

INQUIRY INTO CROSS CITY TUNNEL

Organisation:

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Theme:

Summary

SUBMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENT OF NEW SOUTH WALES JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE CROSS-CITY TUNNEL.

Apparently nothing has changed in the public's attitude to transport in nearly two hundred years. At the gala test run of Robert Fulton's steamboat, when the engines were being revved up prior to casting off, the boat shook violently. This caused the Doubting Thomases in the crowd to shout loudly and scornfully, "She'll never start! She'll never start!" When the boat actually started to move up the river, there was a moment of astonished silence. Then the voices of the scoffers resumed their shouts; this time crying out with all the scorn they could muster, "She'll never stop! She'll never stop!"

Today the prominent political and legal philosophy in New South Wales and the inevitable outcry from the media is "Damned if you do! Damned if you don't!" While the mood of the mob is that blame must be apportioned for any controversy; and that it is expected that either "heads will roll" or "someone will fall on their sword". It is in such a social and political climate that a media campaign has led to the formation of a Parliament of New South Wales Joint Select committee on the Cross-city Tunnel and the subsequent public inquiry.

It would not come as any surprise to the members of that committee that the submissions of persons from inner-city communities all have their own biases, grievances and often-conflicting agendas with the Cross-City Tunnel. I also note that there was extensive consultation, but that some closure of alternative routes to the city and harbour crossings were always going to be inevitable in the negotiation of a commercial contract. This would have been the case even if the shorter tunnel route had been chosen.

Nevertheless it must be stated; that all parties to this project have made many mistakes. Moreover some of these mistakes have their origins in government decisions and practices going back decades.

During the planning and negotiation phases, there were so many "elephants under the carpet" that were ignored, that it is not surprising that the public has the perception that the project is "knee-deep in pachyderm poop".

My major criticism concerns the reduction of William Street from six to four traffic lanes. This is the "line in the sand" which the Cross-City Tunnel should not have been allowed to cross.

Moreover the same mistake is going to be made with Epping Road after the completion of the Lane Cove Tunnel. To reduce that road to only one lane of general traffic is an irresponsible travesty. At the very least the third lane on each side should be given over to a pattern of local through traffic (Hunters Hill-Lane Cove- Chatswood: a north-south axis that does not compete directly with the east-west lane Cove Tunnel project). In any case a two-lane tunnel will be at capacity in the peak periods anyway.

William Street had been widened at considerable public expense early last century. During the entire post-war automobile age it's six lanes have been choked with traffic in both morning and evening peak periods. Also with increasing car ownership and car usage this traffic and the extent of spread of both peak periods has also been steadily increasing.

Even with all cross-city traffic taken out of William Street the planning decisions taken over past decades, such as city office parking, city kerbside parking and

commercial delivery patterns, will still leave two lanes of traffic at capacity during the peaks. It is after all one of the major vehicle entry and exit points for the CBD.

This has been the experience with other Sydney thoroughfares after toll-road bypasses, for example: the Harbour Bridge after the Cross-Harbour Tunnel, Epping Road after the M2, King Street-Princes Highway after the M5 East.

The William Street kerbside lanes in both directions should have been designated 24-hour bus lanes, as well as the daytime T2 lane and a general traffic lane in each direction. The handful of parking bays, are a functional nonsense. They slow traffic flow by constricting it to one lane as vehicles move in and as other vehicles stop in the T2 lane while waiting to move into a parking space. On a true cost per space basis they would have to be the most expensive in Sydney.

These bus lanes are justified by the five main public bus routes (323,324,325, 327 and L24). Also there are hundreds of tourist bus and taxis that ply William Street each hour. Kings Cross- East Sydney after all is one of the major tourist precincts in this city. The present four-lane configuration of William Street means that these buses make very slow progress, virtually crawling in both directions during the peaks. Such traffic congestion is literally "ripping the guts" out of city buses. This is only part of this project increasing costs for public road transport. Not only are maintenance and fuel costs higher; but the bus services are made less efficient with increased journey times, failure to keep to timetable, an inability to use longer or articulated buses on these routes and subsequent loss of patronage.

