

Integrated Transport Options for Southern Tasmania

Submission from Chris Harries

[Chris has had a lifelong interest in energy management and transport issues. He is a member of the Tasmanian Government's Climate Action Council and is Convenor of the Peak Oil Tasmania education committee.]

1. The Big Picture:

The parliamentary inquiry into integrated transport options is welcome and very timely.

Hobart City itself is in a state of flux as a result of several confluences:

- the national imperative to reduce carbon emissions;
- the newly instituted Clean Energy Fund;
- high volatility of petrol pump prices and world oil markets;
- Jan Gehl's recommendations on refurbishing the Hobart City precinct;
- a new national policy focus on the livability of our capital cities;
- shifting of the rail freight hub to Brighton;
- new and mooted developments on the periphery of the city, especially in the airport vicinity;
- shifting trends in choice of transport modes by the general public;
- a strong policy focus on the need to develop healthier lifestyles;
- a strong policy focus on policies that support social inclusion.

This contextual backgrounds highlights one thing about transport: inevitable change is upon us and therefore we have no choice but to adapt to the changing times. Much better to embrace it.

The core purpose of the integrated transport inquiry should be assess where these multiple trends are taking us and us and how they should be collectively managed in the best public interest.

The inquiry should pay heed to all of the above trend lines. In doing so, it should be noted that, fortuitously, they are not mutually exclusive. Rather, the development of efficient integrated public transport is central to providing an harmonious resolution to an array of difficult economic, social and environmental challenges, and thus would offer multiple positive spin-offs.

In the entire public policy arena, I regard public transport as unique in the ability to deliver such multiple benefits.

2. The climate imperative:

Scientific evidence on human-induced climate change may still be disputed in some quarters, but the issue is having and will continue to have profound and increasing implications at a federal, state and local level as Australia attempts to adapt to a carbon-constrained future.

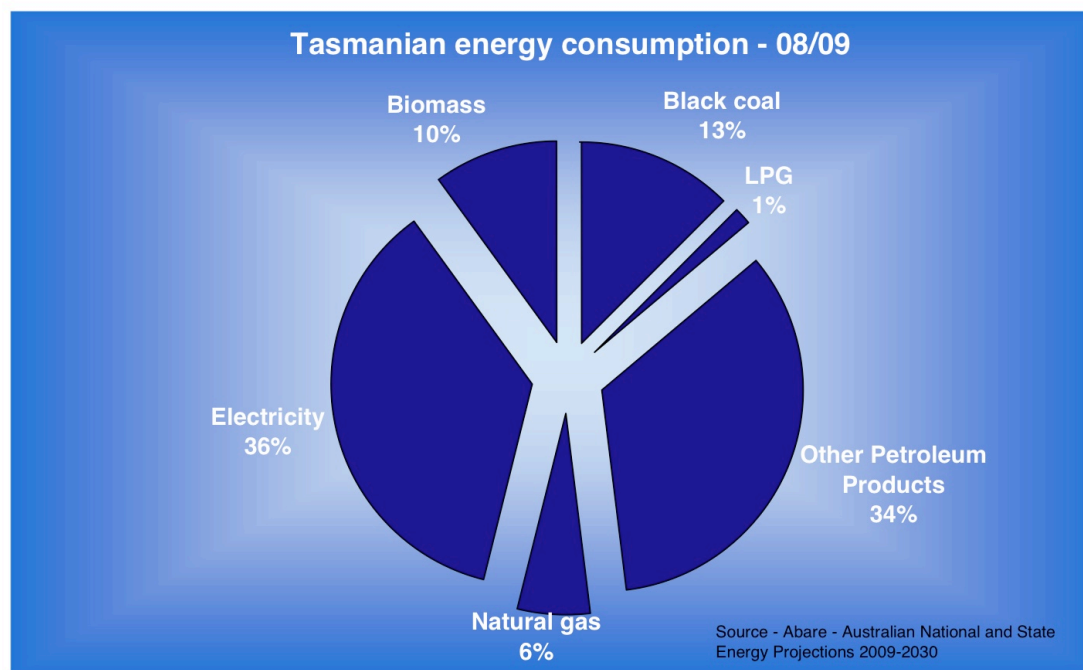
Confronting the climate challenge will fundamentally alter how society uses energy, what energy sources are used and how efficiently energy is utilized. From a transport perspective, one person switching to public transit can reduce daily carbon emissions by over 2,000 kg in a year. This inquiry sits at the pointy end of that process of change.

