

Sending the Right Message on Sustainability

Understanding the consequences of global warming should lead to consistent and concerted policies and actions. Yet from all levels of government and the media the message is very confused.

Wilson Tuckey's statement that he would book out of any hotel that installed water efficient shower roses (Background Briefing, Radio National 4-3-07) sends the wrong signal, as does the support by governments of over-reliance on the motor car.

In Australia around 25% of our greenhouse gases (GHG) come from the transport sector. It's a little lower in Victoria but only because of the higher percentage of GHG from dirty brown coal. So you would think that the transport sector, and in particular, measures to reduce the numbers of driver-only cars, would not just be a priority but would be an obvious and easy target.

The Victorian State Government is to be commended for its many initiatives in funding and improving public transport. In reality though we will need to do considerably more and we will need Federal funding (under a 'Better Cities' program, or similar). Generally most of the State and Local Governments are starting to address the greenhouse gas issue but the messages are mixed.

The Victorian Road Minister's 'staunch defence of cars': "My job as minister for roads is to fix congestion, not cause it. I won't be supporting any reduction of (car) access into the city in order to provide for a bicycle lane" definitely sends the wrong message. A few days earlier the same minister said that cycling is "not only a social and environmentally responsible activity but an important way to deal with our congestion issues." [The Age 3-3-07].

The minister also said: "People have a right to drive their cars, and to do it without being impeded..." [The Age 3-3-07]. This presents a paradox because cars mostly impede cars and are the principle cause of congestion. And yet cars do so much more, and not just through greenhouse gases, noise, road rage and accidents. The private car has shaped our cities in a very negative way through loss of amenity, through space provided for roads and parking, and through loss of permeable surfaces (thanks to bitumen and concrete). Worse still, our outer suburbs are all but dependent on the motor car and the consequences of that are social isolation and an increase in obesity.

The answer to road congestion is certainly not more freeways. We can't point to any city in Australia where building freeways has solved the congestion problem. They might move it for a while but sooner or later the congestion is back.

The Victorian Government's concern about congestion has prompted a review of Melbourne's East-West transport needs. The document looks like an excuse for connecting the end of the Eastern Freeway to something, particularly as that freeway will have to cope with the flow-on from Eastlink. The Terms of Reference however state that the "study will consider opportunities for the development and integration of public transport along the corridor...." We can only hope that it will go past the

consideration and onto the implementation stage. A cynic would say that we are still waiting for rail lines on both the Eastern Freeway and the new Eastlink.

There is no doubt that we are bound up with the motor car - in one weekend we had the Ferrari Festival (Lygon Street), Motor Show (Jeff's Shed), V8 Supercars (Adelaide) and Superbikes (Phillip Island) – and it will be near impossible to break the nexus of our love affair with the car.

If we are serious about Climate Change and coping with the beginning of the end of the oil age, we have to avoid sending conflicting messages. We need to do much more than introduce hybrid vehicles or use biofuels. As well as the greenhouse gas reducing measures that are the equivalent of 'removing so many thousands of cars off the road,' we need to actually start removing some cars off the road.

We need to design our cities so that they are not car based, but rather structured around sustainable transport corridors. Cities with reduced noise and congestion, that make our streets more liveable, that encourage walking and cycling – cities that improve our health.

The good news is that we actually know how to build better cities and reduce the production of greenhouse gases. The problem is the lack of political will and the influence of those agencies still advocating the expansion of our road system at the expense of sustainable transit.

We also need to introduce new forms of transit including high-speed commuter ferries for Port Phillip Bay and cost-effective ultra-light rail vehicles (light trams) in our new suburbs. We have perhaps ten years before the effects of climate change really impinge on our society. We need to implement some real change in how our cities are designed and we need to start now.