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CHAPTER THREE

Establishing Issues in Transport Policy

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SUMMARY

The process of establishing issues in transport policy is viewed and treated differently by almost all of the parties to the process. The framework within which this occurs is considered, and specific examples are given of the links and processes involved, including freight policy development, the treatment of non-motorised transport, travel demand management and the assessment of safety. The mediation of the very wide range of forces involved has always presented problems to those concerned with transport operation and construction, especially as the periods required to develop many transport policies and projects far exceed electoral and budget cycles. The changes in government transport related organisational structures and their objectives have significantly altered both the level and diversity of public professional debate and the information underpinning it. The critical role of the various characteristic times for processes to develop and become endorsed are examined, and the requirements in the altered economic and organisational environment to gain earlier issue establishment, effective debate and continuing endorsement are considered.

INTRODUCTION

The establishment of issues in transport policy can be approached from many different directions. In an academic environment it is helpful to examine some of the aspects that are less commonly studied than individual projects or modes of
transport. Two of these are poor matches between the needs of the various parties involved and the sometimes protracted cycles of planning and decision making, and the professional and other parties and their changes in roles and the needs that now exist to ensure that issues emerge and are established in an effective manner (Wigan and Ogden 1986). Both are affected by exploring the changes in environment and role, the types of instruments and constraints on those instruments, and the mix of expectations and assessment procedures that emerge.

A common process for the analysis and understanding of transport policy development and articulation is done from the standpoint of the institutions and institutionalised processes involved (Starkie 1976), with some contributions on the roles of the varied participants (Loughlin 1987). The treatment of transport policy specifically from the widely differing standpoints of the professional and others involved — the primary goal of the teaching objectives of Wigan and Ogden (1986) — has received very limited attention in such publications.

**THE PROCESS OF ESTABLISHING ISSUES IN TRANSPORT POLICY**

Transport policy must cover several very different areas. These include:

- regulation of transport and movement operations;
- access to transport opportunities (air links etc);
- vehicle specifications;
- infrastructure construction and expenditure; and
- evaluation principles and resource allocation across different areas and locations.

All of these are strategic issues, and require a mixture of broadly agreed ideology and consultation across many different bodies and groups.

Once such policies are formulated, attention moves to an implementation focus, frequently on a series of highly localised projects — and those groups in that locality that are affected by them. Rational models of development and advice seek to identify and implement policies that achieve the greatest benefits to the community. The influence of the time horizons for obtaining this benefit, the relative weights of the different components, the distributional effects and the political impacts will differ depending on the ruling ideology.

A strategic centralist view is one of a professional administration seeking long term plans — often at implied discount rates discounted against the opportunity cost of capital, using social cost benefit valuations of travel time and developmental needs. This implies a long term group of advisers with stability and longer horizons than the electoral cycle. The practical effects are that major projects tend to get worked up over a long period, and be provided at the relevant stages of electoral and business
cycles. Such a model implies a measure of agreement over a considerable period by a professional constituency represented in most of the different organisations and institutions involved, at least at an advisory level.

The capturing of this agenda by the engineering profession took place at an early developmental stage of Australia's history, when construction and development were largely synonymous. The value system encapsulated in this history has parallels throughout the country in a number of areas (water resources being a prime example). The shift to an operational management mode took some time to emerge, and although there is a very rapid rate of change, the achievement of a satisfactory balance between operational and planning issues has yet to be reached. The outward signs of this change include structural shifts from separate construction and operational authorities to unified transport agencies — and the inevitable move towards divisionalisation that ensues from such huge institutions.

These large "unified" bodies still contain a similar diversity of professionals (and professional cultures) as before, but with a very different operational mission, and a smaller diversity of bodies providing input to the policy process. Many differences of view and perspective become resolved within these amalgamated organisations without much externally visible debate between the different professional groups.

The input from various interest groups is always required at some point in the process: the views on where this should be vary widely across the political spectrum. Consultative development of policies has been popular in many Australian administrations for some time, but this consultative process is not universally followed as changes in the Victorian government in late 1992 have clearly shown. The Parliamentary apparatus of Committees has served the community fairly well since the early 1970s, but is still a comparatively recent structure in Australia, as distinct from the US Congressional Committees in the very different political structure of the USA.

The channels for establishing issues all require either (or both) media of a popular or professional type, access to those formulating or interpreting the political policy process, and also a basis for ensuring that "weight" is attached to the input. This weight may be either political or technical, the latter may have to be built up over a long period — and the changes and movements in transport or organisations increase the importance of personal links and sustained contact.

