



## 2016: A Year of Crisis and Opportunity

**Recalling the old Chinese curse, these are interesting times for public transport in Victoria.**

**To the regular litany of cancellations, bypasses and signal faults that plague our train system, we have seen added the withdrawal of V/Locity train services, a derailment at Rushall, and a public outcry over elevated 'skyrail' plans for level crossing grade separation.**

It may seem a wicked coincidence (or worse) that so many problems would beset a new State Government less than halfway into its first term. But in fact all of these difficulties share a common origin: and that is why we should neither call this build-up of troubles a coincidence, nor hold this government uniquely to blame for any of them.

Every failure, every public protest, represents in its own way the 'blowback' from the cumulative failure of decades of successive governments to invest in, plan, develop or maintain public transport, or even to take it seriously.

The burden of cumulative failure was obvious to the Brumby, Baillieu and Napthine Governments well before today. But they sought only to limit the short-term political damage caused by peak-hour overcrowding, or to tinker round the edges with embellishments like PSOs on stations or free CBD trams. At no time did Victorians get the in-depth policy response demanded - a wholesale commitment of funds and personnel to revive and renew our ailing public transport for future generations. Instead we went on a 45-cent-in-the-dollar frolic with the East West Link.

So we got a central authority in PTV; but without the uplift in powers, independence or expertise to conduct due diligence on Metro Trains or V/Line to ensure they were carrying out adequate maintenance.

Likewise, we eventually got a thorough grade-separation programme for level crossings; but 40 years too late, and with a timescale so compressed by the imperative to make up for past inaction, that there has been no time to properly test support for alternative solutions with local communities.

Residents feel they have been blindsided, not because they weren't expecting change, but because the change has come so quickly and in a completely unexpected direction. Having an Eastlink turn up in your backyard where there was a 40-year-old

reservation is one thing; learning of an entirely new plan to elevate a train line untouched for a century is another thing entirely.

Yet in these crises lie important opportunities and hope for the future.

A State transport bureaucracy, that for decades dealt only in inaction and decline - and in making excuses

for inaction and decline -

now finds itself forced to learn how to have real conversations with the public about growth and new infrastructure. Politicians and transport managers alike are being forced to get into the nuts-and-bolts of building an efficient, seamless operation, and not just lurching from one shiny 'announceable' to the next, while spinning their way out of the boring business of attracting new patrons outside the CBD commuter market or outside peak hours.

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## Keeping in touch...

### PTUA office

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e-mail: [office@ptua.org.au](mailto:office@ptua.org.au)

### Internet

Our web site is at [www.ptua.org.au](http://www.ptua.org.au)

The PTUA runs email lists for member discussions, and to stay up to date with PTUA events. Members can also view archived newsletters online:

[www.ptua.org.au/members/resources](http://www.ptua.org.au/members/resources)

### Committee

Anthony Morton – President  
Tim Long – Secretary  
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Daniel Bowen

Ian Hundley

Anna Morton

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Petra Stock

Bruce Sutherland

Jennifer Williams

Geelong Branch:

Paul Westcott – Convenor

### Member meetings

Melbourne:

Meetings will be advertised in PTUA News and on our website  
[www.ptua.org.au](http://www.ptua.org.au)

Geelong:

First Saturday of every month (except Jan), 10:30am  
Mary MacKillop Room, St Mary's Parish Offices, cnr. Little Myers and Yarra streets, Geelong

### Membership Enquiries

E-mail the office (see above).

PTUA members can obtain cheap yearly Myki passes – see  
[www.ptua.org.au/members/offers](http://www.ptua.org.au/members/offers)

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That's not to say the government isn't announcing lots of things to get excited about. The release of the Metro rail tunnel business case - with its benefit-cost ratio of 1.1, doubtless arrived at on deliberately conservative assumptions to protect against an Eastlink-style embarrassment later - and the strong hint that Melton line duplication and electrification will proceed as an addendum to the project, is unquestionably good news for the whole western half of Melbourne. We also expect to hear more about the Mernda extension, the Sandringham high-capacity signalling trial, and the long-awaited Southland station.

