiece or hook up the bluetooth?

Duped | Sydney - February 17, 2010, 11:05AM

I don't own a car (haven't since 1976); don't drive (haven't since 1996), don't have kids, don't own a dog (apparently the carbon footprint of a large dog is greater than an SUV according to New Scientist) and use public transport (or walk). Thank god I live in the inner suburbs. But where are my personal carbon tax credits? Where are my rewards for being socially responsible? Not a great public transport service in my little corner of Ultimo, buses mostly crowded and my taxes are paying for everyone else's kids, cars and health costs!!

Steve | Ultimo - February 17, 2010, 11:07AM

I agree with Bowral Blacks' suggestion to develop workplaces at Picton, Windsor, Penrith, Gosford etc. and utilise existing infrastructure. A carrot could be to waive, for ten years or so, payroll tax for businesses that set up there or relocate from existing high density traffic destinations. This would reduce the pressure on Governments to make hasty (poor) transport decisions.

connectors - February 17, 2010, 11:15AM

I note Serenity's comment that the RTA should only be responsible for construction and maintenance. Problem is, the RTA can't even get that right. The surface and ride quality of the majority of Sydney's roads is beyond appalling. People's apathy towards this is made even worse when you realise the knockon effects it has on our cars and public transport. Ever wonder why the Sydney buses keep getting taken off the road due to hairline cracks in the chassis or suspension problems? Because Sydney's roads are rapidly destroying them. I should know....my own car had two low profile rims ruined because of abysmal roads and potholes.

As well, the RTA's standard of signposting and route marking is hopeless compared to other states. A few years ago they decommissioned most of the state routes around Sydney, and haven't bothered to replace them. It is infuriating when you see route 70 (Anzac Parade) on the GPS or street directory,

but there is no signage on the ground to support it. In the country, the signage is even worse. Go to Victoria to see how it should be done!

Sydneysightseer | Moore Park - February 17, 2010, 11:16AM

According to Fortune in 2009, 7 out of the world's 10 largest companies are petroleum producers, and one of the other three manufactures motor vehicles. Kind of put the forces we're up against in perspective doesn't it?

Bazman | BoganCentral - February 17, 2010, 11:21AM

All this general should should should about cars and public transport is overdone. We need a plan! Here is mine. Anyone in NSW government looking for fresh ideas please contact me!

Two tiers of public transport: High-speed and Local.

High Speed (HS): Let's have councils tender to host a high speed station. Stations should be at least 10km apart e.g. City, Parramatta, Hornsby, Liverpool, Blacktown, Penrith. HS trains would only stop at these stations. A train should arrive every 10 min. They should have local train and bus connections, a taxi rank, a massive parking station including motorcycle and bicycle areas, quick access to major roads/motorways. Some existing rail infrastructure could be used. Free shuttles could exist between parking stations and platforms if required.

Local: Light or heavy rail and buses running all-stops with stops no closer than 400m to each other, routes no longer than 30 min, with a frequency of 4-8 minutes daytime and 8-16 minutes evening. Routes can be circular, between HS stops or in-out.

Congestion charge/toll on CBD in two tiers. Max cost for passing both tiers. Commercial delivery vehicles can buy an annual pass with discount.

Motorcycles without sidecars can travel toll-free.

New bus/light-rail interchanges at Central (x2), Pyrmont, College St, Wynyard and new light rail loop encompassing these stops. Big bicycle area lockups at each. No buses in George St, Castlereagh, Elizabeth, Town Hall area.

Let the would-be politicians of the next term promise to deliver!

Listen Up And Learn | Sydney - February 17, 2010, 11:46AM

There is no "only way forward". There are lots of choices with various consequences.

From where I live, I can comfortably walk to shops, the buses to the CBD, where I work are great, and the cycling is good enough to make that my preferred form of transport.

However telecommuting and online shopping are already good enough to replace many of my journeys.

Further growth in regional centers could be encouraged. Moving the NSW parliament and all departments to Nimbin would both reduce the population pressures in Sydney and improve the quality of what they are smoking.