Information plays a major role in identifying and mediating these processes, but purely technically based issues require considerable development and communication to gain a broad endorsement before becoming effective. If any of these systems fails to perform, particularly in the information area, policies veer towards the reactive and opportunistic.
FRAMEWORKS FOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT

The formal frameworks for policy development are clear cut — but the manner in which they are used is far from stable or often even clear. There are a series of formal planning, coordination and politically mediating bodies — but the less easily managed media, lobby groups and individuals with a knowledge of the manner in which the system actually operates provide a second, and far less controllable and predictable group of clients.

The professionals assisting the entire process to work, within the public sector, provide both players and opposition to this process. No policy can emerge, gain endorsement and be put into practice without a progressive development and promotion between at least the majority of these groups.

The working out of the roles and perceptions of many of the roles in the policy process are explored elsewhere by Wigan and Ogden (1986) in a detailed framework used to support teaching of transport policy to graduate engineers and planners.

Other factors which can and have been exploited to establish transport policy issues on the agenda — if not always to keep them there — have been diverse: from long term professional development, single issue promotion, and reactive responses to problems or events seen out of perspective. Many professional groups have not participated actively in the issue establishment and policy process until recently, when both the Australian Institution of Engineers and the Chartered Institute of Transport (CIT) have taken such action.

Initially the Australian Institution of Engineers National Transport Committee sought to define at least the need for a National Transport Policy, with mixed results from the consultative process adopted (Grigg, Houghton and Pretty 1989). The localised and issue based needs for input and review have been chosen by the CIT, a direction likely to gain a larger degree of participation and mutual knowledge.

The reliance on formal associations of lobby and special interest groups has raised the importance of such bodies, but not always to the satisfaction of the community. Associations of professional and operational bodies across Australia have undertaken major studies to formulate views. There is a major literature on public policy as a whole, and on the problems of formation and carriage of policies in this political and frequently turbulent environment (see Lindblom 1979 for a careful discussion of an incremental and satisficing strategy of this type).

National policies for land transport are rarely effective due to the local impact of land transport (and indeed air and sea terminals) on their precise position. The closest that could reasonably be termed a national policy has been given (in fairly broad terms, couched for each major constituency, such as bicycles (Land Transport Policy Division 1992)) by the Department of Transport and Communications (DOTC) Land Transport Policy Division (1993). Ironically, the 1991-94 Corporate Plan of this Department gives a better feeling for the emergent policy, as it indicates a cumulative series of priority issues and the sequence in which they are planned to be addressed (DOTC 1991).
In other countries other mechanisms are used. Perhaps the most interesting model for Australia at present is the transport policy of the European Economic Community (EEC) (Commission of the European Communities 1992). This necessarily focuses on harmonisation, standards and, to a degree, equity. It also specifically addresses the mixed objectives of transport as well as its pervasive influence.

The careful distancing in this document yielding to member nations their own implementation within the principles and project groups defined and identified has many echoes in Australian politics. The Constitutional framework within which Canberra must now work is probably less supportive than that for the Commission within the EEC. The ability and instruments by which Canberra can position and confirm transport policy issues is more limited. The tools of harmonisation and fiscal leverage remain the most critical instruments.

Some Examples

The time scales for infrastructure planning and development range up to 20 years, as is clear when road corridor planning, road and transport reserves and major ports and airports must navigate hurdles at every stage. Many attempts have been made to establish a national ports strategy (one of the more recent was attempted by the short lived Department of Urban and Regional Development (DURD)) after the Whitlam government). In each case the positioning of the issue failed, as the States had the carriage of the issue, and preferred to compete rather than cooperate. Several electoral cycles have passed while major issues such as the second Sydney Airport, and even the Very Fast Train have slowly progressed.

The development of transport policy is not limited to major schemes and construction. Operational issues such as the funding of urban public transport operations, the regulation of heavy vehicle movement, and safety oriented policies are more easily dealt with as they correspond to more clearly defined interest groups.

Standardisation, harmonisation and coordination roles provide an effective means for centralised transport policies to be developed. The reversible nature of many such policies, and the shorter lead times involved make them attractive politically.

