

Federal election special

Election editorial: Labor by a nose

From our perspective it is heartening that federal funding of public transport has emerged as an election issue in Victoria. This has been sparked, ironically, by the \$420 million of federal funding for the Scoresby Freeway which is no longer required due to the decision by the Bracks Government to hand the road over to the private sector.

At the time of writing the major parties have taken clearly distinct positions on this issue. On the one hand, the Coalition insist that Victoria must be punished for this ‘broken promise’, and the \$420 million will be locked up indefinitely unless the decision is reversed and the freeway built as a toll-free road. On the other hand, the ALP say they will spend the \$420 million on other transport projects in Victoria, and are receptive to the idea of spending the money on public transport.

The PTUA takes the view that Federal funding is urgently needed for public transport in Victoria, and \$420 million would be a welcome start in comparison to the billions spent on roads each year. We are also sympathetic to the concerns of people in Melbourne’s outer eastern suburbs, who understandably feel cheated that \$420 million of promised Federal money may no longer be spent in their region.

We believe the best use for the \$420 million would be to fund a package of public transport measures in the Outer East, similar to that called for in our 1998 document Making Connections. These measures include:

- a heavy rail extension to Rowville via Monash University;
- an extension of the 75 tram from Vermont South to Knox City;
- a comprehensive network of feeder bus services, built up by reconfiguring the services that already exist and running them to tram-like service levels;

- duplication of the remaining single-track sections on the Lilydale and Belgrave lines;
- a rebuild of the Box Hill interchange, to bring buses, trams and trains as close together as possible; and
- local road works, such as grade separation of the Springvale Road level crossings.
- Our cost estimates put the total bill for these projects at roughly \$350 million (up from \$240 million in 1998 due to inflation).

There are of course many other public transport projects in Victoria that warrant Federal funding, and that count as small change in comparison with AusLink’s freeway projects. These include the 5km rail extension to South Morang; electrification to Sunbury, Melton and Mornington; extra stations on the Craigieburn line; various half-mile tram extensions to improve connections with trains; a comprehensive bus priority programme to match the State’s \$30 million tram priority programme; and many other small projects described in our policy document It’s Time To Move.

At the time of writing, the Democrats and Greens remain the political parties whose transport policies best reflect the PTUA’s vision of environmentally friendly transport. We therefore recommend that you give your primary vote to a minor party or independent candidate of your choice. Of the major parties, we hesitantly recommend a preference for the ALP; while they continue to disappoint at State level, and although both parties seem committed to a spending spree on new roads, the Federal ALP appear much more likely to grant federal funds to public transport when in government, while the Coalition appear not to tolerate taking one cent away from freeway-building.

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Annual General Meeting report

The Annual General Meeting of the PTUA took place at Ross House on Thursday 16th September.

PTUA President Daniel Bowen and Secretary Tony Morton gave brief reports on the Association's activities over the year, highlighting our successful New Year's Eve campaign, and our ongoing local government campaign.

Overall the most positive development in the last twelve months has been Knox Council's proactive stance on public transport, and their decision to fund a feasibility study and associated publicity for the Rowville rail line.

Organisationally the PTUA remains in a strong position, with a stable membership base and a full-time volunteer office presence.

The meeting welcomed newly elected Committee members Mark Johnson and Chris Trikilis, and gave a vote of thanks for departing Committee members Matt Cook and John Cox, who we hope will continue in an active role with the PTUA.

There followed a general discussion on a number of public transport issues raised by members.

Thanks to all those who attended, and we trust 2005 will be an exciting year for the PTUA

Policies compared: Democrats

The Democrats national policy support moving freight from road to rail and an increased role for public transport. They recognise that current federal funding is biased too heavily towards roads, but would not curtail federal funding on urban freeways.

The Democrats would reform Fringe Benefits Tax to favour public transport and car pooling, and remove the GST from public transport fares.

Democrats Victorian Senate candidate Jess Healy states her top five transport priorities as being:

- diverting Scoresby freeway funding to public transport projects such as the train to Rowville and tram to Knox;
- more rural public transport services;
- extended student concessions;
- public transport in public hands;

- better safety by staffing trains, trams and stations.