Ramifications of those changes to energy consumption patterns will be very profound and will increase over time. It is therefore prudent for policy makers to be abreast of these impending changes and to be forward thinking so as to take advantage of policy changes as they take place and also the incentive schemes that will help administrators adapt to these challenges.

3. Transport as an energy conservation consideration:

When Tasmanians think energy they generally think electricity. This is a legacy of our century-long focus on dam building and controversies surrounding hydro-electricity.

However, as the chart below shows liquid fuel energy usage is virtually equal in scale to that of electricity, and is a vital component of Tasmania's energy mix.



Overview of Tasmania's Energy Sector

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More saliently, whilst Tasmania can boast 90 percent self sufficiency in its supply of electrical energy (and is rightly proud of that fact), by sharp contrast we import all of our liquid fuels. We have zero self sufficiency of those fuel products, yet we rely on imported liquid fuels to supply nearly all (98%) of our essential transport services, for both freight and people movement.

Transport policies are therefore central to Tasmania's economic future and to the contemporary political setting.

4. Petrol prices and energy security:

Running parallel with the climate imperative is the global problem of oil depletion. This is sometimes referred to as Peak Oil, but is best regarded as an inexorable upward trend in petroleum prices.

In brief, oil will not run out but the costs of recovering it from more difficult locations and lower grade sources are causing world petroleum fuel prices to escalate well above the CPI index.

Though the global financial situation has resulted in depressed oil prices for the present, there is a general consensus amongst all of the major international energy agencies that fuel prices will continue to escalate rapidly in coming decades.

This upward trend will have significant ramifications on the state economy, Tasmania's energy security and, particularly, the universal affordability of private motor vehicle transport.

5. Transport as an economic consideration:

During the coming 'critical decade', changes to public policy will reward efficient energy use and discourage inefficient systems, and this will add to the cost of private transport.

In Tasmania especially, transport will be affected more than any other policy sector.

- **With regard to the state economy:** Tasmania imports liquid fuels each year at a wholesale value of around \$1 billion. That entire sum is lost annually from the state economy, since we import 100 percent of our liquid fuels. If upward fuel price trends continue, that impost on the state's economy will also increase proportionately with dire consequences for our already strained economy.
- **With regard to the interest of Tasmanian citizens:** though much attention has been paid to increasing electricity costs, this inquiry needs to keep in mind that the average household sinks more disposable income goes into providing fuel for the family car than into their electricity bills. What's more, the global fuel supply problem is likely to cause petrol pump prices to increase even faster than power bills. This will cause increasing public tension over time.
- **With regard to low-income households:** comprehensive research undertaken in Australian capital cities shows that citizens who will be most affected by rising fuel prices are low-income householders who live on the periphery of cities (in peripheral housing estates such as Bridgewater and Rokeby). Those far flung households have higher transport costs than do most citizens, albeit in tandem with a lesser ability for the residents to afford those costs.

Any transport planning that helps to offset the above three trends – that is, to reduce fuel imports and travel costs – will provide tremendous dividends in relation to our general economic prosperity and also in relation to social welfare.

6. The status quo:

Tasmania, along with Western Australia, boasts the highest per-capita car ownership in Australia, by a significant margin. This fact could be attributed to the dispersed nature of Tasmania's population, but it could equally be seen as an indictment of our failure to provide attractive and affordable public transport alternatives.

State	Vehicles per 1,000 population
Western Australia	830
Tasmania	825
South Australia	765
Queensland	750
Victoria	750
ACT	720
NSW	650
NT	590

Whichever is true, as the poorest state in the federation the upshot of this statistic is that our over-reliance on private transport is a major, and growing, cost burden to the Tasmanian community.

Is this situation locked in place by our particular geography and demography?

The rising and often volatile cost of transport fuel caused by peak oil is likely to place stress on household budgets, with areas of high car dependence, long trip distances and limited sustainable transport options most severely affected

Conclusion made in UTAS 2012 consultant study on impact of peak oil.

My view of Hobart's transport possibilities is guided by personal experiences – having ridden Hobart's former electric trolley bus and trams to school and remembering well the commuter rail service that used to operate between Bridgewater and Hobart. That was 50 years ago.

In the space of my lifespan transport infrastructure has changed out of sight, thanks to the affordability of the private motor car. But now we are seeing circumstances beyond our control forcing a dramatic reappraisal of how we get around.

And so I ask: If 50 years can see so much change, what are the possibilities for the next 50 years?