The same features which make the issues concerned with narrow and operationally-oriented issues attractive to instrumentalities make them suitable for other parties to exploit through the media. The longer term issues are more suited to academics to identify and argue, and help to build up a constituency of understanding and agreement. Travel demand management provides an example where this has taken over 30 years to reach a serious stage after academic focusing and attempts to establish the issue, and then only because a series of developments have coincided.

Some examples of the roles and processes are useful to consider in detail.
Example 1: Freight policy

Freight systems are broadly regarded as a much disliked creator of externalities to those on or near the road, terminal or transport system, yet have very high priorities in public sector and development assessments. The first full-range freight policy for a major area was the Greater London Council (GLC) in 1973-5 (Freight Unit 1975, GLC 1976). This process was set off by a political instruction to reposition freight from the bottom of the perceived transport policy issue list to the top, with public transport. The process was followed by a rational information acquisition and research process which used an extremely extensive consultative process in the many technical sectors of freight (over 850 companies and organisations were involved over two years) supported by a large number of working groups involving unions and interested parties across the whole area.

This process model, a modification of a consultative development process, was managed to position issues progressively (and fairly publicly) into three categories: all agree (winners); no one wants it (losers); and the middle area. Much effort was applied publicly and privately to a successful narrowing of the range of such middle issues. The process was highly effective, as the rating of freight issues moved up to join public transport at the top of the agenda, and the national UK government joined in by attaching the National "Lorries and the Environment" program to the Freight Unit and contracting it to do the largest of the freight operations research studies.

The positioning and establishment of freight issues was done in several ways: participants in the process carried the winners forward to the appropriate forums; and professionals built up a common ground of agreement on possibilities and desirable outcomes. Ironically, the only "classical consultative" policy (designated truck routes) met with 50,000 complaints and stalled on a single small section of the route, as so often happens when such techniques are employed. The major outcome was the winning of the M25 London Outer Ring Road, due as much to the emergence of a common basis of information and perspective that emerged through the professional aspects of the process as to the political pressures applied by the prospect of blanket bans on freight movement within areas of London. The processes required to establish the National Road Freight Commission and the National Rail Corporation in Australia took far longer, but had a number of common features.

Example 2: Non-motorised transport policy

The community at large has largely negative perceptions about freight vehicles and broadly positive (and often highly unrealistic) views of public transport and non-motorised transport. In both cases these views are held without a real understanding of the characteristics of the transport system and of overall user needs. Management of the debate has been largely political in its nature.

Such debate is noted more for its energy and the intensity of the lobbying than the facts that underpin it. One of the major planks that moved bicycle planning positively into transport rather than safety issues was the development of the Victorian State Bicycle Committee's (SBC) research program in the early 1980s. This was the initiative of a pressure group member, who brought professional
transportation analysts into the process. The series of research studies undertaken positioned the SBC quite differently and into a far more acceptable "professional" context for many of the transportation engineers and planners. One piece of work on the actual usage patterns and levels of bicycle users firmly established the credibility of treating bicycles as a means of transport rather than as a simple "safety issue" (Wigan 1983).

The standardisation and harmonisation route was also exploited to establish the issues. Technical Standards Australia contributions and participation produced results quite quickly, and the combination of excellent advocacy backed by sound professional analysis has made a considerable and long term difference to the treatment of this mode of transport. The building of an informed constituency within the engineering and analysis professions was a major factor in establishing bicycles as an issue on the standing agenda of transport.

Example 3: Travel demand management

The perspectives of the different parties (providers, managers and users) of the transport system are being squeezed together by the need for travel demand management. Road capacity is simply not available for much of the travel that is still growing, and the more effective selection of the trips to be made using that capacity now needs positive management.

The first major road pricing study was done by Reuben Smeed as the Chairman of a 1957 UK Government Committee, but the first live experiment waited until 1974 in Singapore. Repeated attempts to establish the "TDM" issue were made by professionals in many guises: "Transport Systems Management" being but one of them.

The next move was an environmental push, based on pedestrianisation and similar town planning and access control policies. But even the most recent greenhouse gas initiatives have not been as effective as the competitive investment by the PROMETHEUS consortium in Europe, which has brought the EEC car industry a major technical advance and a leapfrogging of the US industry. This has now combined with the communications and road infrastructure industries to create the new tag of "IVHS" (Intelligent Vehicle Highway Systems) which has at last placed tollway systems, intelligent roads, safer vehicles and road pricing on the same program with wide recognition and increasing understanding.