All the same, the best rail infrastructure in the world will never function well in a city like Melbourne unless it's the backbone to an excellent multimodal transport network, with trams and buses filling in the linkages between railway stations, district centres and the neighbourhoods where people live. So this year also brings a renewed strategic focus for the PTUA and our Public Transport Not Traffic campaign on the potential for high-frequency bus services to make critical linkages across our suburbs.

Our Connecting Places campaign - already begun with a submission to the forthcoming State Budget - will take the push for radically improved local transport to communities already seeking alternatives to destructive motorways and perpetual traffic congestion. Initially focussing on a small number of new Smartbus-style routes, we hope this

campaign will build new impetus for important transport investments that may not be as awe-inspiring as new rail tunnels, but have just as much capacity per dollar invested to do the heavy lifting of day-to-day transport. We are also participating in the Victorian Ombudsman's inquiry into fare enforcement - see the results of our survey at [ptua.org.au](http://ptua.org.au). Finally, we are pleased to inform members that audio from Public Transport Minister Jacinta Allan's address and Q+A session at the PTUA's Annual General Meeting in December is now online at [www.ptua.org.au](http://www.ptua.org.au)

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Printed by Kosdown, Port Melbourne.

Our thanks to Margaret Pullar and the dedicated mailout team.

## V/Line woes

**The crisis which engulfed V/Line services at the end of January is set to affect passengers until the middle of the year.**

Rapid flange wear on the wheels of V/Line's VLocity trains led to a quarter of the 59-strong fleet being withdrawn from service overnight, then Metro banned VLocitys from its tracks, after the failure of one of them to properly activate level crossing warning signals near Dandenong.

The emergency led to the "bustitution" of many V/Line services, the running of shorter trains, and the provision of free travel on all V/Line rail and bus services. It also precipitated the resignation of V/Line CEO Theo Taifalos.

Metro's ban on V/Line Bendigo trains was soon revoked, but Gippsland passengers continue to suffer the huge inconvenience of having to change to and from Metro services at Pakenham.

In the meantime, to try to reduce flange wear on VLocity wheels, V/Line has slowed the speed of trains

on a few sections of its network and instituted the hand-lubrication of the inside of the rail head at certain unspecified locations.

To overcome the level crossing problem, Metro is modifying the present track circuit technology for detecting trains at level crossings, as an interim measure. We presume that the temporary fix is to at least allow Gippsland trains to run though to Melbourne.

The permanent solution, which should take Metro six months to complete, is to install axle counters as the detection method at those Metro level crossings which are shared with V/Line trains, on the Pakenham, Sunbury and Seymour lines.

The temporary timetable developed by V/Line to manage the shortage of rolling stock and Metro's ban on most Gippsland line trains seems to have at least settled the situation down. For the most part, passengers are now aware of what type of service they will be travelling on, and how long

it will take, with rail-replacement buses being free.

Allowing free travel for all V/Line passengers was a very crude method of compensation and wasn't popular with a number of regular passengers. However the PTUA is pleased that, unlike the last time free travel was offered, Myki Pass users, the system's most loyal customers, were promised compensation. It's obviously harder, but surely not impossible, to compensate regular V/Line Myki Money users specifically, rather than allowing an open slather.

The PTUA has deliberately not commented on any of the many alleged causes of the two problems, because almost nothing is certain. We are pleased that the respected Institute of Railway Technology at Monash University has been given the job of finding the reasons for the flange wear crisis. Passengers hope that the reasons for the problems, and their solution, are arrived at speedily and as permanently as possible.

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## Council push for Leongatha trains to return

**At its meeting on 24 February, South Gippsland Shire Councillors unanimously supported a motion to develop an integrated transport plan and business case for returning freight and passenger rail services to Leongatha.**

The motion arose from a petition circulated by the South & West Gippsland Transport Group, which gleaned a large number of

signatures from local communities. This petition will now be passed to the State Government and PTV, with a call to provide for South Gippsland rail services in the forthcoming Regional Network Development Plan and reverse the 2008 decision not to return rail services in the corridor.

The Group understands that although the corridor is unable to be used by trains currently,

VicTrack continues to maintain the easement intact and available for future use by freight and passenger trains.