What could Hobart be like in, say, 2050? How can such a vision be brought about in the best public interest? What needs to happen now to help realize

that longer-term vision? How do we convert from being the victims of change to becoming the controllers of change?

7. Obstacles to change:

I surmise that the greatest obstacle to developing a viable transport vision for the future and constructively working towards such a vision is that the public and private agencies that determine transport policy are so caught up in business-as-usual that they are simply unable to confront inevitable change. Innovative transport solutions tend to be immediately resisted and rejected on the basis of limited economic analysis, and this tends to lock in the status quo position.

I submit that this inquiry should welcome all innovative transport proposals, including the light rail and ferry options, and make sure that they are thoroughly investigated in the context of the Big Picture.

The economic viability of every proposal is a necessary bottom line. However, the culture of dominant car-centred institutions, such as DIER, need to be challenged so that the overall public interest is not too easily dismissed by a reductionist economic analysis.

The Integrated Transport inquiry should demand that Triple Bottom Line accounting is a fundamental basis for examining transport options

These analyses also need to take a wide systems approach. In view of the sustained high level of public expenditure on roads and highway infrastructure, the inquiry should examine cross-subsidisation between private motor transport and public transport infrastructure and should determine if the balance between them is appropriate, in terms of:

- the Big Picture challenges that Tasmania has to face.
- Tasmania's state budget allocations.

8. Summarizing the Big Picture:

Transport is a major cause of Tasmania's greenhouse emissions and, for this reason alone, reforms to transport policy needs to be a high priority in the state government's future planning and investment.

Improving public transport infrastructure has the advantage of offering multiple benefits: greenhouse emissions, reducing Tasmania's liquid fuels imports and increasing the resilience of Tasmanian communities in an era of great uncertainty.

Economy: Investment in public transportation creates jobs and avoids the outflow of dollars.

Environment: Investment in public transportation is an investment in our planet.

Energy: Tasmania's energy security and economic security increases when we invest in public transit.

Quality of Life: Investment in public transportation leads to improved health and quality of life and improved livability of our towns and cities.

I submit that this inquiry should impress upon the state government that, in view of the above, a much greater emphasis needs to be placed on policy changes and budget allocations that support graduated, innovative improvements to public transport infrastructure.

It is very pertinent that *Infrastructure Australia* now been mandated to fund public transport, not only roads, thus enabling states to re-align their transport infrastructure choices and transport funding priorities.

9. Shifting trends in choice of transport modes.

The Integrated Transport inquiry should be mindful that what is regarded as the status quo is actually in a state of considerable flux.

- Private car ownership in Australia [peaked in 2004](#), on a per capita basis, and has been [in decline](#) ever since that date.
- Average annual kilometres driven by motorists [in Britain](#) and [the US](#) is similarly in general decline, and I suspect the same trend is occurring here.
- Patronage of Metro bus services is increasing at a rate of approximately 6% per annum.
- Commuter cycling and walking in Tasmania is increasing at a similar rate.

There is a need for better research to pin down local trends with better precision, however, in short, whether because of cost or for environmental reasons, citizens are choosing to drive less and to use other forms of transport. These shifting trends are most prominent in the younger generation.

If these trends are sustained or accelerated we shall see a compounding effect whereby travel behaviours in twenty years time may be completely different to what we have today.

These shifting trend lines should inform the inquiry that forward planning for Hobart region's transport should be based on what is likely to be the case in, say, 2025, rather than what is happening right now. Too much transport planning and infrastructure investment is conducted on a premise that current patterns of travel are more or less static, or worse, on a wishful-thinking premise that private vehicle transport will continue to grow as it has in the previous thirty years. It won't.

10. Urban density is a barrier to public transport: myth or fact?

It is often argued that offering reliable, efficient public transport is impossible in small, low-density cities and regional towns. Whilst traffic congestion is a major factor that favours the uptake of public transport, it should be noted, however, that the population density of Hobart is not much less than that of other Australian cities and is above the 700 people per km² that is considered to be a viability threshold for efficient commuter transport.

City	People per km ²
Sydney	2058
Melbourne	1532
Adelaide	1295
Perth	1090
Canberra (includes Queanbeyan)	1005
Darwin	926
Brisbane	918
Hobart	895

km² = square kilometre

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics⁴

I submit that the low-density argument certainly has merit, however these thresholds are based on behaviour patterns in a society where virtually all citizens own a registered vehicle, and can afford to drive it. The 'new normal' is likely to be quite different. Economic analyses of future transport options need to take these changing behaviour patterns into account.

