

# Batchelor plan is driving against the traffic

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Throughout the world buses, trains and trams are seeing declines in usage. In the United States they now account for only 1 per cent of the transport market. Public transport is fast approaching similar unimportance in Australia.

In Melbourne over the past half century, public transport as a share of passenger trips has fallen from 57 per cent to 7 per cent.

Like King Canute, Transport Minister Peter Batchelor wants to roll back the trend. His goals for 2030 are ambitious. He wants to reduce car use from 74 to 60 per cent of all trips and to raise public transport's share to 15 per cent.

Such a trend reversal has been seen nowhere in the world. To attempt to make it happen, the Government is allocating the lion's share of transport and road funding to public transport.

Over the coming decade, the Batchelor plan allocates more than \$6 billion to public transport and little more than \$2 billion to roads. The plan allocates three times as much funding to the 7 per cent of trips that are by public transport as the 74 per cent that are by car is to receive.

Many of us have a nostalgia for public transport. But the fact that its decline is consistent across the world in a sure-fire indicator that it does not cut the mustard of consumer needs.

The modern city just doesn't have the geography that allowed an effective public transport system in days gone by. To be efficient, public transport needs high population densities with people moving along radial routes.

But city trips are becoming more dispersed and population densities are falling. Half a century ago 55 per cent of Melbourne's jobs were in the CBD. Today it is only 10 per cent. Back then public transport paid its own way. Today the taxpayer covers 80 per cent of the fares.

The growth of car ownership is what is killing public transport. People prefer the convenience and comfort of their cars. A car is now available to virtually all adults who want it.

Hence public transport is becoming redundant except for serving the city centres and some specialised needs.

Unfortunately, the Government, prodded by anti-car "elites", cannot come to terms with consumers' preferences for using their cars. It is throwing money at public transport, preventing new shopping centre developments, and trying to ensure a more compact city.

In trying to ensure a more compact city it is restricting land for development on the periphery and encouraging apartment building in inner areas. The effects include spiralling land prices and disappearing affordability for those who don't have a foot on the home ownership ladder.

The Government is clearly not responding to consumers' wishes. Its policy is starving roads of funding. Car users pay twice as much in petrol taxes and rego charges as is spent on roads.

Inadequate road spending means mounting congestion. Aside from commuter inconvenience, this reduces the city's commercial efficiency. Excessive costs for car commuters and other vehicle transport and is reducing the fabled "liveability" of Melbourne.

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