The PTUA has supported the Group in its efforts over the past five years to garner support for the return of Leongatha rail services. We congratulate the Group on its achievements so far and look forward to positive developments in the future.

# Infrastructure Australia: Talk is cheap, but our fares are not

On 18 February, Infrastructure Australia (IA) released its 'Australian Infrastructure Plan' and associated 'Priority List'. These documents set out IA's thinking following important changes in its personnel and purpose.

The Abbott Government put its stamp on IA quickly, replacing both the chief executive and chair in the first half of 2014. IA's current chair is tollroad lobbyist Mark Birrell who (as some PTUA members may recall) was the Kennett Government minister that in 1999 first put an 'East West Link' between the Eastern and Tullamarine Freeways on the agenda.

IA did not capitulate to Abbott's road-friendly agenda without some internal dissent. In July 2014 a draft report with the title 'Spend more, waste more' was leaked to the media. It famously stated that "Australia has a gambler's addiction to roads" and that the country was spending more on roads than ever for little result.

Increased spending on roads, it found, could only come at the expense of vital health, education and public transport needs.

This dissent was short-lived. IA coordinator John Fitzgerald rapidly backed away from the leaked report, claiming it had no official status. No such frank

assessment of Australia's spending on roads has appeared since.

The Infrastructure Plan follows on from last year's 'Infrastructure Audit'. Both include heavy doses of the predict-and-provide mentality familiar from decades of business-as-usual road plans, and call to mind the AusLink strategies of the Howard era.

group without concern for the budget. And the nomination of a swag of road projects under the heading "Urban Congestion" signals a regression to the doctrine that building roads relieves congestion, contradicting all available evidence.

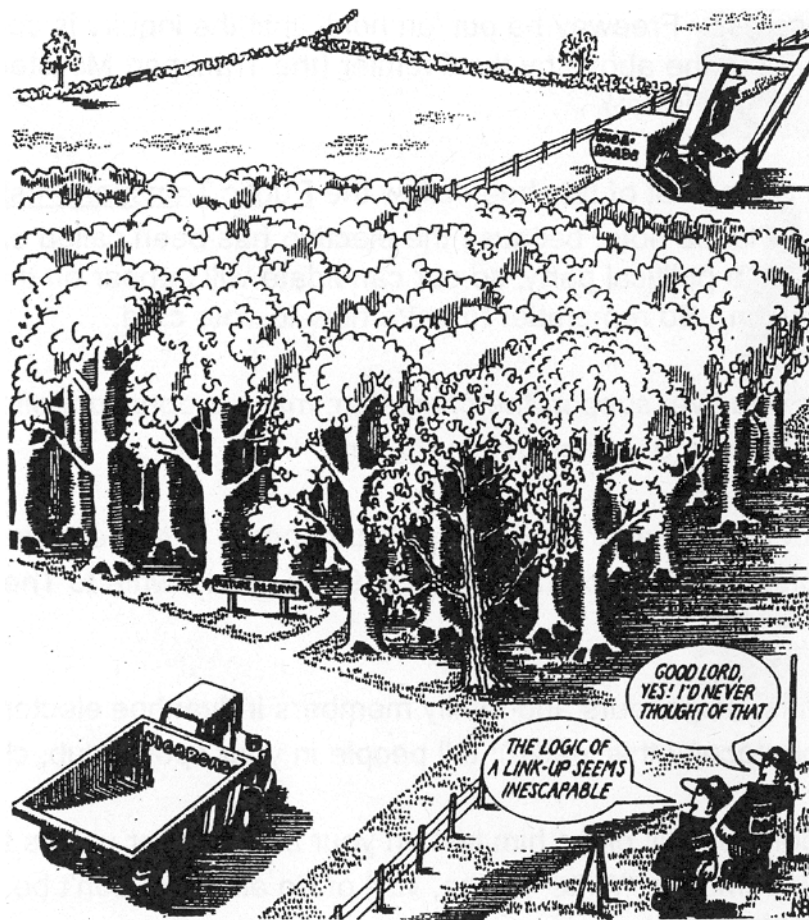
True to the creed of 'balanced transport', road and non-road projects appear in roughly equal numbers on IA's Priority List. In practice this means very little. With two exceptions, the items are 'initiatives' with no cost-benefit analysis or committed funding.