Size-for-size Hobart and surrounds has a better public transport infrastructure than most in the 100 - 200,000 population category. That does not mean we have an optimal system, there are many European small cities that, through investment and clever urban design, have much better public transit services. Hobart region can aspire to best practice.

11. Metro bus services:

Metro Tasmania is well managed under its current administration. It has attempted to innovate and has improved its services under very tight fiscal situation.

Patronage of suburban bus services in Hobart suburban area is not significantly constrained by ticket prices.

Patronage of out-of-town services, such as to the Channel area are very much constrained by ticket prices, many commuters reporting that it is cheaper for them to travel by car.

Patronage of suburban bus services within Hobart area is mainly constrained by:

- our low level of traffic congestion, making the choice of car trips an easy one to make.
- financial restraints on Metro to offer the best possible vehicle infrastructure and services on all viable routes.

These two factors work against each other. The key to advancing Metro's patronage mainly lies with a political determination as to its value to the community. So long as there is an over-riding political view that public transport is developed at a minimalist level so as to cater for those people who are poverty stricken or who, for whatever reason, are unable to own or drive a car, then its full potential will be severely constrained.

I submit that the inquiry should challenge policy makers to re-assess the value-for-money advantages of Hobart's public transport infrastructure in terms of the full gamut of relevant issues such as public health, social welfare, reduced accident trauma, social inclusion, community resilience, our moral response to greenhouse gas pollution and avoidance of costly public expenditures on roads to ease congestion.

The inquiry should seek to have a comprehensive economic study undertaken to analyse the full cost-benefit value of public transport investments, including the various hidden costs that are not normally accounted for.

At a lower level, innovations in feeder depots are proving to be effective. It seems the next step is to gain state and local government support to further develop park-and-ride facilities on the outskirts of greater Hobart.

Kingston desperately needs a transport hub including a park and ride facility with bus interchange.

I would like to see travel on Metro's Sunday bus services be made free, since Metro currently receives very low patronage on Sundays.

Most other incentives to use public transport will come from Hobart's urban planning reforms, rather than from Metro itself.

12. Country bus services:

Unlike Launceston, Hobart has no central terminus for inter-city and country bus services. This curious lack of basic infrastructure is a cause for much inconvenience and confusion amongst tourists and other travellers.

The Launceston general terminus was coupled to a shopping complex development and I submit that the inquiry should investigate if there are any opportunities to develop a Hobart based terminus in tandem with commercial developments that may be occurring in the near future.

Such a terminus would cater for airporter buses plus all bus services that link Hobart with outlying regional areas. A taxi ramp should be located at the same venue.

13. The northern suburbs rail corridor:

It is very rare for any city to suddenly have an open transport corridor made available that obviates the need for land acquisition or building demolition that usually accompanies the development of transport infrastructure.

Though it may be too early to plan immediately for its best use, as a priority the inquiry should recommend that:

- 1) the rail corridor with associated public land must be dedicated to future commuter transport.
- 2) the rail tracks themselves should be preserved so as to keep open the option to use them for possible rail prospects.
- 3) the existing bikeway should be retained, since it is very popular and has the capacity to carry a very high load of people traffic and this value will only increase over time.

Meanwhile, the light rail proposal should be re-appraised with a broader set of parameters.

If a container crane is to be retained at Hobart wharves it will be in the interests of business relying on freight the rail tracks be retained for special purpose freight trains that service that need.

The single rail line does tend to limit the functionality of the corridor as a two-way commuter rail thoroughfare, so I suspect that its best purpose for commuter traffic will end up being as a one-way peak route, most likely using traditional buses or hybrid-wheeled vehicles that can operate on either tracks or road.

The route would be made most serviceable for all likely purposes if the rail tracks were imbedded in a hardened road surface that existing Metro buses can immediately use.

The light rail proponents deserve credit for their very thorough job in detailing possibilities for light rail and its advantages, so I won't repeat those here.

14. Ferries on the Derwent

Like the light rail proposal, better utilisation of the Derwent to enhance both commuter traffic and tourist amenity is economically marginal starting from scratch, but has sound prospects in the long run.

Both possibilities should be allowed to grow over time with appropriate support from the Tasmanian administration.

The best possible support for non traditional transport modes is to stop public transport operators from competing against each other rather than competing against the car. With a transition away from private vehicle travel, all will benefit much more via a combined, supportive strategy.

Introducing new modes of travel, such as light rail or Derwent ferries, without also developing an integrated ticketing system would probably render them non-viable.

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