Virtual Transport is the only way forward | Lane Cove - February 17, 2010, 12:00PM

Maybe Ross or someone else could answer these questions for me. I'm very curious

- is it true that state governments won't invest in public transport - no matter what - due to, a) people across the whole city (esp. in outer suburbs) not caring for public transport at all, and preferring their car? That is, love of PT is an inner city thing and the outer suburbs just want things to go on as they always have. In effect, wanting freeways to continue to be built

- b) PT means expensive maintenance above cheaper roads.
- c) PT means union influence. Private car owners have no union.
- d) PT means government has to shell out money, when they can just delegate that job to the average consumer
- e) State Govt just doesn't like PT. Just. The culture of the beaurocracy hasn't changed since the 50s, and chooses not to now or in the future.
- f) City Rail is not liked by other departments and ministers, and if they can downgrade City Rail, then they can be either privitised or abolished.

Another question is:

do governments want to pull up all the rail lines and turn them into freeways? I don't know why they haven't done this. I don't want this, or even want to promote it, but have wondered why we still have a train system at all, given the govt's love of nothing but freeways forever into the future. Surely they hate trains that much that they are just chomping at the bit to do it.

Love to know what people think of these.

happyez - February 17, 2010, 12:12PM

Encouraging motorbikes are a sensible and realistic short-term solution.

No-one with half a mind believes public transport in this city will be improved to a 'competitive' level with car-drivers within the next 8-10 years. Especially if Labor stays in.

Why motorbikes are good for the CBD

- less pollution
- safer
- much less traffic space
- significantly less parking space (try fitting 15 delivery vans in a 10 metre space)
- safer parking for pedestrians and commuters (think of a tall van parked on a corner)

Why motorbikes are good for people

- cheaper to run
- easier to park
- quicker run in and out
- cooler!
- the more of us the safer it will inevitably be

Plife30 | Denison Island - February 17, 2010, 12:13PM

... and Sydney needs to a French rail system - outer suburb trains zooming in and out at 150km. Some big world thinkers is what Australia needs. Enough of these small-fry ideas!

Plife30 | Denison Island - February 17, 2010, 12:15PM

Matt of Glebe - being on a bike means you are naturally more attentive whilst riding through traffic. If you're not paying attention, you die. Bad drivers outweigh bad riders by a factor of ten. The amount of times I've nearly been knocked off my bike by an idiot who doesn't think they need to stay in their lane, is more focused on their conversation than the road or just plain in a rush is ridiculous.

Like Duped says, it is much harder to get a license to ride bikes than it is to drive cars. And part of that is you have to use as much focus when you hop on a bike for the 1000th time as you did when you did your test. How many car drivers pay as much attention today as they did when they did their test?

hired goon - February 17, 2010, 12:42PM

My partner and I live at Berowra and both work in the CBD. It is actually cheaper for us to drive to the city, pay the bridge toll, and pay early bird parking than it is for both of us to catch the train. Coupled

with the irregular services to and from Berowra, it becomes an easier solution to drive each day, though not our preferred option.

tombm | CBD - February 17, 2010, 1:10PM

It is time for Sydney to open it's eyes about the transport around the suburbs.

Not everyone is travelling to the City.

Public transport between the major centres is hopeless and the road infrastructure is pathetic because all the roads point to the city and drivers not going to the city add to the congestion.

Pick up a map of Sydney and it is obvious that the major roads point to the CBD and travelling between the other centres will be difficult, yet the CBD has been shrinking for years while the other centres are growing (by population and employment).

The problem won't be solved while the polies and the bureaucrats work in the city.

Brian | Parramatta - February 17, 2010, 1:11PM

i just want to comment on Ross's 6th paragraph where it reads:

"As soon as the new highway has cut the time it takes to get from A to B, more people decide to drive rather than use public transport, thus forcing travel times back up. Studies suggest that motorists keep piling in until travel times are pretty much back to where they were."

Wouldnt the same be true if the government spent money on public transport??? In otherwords trains and roads are currently over crowded, if you upgrade the train lines wont more people catch the train and in turn make it as congested as it was before??

I think those arguements are useless. We need increases in spending on transport as a whole. i dont care if they make a 10 lane highway everywhere or if the bring in ultra fast trains. Just do something to reduce congestion.