They are mere thought bubbles, like the "line on a map" that became the Regional Rail Link.

The separation into 'High Priority' and 'Priority' initiatives is equally meaningless: if there is some method to assign priority to public works other than by setting out their benefits and relating these to delivery costs, IA has made no attempt to explain

what it is. (Likewise, there is no basis for excluding other popular initiatives such as Doncaster or Rowville rail.)

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The main difference this time is the active consideration given to public transport. Even before Tony Abbott's demise as Prime Minister, it would not have been credible for IA to adopt his 'roads only' agenda. But in its place we have the politically convenient but conceptually shallow 'balanced transport' bromide. This implicitly supposes we can hand out buckets of cash to every competing interest

# Infrastructure Australia: Talk is cheap, but our fares are not

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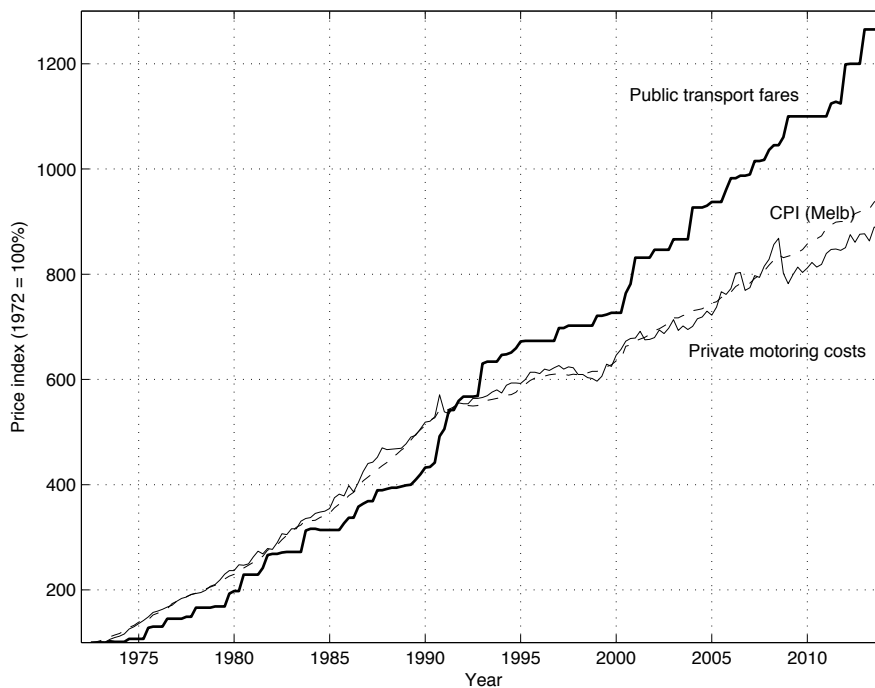
Media attention has focussed on the inclusion of the defunct East West Link on IA's list. It is odd, given IA's express role is not to develop projects itself but to assess and prioritise those proposed by others. But as with many other items on the list, its inclusion is a matter of politics rather than of rigorous assessment. The rationale given is that the 2015 'Audit' identified a need for it. What it actually did, beneath all the layers of maths and computer code, was observe that there's a lot of congestion on east-west arterial roads north of the city. It cited no evidence that a new road would actually improve matters, or that a public transport alternative would not. As with many other road 'initiatives', the 'need' is that the freeway map looks incomplete without the extra lines drawn in.

The Infrastructure Plan is much more than the priority list, of course. There is much useful discussion of the need to link transport and land-use planning, to boost public transport in outer suburbs, and to test novel funding sources such as land value capture.

But there is also an reckless enthusiasm for privatisation (which Tim Colebatch writing for *Inside Story* described as "a

quaintly old-fashioned Thatcherite view"). It is difficult not to draw a link between this enthusiasm and the commercial interests represented on the IA board.

One final point needing challenge is the contention that public transport fares are too low.