Provision of bus lanes in William Street would still have restricted the road capacity to encourage vehicles to use the tunnel, but it would also provide a contingency route for emergency service vehicles to negotiate the grid-locked inner-city streets. Note that William Street together with Oxford Street comprise the main ambulance routes from the city to St. Vincent's Hospital, the main emergency hospital for much of the CBD.

Such bus lanes would also allow express peak services to be diverted from busy Oxford Street for a quicker run to and from the city.

If transport planning can identify 43 strategic bus corridors for the Sydney Metropolitan Area, many of which will require millions of dollars worth of capital works; and hundreds of millions can be expended on just two bus transitways for western Sydney. Then surely transport authorities can use existing road capacity to develop a workable strategic bus corridor that complements the Eastern Suburbs Railway. It also serves some of the highest population density suburbs in Sydney (Woolloomooloo, Kings Cross, Potts Point, Darling Point and Point Piper). In such suburbs parking is limited and the "footprint" of parked cars from many apartment buildings exceeds the land area of those blocks. It is very desirable that public transport be encouraged in such areas. Some of these are also among the wealthiest and high status suburbs in Sydney. The implication of this is that public transport won't attract more passengers from that type of area unless it can offer faster, more stylish and convenient service.

The fact that public transport services were sacrificed shows that the process was clearly deficient. Was it so "legal-centric" and "Treasury driven" that wider metropolitan planning issues were wilfully ignored? The evolving Metro-strategy planning and a more holistic viewpoint of transport issues were either not considered or subjugated in order to reach a commercial agreement. This neglect by bureaucrats acting like "monomaniacs on a mission" in order to reach an agreement and "lock-in" some legal advantage that could

be exploited during the life of the contract, is nothing short of negligence and negotiation ineptitude. Their perception of the concept of "public costs" appears limited to up-front dollars. What evidence exists of detailed discussion papers being circulated in order to get more public benefits? What viewpoints were expressed by government planners in transport and in the Roads and Traffic Authority? Where was the Cabinet oversight?

The tunnel consortium would naturally have wanted to maximise the number of vehicles whose trips take them through the city. However very few vehicles bound for the CBD, other than those destined for the western or far southern CBD, would be expected to use the tunnel. I cannot see any commercial logic or public relations benefit in the company strongly objecting to a priority bus lanes in William Street. The great majority of those passengers would be heading for the City-CBD or Kings Cross-Darlinghurst precincts. Both these areas are not really serviced by this tunnel. In a rational negotiation process it should not have been a high-value point for them.

While a superficial examination may see it as a clumsy attempt to simulate a monopoly market power of sorts; and to overcome the limitations of a fixed supply (two set lanes). A more detailed economic analysis of the cross-elasticity of demand shows that it is a more complex and indirect pattern that is involved. Seeing public transport as a simple substitute for tunnel use is incorrect and does not justify those contractual restrictions. A two variable model does not begin to explain the complex pattern of transport choices in a metropolitan area.

The only explanation that I can see is that they were seeking to exploit the very vague "restriction on new public transport developments within the project's catchment area" clause. Such clauses have been a feature of all Public Private Partnership tollway and transport project contracts made by both Labor and Liberal Coalition governments in this state. Drafting such contracts has been like a game of "follow the leader" for decades. Like errant children each new project party points to the previous project and makes the feeble claim; "Well they got away with it!"

Rather than having a blanket restriction on undefined public transport developments for the whole life of a project; there should be a more limited "stepwise" pattern where protection is given for the first ten or twelve years. The "generational" restrictions of twenty or thirty years are too expensive in social and economic opportunity costs.

Considering the magnitude of congestion, pollution, potential energy crises, and other environmental problems; such a clause, unreasonably preventing the long term evolution of public transport, is unconscionable. It is also unclear and undefined, and as yet untested in a court of law. I put it to you that the true purpose of such a clause is not just as a strategy to attract investment; but also as a "bargaining chip"; a one-sided hair-trigger to allow the private partners to appeal a contract. It is a form of underwriting or risk-management. The probable perception is that it also represents a potential "escape clause" of last resort. Since in any legal challenge, the government would face massive damages if it lost; but the private partners, apart from costs, would only have the status quo preserved and the existing contract stand. Faced with such unequal risks and potential gains in the gamble of tort law, any future government would have to accept the reality of making further concessions.

