

View from Canberra



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Do you often look at Australia and wonder why the public transport infrastructure investment over the last decade or more has primarily focused on light rail and some other very big heavy rail projects with no real debate or consideration of what the alternative transport vision and mode might be.

A recent report produced in South Australia titled *Developing Bus Rapid Transit -The Value of BRT in Urban Space* highlights that the Adelaide O-Bahn bus system is far more efficient than Adelaide rail. The O-Bahn started operating over 30 years ago and was the first BRT in the southern hemisphere. A light-rail transit line was planned along the River Torrens corridor to service the growing north-eastern suburbs but on paper the O-Bahn stacked up. It was cheaper than light rail to build and operate; and importantly it offered flexibility, allowing buses to enter and exit from the road system.

Sound familiar? – that was 30 years ago. In fact, the review of the O-Bahn and what might be possible commenced in 1979 – that was over 40 years ago. And what is happening today in the ‘modern’ 21st century? It is hard to believe that despite the growing evidence about BRT we are *still* in a situation where all infrastructure and modal options are not being fully considered.

The BIC has produced two major reports on why BRT is a very good option which includes an assessment criterion to look at prospective projects and compare BRT, light and heavy rail options. Despite these and many other reports from ITLS and academia from around the world, we have seen over the last decade light rail in particular become the mode of ‘expensive choice’ as I call it.

What is going on? Are the right decisions being made and when our governments decide to build a big rail project, are these projects ever revisited to see if they delivered on the promise and the cost? Is this too politically sensitive to do after the event? Probably. So we need to assess PT projects properly before we build a rail line and make sure that all options are considered and not skewed by romantic notions of rail as a child or ‘Europeanizing’ Australia or building a permanent legacy to their Ministerial term. Are we spending Australia’s infrastructure dollars in the smartest, most productive way?

Do we know?

Don’t get me wrong, light and heavy rail have their place and projects like the Sydney Metro will be transformational but light rail for Canberra or the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney are transport projects where BRT should have been more fully considered.

There are many debates about this infrastructure decision-making process in the passenger and freight areas.

Is the strongly criticized, so called, ‘white elephant’, Adelaide to Darwin rail line delivering what was expected? Was it a good infrastructure decision? How many road trains did it take off the road, and has, or will Darwin’s port ever become the access point for trade between Asia and Australia and see this rail line full of freight? Is it working efficiently as a passenger service - “The Ghan”?

I am pretty sure our politicians do not want to know the answers to the Darwin to Adelaide rail question or the answer to why other questionable rail projects were built but the answers would no doubt be embarrassing in



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some circumstances but useful when considering future transport infrastructure investment. As I said above, don't get me wrong, rail is central to our passenger transport future and some light and heavy rail projects have been the right decision in my view, but we need a new robust way to assess passenger transport infrastructure projects.

In next month's column I will bring you up to date with a project that the BIC is undertaking with strategic partner Roads Australia to give a greater focus from all Governments on the importance of investing in bus related passenger transport infrastructure.

Bus Australia Network