Transport price trends and CPI for Melbourne, 1970-2015 (data from Australian Bureau of Statistics)

A chart on page 91 of the Plan claims that in Melbourne, fares recover only 22% of operating costs. A check of IA's source reveals that the figure is almost certainly for the whole of Victoria, not just Melbourne. In particular, it includes the cost of providing rural school buses, which operate free of charge across the entire state (and do not accept regular passengers).

The true cost recovery figure based on PTV and Budget figures is closer to 40%, but even this masks important variations. If one-third of revenue is attributed to the tram system, then cost recovery for

trams is over 90% - meaning that Melbourne already possesses a model for cost-effective public transport. Conversely, the picture for buses is probably as bad as IA makes out - reflecting the poor standard of service provided.

As the graph on this page illustrates, Melbourne has hiked fares before in an attempt to recover more costs from users. The result is that while motoring costs have reliably tracked the CPI (or even declined in real terms), our fares since 1990 have escalated more than twice as fast as prices generally. More importantly, the periods of most rapid increase have also coincided with periods of static or declining patronage.

In the 1980s there might have been something to the idea that fares were unsustainably low, as a consequence of rapid inflation.

But if cost recovery is low today it points largely to other factors - chiefly the failure to draw on the ample infrastructure resources already available to make public transport attractive for travel outside peak hours, and to destinations other than the city centre.

This is an area where IA could be a valuable source of advice.

## Geelong branch report

**The January V/Line calamity rapidly assumed centre stage for Geelong residents. The sudden reduction in the number of VLocity carriages meant that two-car VLocitys ran on the Geelong line for the first time in years.**

If they use stations served by express buses (mainly Geelong & South Geelong), passengers forced on to replacement road coaches can sometimes have a quicker trip, if not as comfortable. However those wanting to use "wayside" stations must endure a much more lengthy journey, as buses wend their way to and from stations remote from the main highway.

After the turmoil of the first couple of weeks, most Geelong services are now trains again, and the interim timetable has at least brought some certainty to travellers. What sort of hit to

patronage has occurred remains to be seen.

The recent changes to the Geelong suburban bus system continue to cause annoyance to some passengers, although things have settled down quite a bit. We are not confident that PTV will meet its deadline for a review of the system within a year of its introduction. The finalising of the Regional Network Development Plan seems to be taking up a lot of time and its release has been twice delayed. We are now told it will probably be available by state budget time.

Some local reviews have been held into particular parts of the new network - in Lara, East Belmont, Newcomb and the northern Bellarine Peninsula. We are not sure if it's a coincidence that all those areas are in Labor-held electorates. The Lara review resulted in some changes to routes

and schedules there at the start of February, which seem to have been well accepted.

Late last year our convenor was waiting for a bus at an inner city stop. The service had not arrived after over twenty minutes, and who should come walking past the stop but Ashley McHarry, general manager of the relevant bus company! He had no idea why the bus hadn't turned up but said he'd investigate.

It turned out the driver had not operated the route he was supposed to, despite his running sheet and Myki machine which should have prompted him, he operated a different route! Our convenor received a personal apology from McHarry's general manager, and an assurance that the driver would be "spoken to".

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## Volunteers wanted

### Fundraising team

We would love to create a fundraising team to help and drive our fundraising capacity and opportunities for the PTUA and PTNT. This year is a Federal election year and also the 40th anniversary of the PTUA.

We are looking for creative people and doers to come together and look at opportunities to try and build our funds to continue our campaigning work for a better public transport future in Victoria. Opportunities that exist include assisting with donor letter

mailouts, organising events, such as around the 40th birthday and other creative fundraising opportunities as determined by the team and endorsed by the PTUA committee, so if this is your interest then we would love to have you on board to help grow our capacity to influence the public transport debate.

If you are interested please email: [eleisha.mullane@ptua.org.au](mailto:eleisha.mullane@ptua.org.au) or call 0418 288 110

### Office volunteers

We need volunteers who have time to come in on a regular basis to help with processing of membership and commuter club applications and respond to questions. These activities are a critical part of supporting the organisation day to day. This is a shared role with other members of the volunteer team and we will provide training and support for people who can assist us.