In matters of law we are all prisoners of precedent. So in all fairness the blame for this situation cannot be attributed solely to the incumbent state government. What should

have been a well-planned contracting out of different sections of an integrated toll-road system has become a sectional free-for-all. In which separate different Motorway Mafiosi are allowed to do their own business under the terms of their contract. (Note that the literal Sicilian translation of La Cosa Nostra means "our thing, our business".) Existing contracts are jealously guarded commercial fiefdoms mean that anomalies are likely to occur. For example a major consumer complaint about the Cross-City Tunnel has been about the pricing. From a marketing perspective it should have initially been set at the same level as the toll on the harbour crossings, which are journeys of similar length. Also the time, convenience and cost-saving benefits heavily promoted, particularly in the face of rising oil prices and the toll congestion makes on vehicle maintenance. The detailed maps of the Cross-City Tunnel were very complex and confusing. Some simple schematic maps should have been promoted; that related the tunnel to specific destinations and patterns of use. Also the tunnel was an issue that the media felt they could exploit and use to promote wider political controversy.

No wonder there is a community perception of poor value. Also a willingness to adopt very determined avoidance behaviour, which generally involves adding to congestion in the CBD. Which was the very problem the Cross-City Tunnel was designed to alleviate.

Unfortunately a contract is a contract. So short of a huge amount of goodwill and not a few concessions: no government can in reality over-ride past decisions.

Also no government can over-ride political reality and incorporate into contracts measures which the electorate is not yet willing to accept. One of the bigger "elephants under the carpet" is that during the life of the Cross-City Tunnel contract it will probably become compulsory for all registered vehicles to be fitted with some form of electronic tag; and that some form of road use congestion charge will apply in peak periods into the main CBD areas of Metropolitan Sydney. In a finely balanced electorate where the vast majority of voters are drivers, no member of the Joint Committee would admit that their party would ever consider such a move. Let alone write the possibility of such a contingency into a Public-Private Partnership contract.

Parking is another of these "elephants under the carpet". While the motorists of Sydney don't share the belief of the French that they have a god-given right to park on the footpath: they do believe that where there are two or more lanes, the kerbside lane should always be for parking. Except of course if they are driving through and don't intend to stop there.

In the ancient world all roads were said to lead to Rome. Among parliamentary joint committee members, it is a fair bet that the international road most travelled on the study tour, business or holidays; is probably the road through London. I ask you to cast your minds back and recall, that the ubiquitous yellow line restricting parking is as much a part of the London transport and traffic management as red buses and black taxis. For decades now London has abolished parking on major traffic arteries and "High Streets". There is also a long-standing use of priority bus lanes and a congestion-toll has been recently introduced for central London.

In Sydney a rationalisation of parking has been in the "too-hard basket" for decades.

We may all be amused by British soccer fans being currently advised not to mention the war at the World Cup. However for decades all political parties in New

South Wales have been content not to mention the parking; for fear of mobilising the motoring lobby or offending business owners in local electorates. All other costs have been subjugated to the fear of a political cost.

In the post-war period a significant proportion of the metropolitan main road expenditure has been spent on widening arterial roads, which apart from one direction in the peaks have 33% to 50% of their traffic capacity devoted to parking. Moreover we still have motorways that end in middle distance suburbs (F3, M4, and F6), forcing traffic for the CBD and inner city onto these inadequate arterial roads. Victoria Road illustrates this hardening of Sydney's traffic arteries. It has been widened at great expense over the past seventy years. Yet a total of about eighty on-street car parking spaces over its length reduce it to two lanes in each direction for most of the day. In one place at Gladesville a bus stop in one of these two lanes reduces it to one lane. Yet this stop could be moved fifty metres to keep two lanes of through traffic. But that would mean the loss of three or four car parking spaces. As mentioned earlier cars pulling in or out of these spaces or a bus that can't pull into a stop can also reduce this road to one lane in each direction at any time.

Several points must be made here.