This combination of thrusts has at last brought TDM to the implementation starting line, nearly 40 years after the first academic/governmental positioning of the issue. The broad constituency that now exists under this banner is still fragile, but likely to be self sustaining and to bring practice onto the ground, in yet another 5-10 years.

Example 4: Assessment of safety

Safety is a high profile measure of transport performance broadly understood and valued by the community in a way that most of the other factors are not. One of the
key issue establishment methods is to exploit safety due to its high public recognition and political interest, and not least because many of the options for furthering safety issues are relatively cheap for governments as regulation plays such an important role.

The valuation placed on safety is such that political responses are comparatively easy to obtain, the costs are often low (for government) as the subjects pay for all the costs bar enforcement. The changes in information technology (IT) have so altered the economics of enforcement that police resistance has been largely obviated and major impacts on transport operation can now be achieved by IT support. This and the impacts on organisations following the ability to control and use information are discussed in Wigan (1986).

The establishment of some of these issues required a shift in the public acceptability of surveillance technology (Daniels, Webber and Wigan 1983) and the introduction of owner onus and absolute offence laws. This was the major problem, and the IT arrived at the time when this was occurring. The technical proposals also met an environment where $100 million and more of revenue could be assured and so an enforcement ‘cost’ decision became a revenue earning policy.

THE ROLES OF TRANSPORT PROFESSIONALS

The changes in transportation have strongly affected professionals in the area, as the goals and operational missions of the largely public sector organisations have been altered. The fiscal accountability processes have both sharpened the organisations and moved many technical functions out from the centre to outsourcing positions.

This alters the basis on which transport professionals can influence the establishment of issues, and changes the nature of the professional support consensus as well. Different professions now have a major role: engineers must now deal with economists, financial analysts and strategic planners.

ACCOUNTABILITY, BUT FOR WHAT? BY WHOM?

The management of the transport system has been steadily shifted to the management of the financial resources devoted to the transport system. This has shifted the emphasis from strategic control (with an in-depth understanding of the system) to financial control (with good costing data and pressures towards divestment of identifiable segments as a major control and provision strategy). The broader agendas are now emerging from economic thought (as in Michael Pusey’s thesis on economic rationalism) rather than engineering infrastructure development and maintenance.
THE ROLES OF INFORMATION

The nature of the policy debate is massively conditioned by the information flows associated with the processes. One of the casualties of the recent developments has been the information base for passenger travel, although other modes of transport are now gaining better means of monitoring continuing performance.

However this information is now held more closely, and a better business operations understanding may not yet have led to better understanding of the customers in a broader sense. The accountability of corporatised units means that the consultation processes will be starved of information to mediate market failures and distributional effects.

STRATEGIC REQUIREMENTS FOR EFFECTIVE ISSUE ESTABLISHMENT

Clear recognition of the mixed goals will help, and the highly educated community needs to be conscripted more effectively. The concept of public servant as serving the public is altering substantially. The trend to corporatisation also tends to quarantine Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, and legitimise very high costings for FOI requests that are permitted to pass through. But privatisation largely removes the channel.

There is as yet no equivalent (other than Austel) to an Australian Stock Exchange or a National Securities Commission for public enterprise. The attempts to quantify community service obligations (CSOs), and to introduce Total Factor Productivity (TFP) and other performance measures (other than the ever increasing "dividend" that comprises a rising fraction of State finances) are not necessarily aimed at ensuring the collections and wide availability of the public information required to form a constituency for planning in a non adversarial manner.

How does one establish transport policy issues in such a regime? Do they become channelled into regulatory and competition oversight bodies such as Austel or the Trade Practices Commission (TPC)?

Availability of Information

Another major pressure is the growing trend for the public enterprises to charge monopoly rents on information sources, often for information collected under legal compulsion and with significant privacy issues attached that provide a yet further non tariff barrier to issue raising.

These shifts in information power are a significant force driving contestability and competitive performance measures to the fore, on the ideology that efficient resource utilisation is ensured thereby. This is an arguable proposition, given the barriers to entry to the shared information required to establish many transport policy issues, and the market power and the legal powers still vested in many of these enterprises.
These barriers are still higher for bodies forming closer in components of the government network, as the barriers to information flow (required for efficient competition in many transport areas) could become more substantial.