Daniel | hornsby - February 17, 2010, 1:15PM

The great hidden secret in the public transport debate is this,

Mathematically, public transport requires people to live and work at high densities in order for public transport to have some semblance of efficiency. The perfect operaterating condition for public transport is moving people from a high rise residence to a high rise workplace at a specific time. If you give the matter some thought you will realize that the train/bus/tram/light rail carriage in this model behaves like a horizontal version of a high rise building shuttling people between the two buildings.

Once people begin to spread out however, and have the audacity to have (carbon sink) trees and (sustainable vegetable) gardens and (carbon sink) lawns and thermal solar collectors and photovoltaic cells and rain water collection systems, you know, be sustainable and responsible, public transport as a pure mathematical concept collapses due to an exponential increases of inefficiency.

So in summary, public transport will work perfectly and efficiently if you live and work in a high rise and start and finish work at the same time as everyone else. Other than that, well you need a solution which is flexible and comes from where you are to where you are going at a time of your choice. This is called a car.

The big fallacy in the public transport debate is not that public transport is required to service a high density environment the big fallacy in the debate is that we need everyone living and working in a high density environment.

Albert | Sydney - February 17, 2010, 1:26PM

Good words Ross...but we need to get a couple of things straight here... IMHO most people don't come to the city Monday to Friday to enjoy the pleasure of driving around the CBD, they bring their cars because public transport is cactus:

Not frequent enough, dirty, smelly, unsafe in evening hours, not air-conditioned, un-reliable, lack of parking at outer suburban main stations etc Fix that lot and we are well on our way to significant improvements. We don't need a tram system...Sydney CBD and immediate environs is simply not big enough, invest in the existing heavy rail infrastructure, make the trains faster and more efficient.

jiggser | Sydney - February 17, 2010, 1:31PM

I find it interesting that people would suggest that scooter or motorcycle use for commuting should be encouraged. All statistics point to the fact that riding a scooter or motorbike is more likely to lead to injury or death than driving a car. Hardly something the government would like to promote.

Also scooters and bikes do not lead to a reduction in congestion if ridden legally. You still have to give them the same buffer as any other vehicle on the road.

Bikes can also produce more toxic emissions than a car (NOX, hydrocarbons etc) as they don't have to meet the same strict standards as cars.

I ride a bike and there is no way I would commute on one. It's just too risky for any benefit.

Richard - February 17, 2010, 1:31PM

Is it too late to bring back the trams?

Blakey - February 17, 2010, 1:33PM

Cars travel times between destinations can usually be estimated to within a 10 minute accuracy. Public transport can have difficulty matching that particularly if you have to change connections.

Gordan Taylor | Greystanes - February 17, 2010, 1:41PM

The almost here energy crunch will hit our civilisation like a ten trillion ton brick. Cheap energy is a factor in everything our civilisation does and produces. Oil will be around for quite some time yet, except the net energy gain of its use (value of energy gained minus the value of energy used to extract and process) will get ever closer to zero. This will impact the world economy with a destructive force unlike any previous economic crises. If you think we have just escaped the shadow of the biggest economic downturn of our times, you've seen nothin' yet. As for alternatives: they are a mirage; they will not be available in time anywhere near in the volume, quality, reliability, price, or distribution of oil. The age of the car is over. The congestion you now see will not be seen again.

xman - February 17, 2010, 1:56PM

I hate driving, I hate cars, I hate living in the suburbs.

That's why I moved to Japan and have not once thought of moving back.

Sydney's idea of public transport sucks so bad that it's a disgrace. Build the darned Metro - use Japanese tunnel technology to build a two storey tunnel with a metro + another transport corridor under every freeway already built, put no stops in after, say 15kms from the city, and have everything terminate at Town Hall.

And knock all that crap housing down that is currently classified "heritage" and build real housing for real people nearer the CBD: dirty dark damp dingy disgustingly cramped hovels are not heritage, Verity et al.

PickledDill - February 17, 2010, 1:58PM

Why do we need these huge offices in the first place? Companies should build small offices for 200 - 300 people and locate them in the suburbs where people live, and then many will be able to walk to work. Look at IBM office in West Pannant Hills, what's wrong with this?

Steve - February 17, 2010, 2:09PM

I think Listen Up and Learn has the best idea - Transport Hubs - its what most modern cities do. It just seems crazy everyone trying to drive their car into the city. Look at Berlin with 3 tiers of trains and also trams, buses, bikes. Fast trains and metros should be in the Sydney mix. Replacing buses with metros should be a major thing - a metro under all major rds with buses. I actually think the trams and metro should be one and the same - they do this in many countries - Berlin - LA - Paris. So instead of duplicating a Metro and Lightrail going up Sussex St - or to Rozelle or down Anzac Pde to UNSW.