Though we think better bus services and service coordination should also have made the list, these priorities demonstrate that she understands what's needed. Thus support for the Democrats in the Senate is worthy of consideration by voters who wish to support better public transport through the ballot box.

Newsletter contributors: Daniel Bowen, Peter Cook, Alex Makin, Chris Loader, Tony Morton, Peter Parker and Beth Driscoll. Our thanks to Max Nicholson and the rest of the dedicated mail out team.

Policies compared

Coalition: Roads, roads, roads

The federal Coalition's transport election policy makes only two references to public transport. Firstly, there is a promise of better security for "mass urban transit and major inter-modal transport precincts" which the PTUA would welcome in general. Unfortunately the second mention is blatantly anti-public transport: the policy criticises the opposition for suggesting the Roads to Recovery program could also fund public transport initiatives "meaning less is available for roads". The policy boasts huge increases in road funding while giving nothing to public transport, even though there are plenty of precedents for the federal government funding of public transport initiatives that we badly need.

In the first three weeks of the campaign we've not heard any supportive noises from the federal Coalition about public transport in the election campaign. The Coalition's previous major transport policy announcement - the Auslink package - also completely neglected public transport. The Land Transport Development Act of 1988 specifically allows for federal funding of public transport projects, but the Coalition have failed to recognise this, continuing to irresponsibly boost car travel by funding urban road projects while ignoring public transport.

In summary, the Coalition's policy is proudly biased towards road funding and this will only set back efforts to increase public transport use in Australia. The policy ignores all the social, economic and environmental benefits of sustainable public transport to Australia's future.

Labor: All talk, few dollars

While the ALP's election transport policy was yet to be released at the time of writing, their "2004 National Platform" frequently mentions the need for effective public transport. Existing Labor policies, however, show an unmistakable bias towards roads. Current election promises include full or partial funding for the Geelong and Deer Park bypasses.

From a public transport perspective, Labor's Roads to Recovery-style program will extend funding to public transport infrastructure projects. Latham's suggestion that the \$420 million earmarked for the Mitcham-Frankston freeway be diverted to other transport projects in the Outer East including public transport was welcomed by the PTUA.

Labor has announced a \$10 million upgrade to Pakenham Station. Shadow Minister for Transport Martin Ferguson claimed that "Federal Labor's transport priorities are not just about improving our roads they're also about the efficient movement of people and better access to public transport networks." While this is a positive move, the contribution looks rather small compared to Labor's commitment towards funding half the Pakenham bypass - a contribution of \$121 million. A National Integrated Transport plan is a noble goal, but not when public transport receives less than 10% of the funding.

While it is yet to be announced, we understand that Labor may announce funding of the tram extension from Vermont South to Knox - if so this is to be applauded as a step in the right direction transport in Melbourne's Outer East.

Greens

The Greens are entering this election as an outside chance at a few key electorates in Sydney and Melbourne. They also seem likely to pick up a few senate spots from the Democrats.

The Greens present policy focus is on Tasmanian wilderness, and while this is all well and good, it is not the main concern of the general public in the areas where they have the most support. While the Greens have made favourable commitments in the past regarding Public Transport, it does not figure as prominently in their rhetoric as it could, though it is there and in clearer terms than the commitments from either major party. This is commendable.

Their policies include:

- reducing car use in urban areas
- improving public transport services, with the aim of doubling market share in major cities by 2010
- ensuring new transport infrastructure is subject to achievement of specified environmental and social criteria

While the chance of the Greens capturing lower house seats is minimal, MPs who win their seats on preferences after a strong Greens vote tend to be more responsive to community concerns.

The Greens have a chance of capturing or sharing with the Democrats the balance of power in the Senate, which would make their influence over whichever power takes government significant.

While all parties have their flaws, the Greens are a fairly safe party to entrust with your vote.

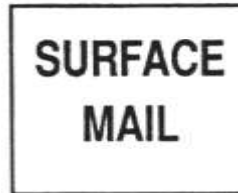
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