Given these rising barriers to shared information and planning vision formation on the basis of much of the basic information, a "market" driven approach is becoming the norm: find out what the customers want, and respond accordingly. This can be done, and is done, but in many areas the cost precludes the fundamental statistically reliable information needed to do the assessments and re-frame the relative importance of the issues thrown up in such simplified public "consultation".

It is hard to see the model of sound, monitored information (see Taylor, Young, Ogden and Wigan 1992) coming into effect. If it does not, the leeway for purely political issues establishment and agendas becomes that much greater. The best data for systematic planning in Victoria is now 15 years old, and based on incremental updates to the 1978 Melbourne Transportation Study. All data that has followed has been such that little of strategic importance can be derived, as only vehicle flows have been economic to collect through the long data drought that has followed 1978.

One reason for the data drought has been the poor use made of the information when it was obtained. Wigan (1987) produced a major book converting this and many other pieces of data into information: one issue per point per visual diagram. The Melbourne Transportation Survey Research Program (Taylor et al. 1992) resulted directly from the Victorian Ministry of Transport seeing this book and realising the direct utility of the information once processed and made immediately useable in this manner.

**POTENTIAL IMPROVEMENTS TO THE SYSTEM OF ISSUES ESTABLISHMENT**

The growth of single issue politics in recent decades has made the business of government more complex, while the external pressures on Australia have at the same time forced a higher rate of change on transport provision, funding and administration. The rhetoric of the structural changes has been concentrated on a customer focus, realignment of strategic goals and the terms of reference of the Government Business Enterprises (GBEs). The practice has been on reducing the staffing levels and raising the financial accountability of the public components of the system. Some of these changes have been broadly effective. Franchising of transport operations may be counted at least a limited success, but almost all changes have altered the ground rules for influence on transport policy.

The financial control strategies adopted to stem the expenses of Government Business Enterprises (GBEs such as Qantas) in transport have been complemented by a closer and less half-hearted effort to monitor and assess continuing operational performance (DOTC 1988). This has led to a greater recognition of the utility of total factor productivity measures, and to a slowly increasing level of awareness of the need to gather and review information about customers. Market intelligence is
beginning to be valued, if not the subject of significant investment. However the information gathered by GBEs is beginning to be exploited, often with a useful monopoly rent component leading to a reduced broad availability of planning and other information, and in the information infrastructure for strategic planning.

At the same time the ability of the community, both relative and absolute, to make effective and informed use of the broader transportation information has been steadily improving. Greater education, higher levels of expectation in consultative processes, wider access to computing and information management tools and a reduction in internal planning strengths in major transport GBEs all combine to suggest that a better model of community consultation could be constructed recognising the balance of technical strength was now more equal (Daniels, Webber and Wigan 1990).

The shift in the public sector to regulatory control and mediation of competition between entrants in freer markets (Austel and its successors) is changing the focus of the lobbying process and altering the relative power of different bureaucratic bodies. How then do professionals and others establish transport issues? Transport reporters tend to be the less experienced in the media, thereby placing the onus on the members of professions and the public.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined a number of the roles and mechanisms involved in establishing issues in transport policy from a particular standpoint. There are several factors that emerge:

- Changes in organisational accountability;
- The disparate cycle times of effective transport policy establishment and implementation are generally out of step with the driving forces;
- The role of information access is increasingly important as devolution of accountability increases, financial control instruments become sharper, and the nature of transport bodies continues to shift;
- Current ideologies have combined with financial control models to accentuate incremental development as a policy, and undermine more radical or larger scale innovative strategic or "rational" planning and implementation efforts;
- Many planning and inquiry processes have become grounds for better quality analytically based confrontation, often with the result of neutralising the technical inputs of both sides;
- Owing to the widely divergent cycle times of many transport and political processes, the interests of the different parties are decreasingly likely to be sorted out by market forces, especially where quasi-monopolies are privatised and inadequately monitored;
Nation-wide coordination, standardisation and regulatory processes have been used, and will be used, great deal more; and

The balance of information power has altered, but the combination of information capitalisation and organisational devolution has not yet significantly improved.

The implications from this perspective for establishing issues in transportation must therefore include a greater level of participation by professional bodies, more active and public use of the information power that is potentially available to a broader professional community, and positive efforts to combine professional inputs with lobby groups with established places in the pre-consultative processes as well as further development of individual contributions. The reduction in the informed debate will require close attention to be paid to the new breed of competition regulators, such as Austel. The Trade Practices Commission could well join this new circle of issue raisers and actors, and is a fresh route for issue establishment.

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