Llewster | *Surry Hills - February 17, 2010, 2:30PM*

I enjoyed reading you article as I always do with yours.

Maybe you should go into politics but alas you would be a lone voice there.

Anthony above, the increase in more efficient cars does not relieve congestion. It will only mean more cars thus even more congestion.

The crux of the article was IMO that we need to wean ourselves from an over reliance on motor cars. I noticed more scooters on the roads.

I suppose to wean people from their tanks, known as four-wheel-drives, is going to be a hard job. Maybe a ten or twenty fold increase in rego and higher taxes on their insurance would help society to rid itself of those monsters.

Tanks belong in the army training areas not on the road. most of them never see a dirt road anyway. It would be a useful step in down sizing.

A referendum on this might provide a useful start.

To those who prattle on about freedom of choice I say this. Does that mean its ok that they pollute my airspace and clogg up the roads. In my book I will do something about it, bring on the referendum and we all will decide.

Ross, what about suggesting it. We are supposed to live in a democracy, ie. majority decides.

Fred | *Sydney - February 17, 2010, 2:37PM*

The poster who said "Public transport 'solutions' are to the SMH what NRL stories are to the Daily Telegraph" ought be given a weekly comedy column by Fairfax...

But seriously, the states need a REAL PUSH on moped/bike initiatives. We need Garrett to hit them over the head at COAG, with a national push. The states are so poor they make all decisions for short-term-political else finance reasons. The Metro was an ill-conceived political motivation to sure up Firth's inner-West Labor seat (though that back-fired). The failure to allow anything more than 'assistive to pedalling' power on a bicycle is because of Treasury's fear of loss of vehicle licensing revenue. Proper mopeds, new electric-MTB cross-overs to pedal-less electric scooters ought all be actively encouraged, for both greenhouse and congestion reasons. Such two-wheelers, with a top-speed of under 40kph (on the flat) ought be allowed to travel on bike lanes without needing a licence, as bicyclists can achieve 50kph under human-power alone. By all means encourage such users to do a week-long safe cycling course, but don't stipulate it as a pre-requisite.

And Garrett also needs to announce exemption from Australian Design Rules (ADRs) for all-electric and other nil-emission vehicles for at least five years, provided the top-speed is limited to under 75kph. If we have a commute-only vehicle travelling in heavy traffic at an average of 30kph, why do we insist on carrying 'heavy metal' to prevent side-impact at 100kph. Plus we need recharging spots in CBDs etc... through to a national database for carpooling, All of this was posted in an SMH transport blog two years ago.

Graeme Harrison (prof at-symbol post.harvard.edu) | *Sydney - February 17, 2010, 3:31PM*

What we have in Australia at the moment is a great big flaw between our thinking and reality.

Our current thinking was born last century and it is made of stuff like the Great Australian dream (home ownership) and the car. We need to replace it with one that actually fits with what is happening in this country and our forward goals of a Big Australia. We need to embrace high density living. It sounds bad, I know, but if you actually think about it, it is the only way to go. If everyone lived close to the city a real public transport system could be built, something that would rival the best, London, Hong Kong, Japan. Incidentally this would also help solve a couple of other small problems like the housing shortage problem and go a long way to reducing our carbon emissions. Do we need more reasons to consider this seriously?

Adam40 | Kensington - February 17, 2010, 3:41PM

At the time of the rising petrol prices, I made a decision to finally ditch the car and ride a bicycle to work everyday, what a difference it has made to my life. I am happier, healthier and have saved thousands of dollars. I am lucky, I live 15km from North Sydney and my trip is only 30mins each way. It is quicker than driving and public transport. There are many bike racks within Private Pay Parking facilities within Nth Sydney, but they are empty. Nobody is aware of these facilities as they are hidden from view. Once you make the switch to bike or public transport, there's no turning back, why would you. Cheaper, cleaner, safer, easier..... give it a try, the options are there if you look hard enough.