Please contact Tim Long on [tim.long@ptua.org.au](mailto:tim.long@ptua.org.au) if you would like to know more.

## Over or Under - How to deal with removing level crossings

Level crossings are a point of potential conflict between trains, pedestrians, cyclists and vehicles. They can be a safety risk, they hamper free movement, and they can be a limiting factor in the capacity of both roads and rail lines.

Current and former Victorian state governments are to be congratulated in their efforts to remove level crossings, however the rate of removal has been too low. Level crossing removals have been going on sporadically for decades: one or two per year, rarely more, and often none. There are still hundreds of level crossings in Melbourne.

The current state government's "20 in 4 years/50 in 8 years" program is a good start. But the question of how best to remove level crossings remains a topic of much debate, especially since the Skyrail proposal by the state government.

Historically, many techniques have been tried, with varying degrees of success: rail under, rail over, road under and road over. If measured only in terms of physical separation of road and rail traffic, they have all succeeded.

But how did they fare using other measures of success, such as walkability - how easy it is to get around on foot?

An important starting point is the recognition that surface level rail lines form a physical barrier. Crossing points are physically limited to designated points along the line. Pedestrians and cyclists can only legally cross at the designated crossings, and must cede priority to trains. Surface

level rail lines physically divide communities.

By comparison, surface streets and roads are generally more permeable. Pedestrians and cyclists can often cross almost anywhere, and at designated crossing points the priority even alternates between pedestrians and vehicles. Surface streets and roads enable community connectivity. This does not apply to all roads however - major arterials and motorways are usually a barrier, like rail lines.

Level crossing removals that raise the rail line onto an embankment, or lower the rail line into a cutting, have no net impact on walkability, as long as existing crossing points are retained. Rail embankments and cuttings are barriers, and the rail line remains a physical obstacle.

Raising the road onto an embankment, or lowering it into a cutting, actually has a net negative impact on walkability. Road embankments and cuttings become physical barriers that did not previously exist, and the result is a community hemmed in by both rail and road impediments. There is also the issue that properties lose their connection to the road, which could be valuable in the case of for example businesses which rely on passing trade.

Level crossing removals that leave the rail line on the surface, and raise the road onto a viaduct, or bury it in a tunnel, have a net positive impact on walkability by providing an increased opportunity to connect across the road, by removing the barrier, however they have the same issue of separation of properties from the road.

A similar but even more positive effect is seen if the rail line is raised onto a viaduct or buried in a tunnel. The relocation of the railway line allows increased connectivity across what was once a barrier to pedestrian movement.

Based on their impact on walkability, many historic and recent level crossing removals around Melbourne would be judged as dismal failures.

However the success of a level crossing removal is not measured by walkability alone. There are many other factors to consider, such as site limitations, cost to deliver, disruption and duration of construction, urban amenity, noise and visual intrusion, land use and open space. These issues are summarised in a table on the PTUA website at [ptua.org.au](http://ptua.org.au).

Each of these factors will push and pull towards a different method of level crossing removal. It all adds up to a complicated mix that must be balanced with community interests, state budgets and political willpower.

There is no one perfect method of level crossing removal. What is important is that those impacted must be given the chance to contribute and to express their views, particularly towards the community aspects of the design. And when a final design is chosen, the community deserves to at least be shown the respect of having the decision rationale explained.

Removing level crossings can bring many benefits to communities. But don't be surprised if not everyone is happy with the outcome.

# PTUA News

Newsletter of the Public Transport Users Association, Org. No.  
A-6256L  
Print Post: Publication No. PP 100002658  
If undeliverable, return to:  
PTUA Office, 247 Flinders Lane, Melbourne 3000

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## Inside:

### **Crises and opportunities V/Line woes Infrastructure Australia. Level Crossings**

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If you are reading a friend's newsletter and would like to join and help the fight for better public transport, it's \$30 per year (\$15 concession). Call the office, or see [www.ptua.org.au/join](http://www.ptua.org.au/join)

Responsibility for electoral comment in PTUA News is taken by Tony Morton, 247 Flinders Lane, Melbourne.