

# Putting a tax on our parks

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The State Government is to introduce parking fees in Albert Park, the first such tax imposed on users of a park.

Among the fine-sounding rhetoric the Government uses to justify this is that the measure is necessary to provide "a fairer parking system" and "a sustainable revenue stream" for the park and the improvement of facilities. It declares, with a straight face, that parking profits will be spent in the park.

The Government has an irrepressible desire to squeeze the public for money - especially revenue that it can argue promotes a public benefit.

There are, however, other motives. Central to these is that the policy is in accord with the Government's Melbourne 2030 plan, which aims to stop Melbourne spreading geographically by restricting people's choice of housing.

One significant element of the 2030 plan is to reverse the long-standing increase in car use. The plan favours "sustainable" transport options, which are defined as walking, cycling and public transport. Public transport is expected to increase its share of travel from the present 9 per cent to a highly improbable 20 per cent.

The Government says it proposes to bring this about by increasing the speed, reliability, convenience and frequency of public transport. Reducing availability of parking is also a stated strategy. Parking and road use fees would reduce the affordability of using the car.

Hence, in addition to new parking charges in Albert Park, we have measures such as the \$800 tax for each car space in central Melbourne.

Though there are good public policy reasons for the Government's backflip on the Scoresby freeway, charging for its use is also a mighty handy accessory to the goal of forcing car users onto public transport.

Melbourne 2030's anti-car philosophy is convenient for an ALP Government if it succeeds in delivering a larger share of the travel business to public transport. In the first place, this means increased opportunities for traditionally Labor-voting transport employees. In addition, it helps the transport unions, which are important funders and controllers of the ALP. If the Latham diaries tell us anything, it is that ALP politicians are beholden to unions.

Albert Park is in fact a hub for football, cricket, tennis, basketball, swimming and other amateur sporting activities in Melbourne. Using parking fees to tax these competitive sports flies in the face of the Government's stated goal and vigorous propaganda encouraging Victorians to enjoy more outside activities.

The users were gearing up to mount a protest. This would have been unlike the Save Albert Park protests of yesteryear, which used the Grand Prix to canalise dissent to the Kennett reform agenda. A protest against parking charges would have been mothers and fathers protesting to save Albert Park for sports users.

Not relishing the prospect of watching people with a genuine grievance filling their television

screens, the Government has bought acquiescence from the park's sports groups. The minister in charge, John Thwaites, has (for the time being) reduced the fees he originally proposed and offered concessional permits to sports clubs. In addition, there is a funding offer of "up to 20 club grants of \$5000 each year".

The problem is that once parking meters are in place, the precedent is set and the Government has a new tax cudgel.

With parking fees in Albert Park, the Bracks Government is on a trifecta. Increased parking revenue provides funds that governments can pretend are charges rather than taxes. In addition, for an ALP Government there are auxiliary benefits: potential job increases for traditional Labor voters and payment of dues to the transport unions.

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