Rod | Sydney North - February 17, 2010, 4:01PM

Finally someone has highlighted the fiasco created by car based transport solution. Car can never be a mass transportation system. Car fan club will argue about the newer technologies etc that would make cars still a transport medium but it can never be the core of the solution. Mass transport systems like heavy rail, light rail, then buses have to be sooner than later be the core movement mechanisms. This is for already highlighted criteria like land space, volumes of people, environment impact, carbon footprint, speed and time and last but not the least costs to the average person. The transport vision provided by this report is scientific, rational and long awaited outcome. Now all that is needed is clear and practical heads - both political and commercial to make this into a reality

Surendra | Telopea-Sydney - February 17, 2010, 4:03PM

Well organised transport is great... used to live in the big smoke (London) and the transport was awesome for a big city.. tube was great... look how organised they are getting in terms of cycleways as well...

<http://www.tfl.gov.uk/roadusers/cycling/11901.aspx>

Living back in Canberra now and I can get door to door in half an hour...

wouldn't live in Sydney in a fit... it seems the people managing the transport there could organise a you know what in a you know what...

James | Canberra - February 17, 2010, 4:07PM

Rel : Cycling Hills to Chatswood

Rel, Last week I cycled from the Hills to Chatswood (Not my usual commute so I took it a little easy as I wasn't sure where I was going). Left about 8:20 and arrived just before 9:30 - door to door. M2 was a car park the entire way - so I'm guessing I got there faster than Rel did that morning. I'm 46 years old and took up cycling only a few years ago.

Sydney : Stop whinning about traffic and tolls, dust off that old bike you have in the garage, pump up the tires and become part of the solution!

Bernie | Winston Hills - February 17, 2010, 4:12PM

Graeme Harrison's comments are spot on. We need to change our points of view on powered two wheelers (P2W) as being part of the solution. They do not have to be fast, noisy and poorly ridden

with the right systems and infrastructure in place. To those fortunate enough to live within 15km of their place of work (wherever that may be) and can ride their push-bike, go to it! Just be careful that not too many people do so as the loss of registration and fine revenue could be catastrophic to the State revenues! P2Ws are here now, are available in many forms to suit all pockets - starting from under \$2k for some new small scooters and the Sachs 150cc motorcycle. Changing infrastructures to suit P2Ws and integrate cycles will drive demand for improved product fit for the purpose as regular transport - and we are not only interested in the journey to work and back - Sydney log jams just as much at weekends! For those travelling into the CBD, NSYD, Parramatta etc etc tomorrow morning, bumper to bumper in your car/4WD, pay especial attention for the lone P2W or cycle that you see and imagine how well the roads would flow if only 1 in 5 of the cars in front of you was replaced with a P2W. Maybe those of us with a P2W and a car should all agree to a day in the next week to use the P2W regardless of rain, hail, shine and show the difference we can make!
How about 24th Feb??

Duped | Sydney - February 17, 2010, 5:05PM

We haven't even begun to consider the real issues facing our environment let alone the urban environment. Why must everyone live in cities in a country with so much space. Because it is sustainable? That is one of the greatest fallacies commonly heard in Australia. Megacities are not at all sustainable. Australia has the potential to create almost any society it desires and that is a gift that very few countries share.

I build and sell motorised bicycles with the cleanest Honda 4-stroke motors available. They comply with all the regulations except for the 200 Watt power limitation imposed by the RTA. 200 Watt is less than a battery operated electric drill puts out and it wouldn't pull the skin off a custard let alone propel a bike up a slight gradient. These bikes are common outside of Sydney where public transport is non-existent. The clean little Honda has a carbon footprint that is miniscule and does 110 kms to a litre of petrol. They are quiet and clean and have an unlimited range unlike electric bikes. The RTA are trying to regulate all motorised bicycles off the roads without liaising with the registered user group for motorised cyclists. The RTA seems to have outsourced their own brains and are hell bent on destroying any attempt to produce what the French Govt recently described as the single most sustainable alternative to the motor car - namely a motorised bicycle with a small clean 4-stroke motor. If Australia is to have a sustainable future it needs to get rid of the State governmental obstacles that stand in the way of sound environmental planning principles. To a large extent our cities are the problem because our Governments are obsessed with them and cannot see outside of them.

Giacomo Fosscati | Ocean Shores - February 18, 2010, 12:26AM