First, solutions to traffic problems are not just found in massive motorway projects and more road construction. There is an onus on governments to look honestly and courageously at existing transport infrastructure and ways that it might be efficiently and cost-effectively improved. Along Victoria Road for example, state government funding of 100 to 120 parking station places, could eliminate on-street parking to create a dedicated 24-hour BEE Line (Bus Express and Emergency) lane in both directions between Sydney and Parramatta. Local councils could also fund additional car parking spaces. While considerably more could be created by providing incentives to private developers to redevelop some of the relict "shoe-string" shopping precincts that developed along the inner city arterial roads in the days of trams. Allowing developments with mixes of retail/commercial, parking station and residential functions could incorporate the existing streetscape facades and have the private sector fund off-street parking spaces.

Second, like many of the traffic problems around the Cross-City Tunnel, those along Victoria Road are much worse today because state and local governments have not had the foresight and political courage to make small sensible measures in the past at times when there was the opportunity to do so. For example when the trams were removed from city streets, priority systems for buses should have been introduced. Particularly since the tramway operator had been responsible for the roadworks in and maintenance of those lanes. Another opportunity was lost when the S-lane system was introduced to facilitate right hand turns on arterial roads.

Third, traffic flow problems have often been exacerbated by state government acquiescence to some of the sillier town planning proposals for these precincts put forward by local governments. Ryde City Council for example is currently developing a town plan for Victoria Road through Gladesville that involves the requisite architectural taste of Tuscany, but that "locks in" the dysfunctional urban forms of fifty years ago.

Local governments with great passion and frequency call for dramatic improvements in public transport, yet very few councils are willing to accommodate

sensible planning reforms such as increased population densities, that will actually promote such improvements.

No discussion of the Cross-City Tunnel would be complete without reference to the current "Village Idiocy Planning" of Sydney City Council. The mantra of light rail and bicycle paths as a panacea for the city's transport woes is a nonsense that is deserving of contempt. The history of trams in the Sydney CBD after the advent of the automobile had been one of inflexibility and congestion. Any accident or incident had the potential to cause chaos. The economic argument against them can be found in any basic economics text: in the section on fixed and variable costs. A few minutes with a calculator working out how many trams would be required in the city to move say 25,000 people a day, mostly in the peak, would indicate what a limited solution light rail is for Sydney.

Fourth, while still a much smaller city, Sydney shares much of London's development pattern of urban form and function. However, inner London has an extensive underground or subway system. This was built at a time of cheap labour in the pre-automobile age. It is not something that Sydney can replicate. Though in the next fifty years Sydney should develop an inner city East-West Loop Line of heavy rail using the existing redundant Metropolitan Goods Line and the unused tunnels around St James Station. This would ideally link the CBD-Rocks-Rozelle-Leichhardt-Marrickville-Airport-Randwick/UNSW-Stadiums-Darlinghurst/East Sydney-CBD.

Further modifications to the Sydney Metro-Strategy must incorporate more sophisticated transport planning to encourage a more functional and efficient city.

Finally, some of the restrictions imposed by the Cross-City Tunnel do appear somewhat mean and petty. For example the reduction of the speed limit in the old Kings Cross Tunnel at the end of William Street down to 50 kph is an unnecessary attempt to make that route less attractive than the Cross-City Tunnel, and cannot be justified on safety grounds. It will prove to be discriminatory to its users in other ways also. The entrance to the tunnel is beside the new Cross-City Tunnel. Many drivers will be anxious at first not to be funnelled into the wrong tunnel and will be distracted. Some will no doubt mistake the lighted 80 sign of the Cross-City Tunnel as the speed for the Kings Cross Tunnel. Still others will mistakenly interpret 50 as 60. At first many drivers would not associate such a tunnel road with such a low fixed speed. No doubt a fixed speed camera will be primed to inform them of the error of their ways some 4 or 5 weeks later.

For over five years now RTA officials have been aware of similar perceptual mistakes in the M5 East tunnels, where variable speeds change without warning at night for routine maintenance. Particularly confusing for many motorists is when the normal speed limit of 80 is dropped to 60. This regularly catches hundreds of motorists who think they are travelling at the speed limit. There are very real safety issues here and very real duty of care and ethical issues for the RTA and other tunnel operators to design safety systems to adequately warn motorists of hazards and that variable speed restrictions are in place. It appears that like the rest of the state these toll tunnels are littered with bad design.

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