

## Tunnel vision



Traffic on the M4 Motorway slowly moving towards Sydney. Picture: Gibson Nic

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IN the post-apocalyptic vision of the latest Hollywood blockbuster, *Total Recall*, the only people who use public transport are doughty resistance fighters who keep a single derelict Tube train running to their hide-out in London's devastated and depopulated suburbia.

The remake of the 1990 Arnold Schwarzenegger classic presents a bleak picture of urban life and public transport by the end of the 21st century. The world is divided into two territories, the United Federation of Britain and The Colony (the former Australia, which still has not managed to become a republic) after the Third World War has made the rest of the planet uninhabitable.

The entire population of the UFB is crammed together in a few streets of London, stacked kilometres high above the ground. A fortunate few, mostly the bad guys, whiz along electromagnetic skyways in gravity-defying personal hovercraft, but on the ground hapless peons sit in perpetual gridlock in vehicles that look identical to the Toyota Prius.

The good guys keep the Tube going in the expectation of one day triumphing over the bad guys in cars, which of course happens by the end of the film.

The long-suffering public transport lobby in NSW no doubt shares a sense of that struggle as the motorway lobby holds sway across Australia, despite mounting evidence that car culture is on the wane.

This week's release of NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell's 20-year transport draft master plan signals an emphatic return to asphalt and tolls that will inevitably influence policy in other states.

What is certain is that the battle between the proponents of rail and road, in NSW and across Australia, is set to escalate.

Firmly on the side of expanding public transport is Garry Glazebrook, transport policy manager at the City of Sydney. Glazebrook argues that many Western cities such as Sydney are evolving into denser, more urbanised places where improving rail links and service makes more sense than building more motorways.

The 50-year postwar trend to car-based suburbia is coming to an end, he says, not only in Sydney but in industrial societies around the world.

In the US, he points out, heavy rail, commuter rail and light rail all grew much faster than population and car use in the past decade. The California government also has committed to building high-speed rail, adding to the 20-plus countries that already have high-speed rail and have experienced a substantial rise in rail use for inter-city movement, he says.

Glazebrook says the share of trips made by car in Sydney has fallen during the past decade, while the share by public transport, walking and cycling has risen.

After decades of decline, population in the Sydney CBD and inner suburbs grew by 15 per cent in the past decade, faster than the middle suburbs (12 per cent) and far outer suburbs (7 per cent).

In Melbourne, the figures are partially reversed, with population in outer suburbs continuing to grow faster than in the inner city because of the creation and extension of motorways, but public transport use rising almost twice as fast as car use in the face of rising fuel prices.

In Sydney, with \$53 billion of transport spending up for grabs, O'Farrell is awaiting a report from Infrastructure NSW, due next month, before making any commitments as to which of the "missing links" in Sydney's road network to build first.

The chairman of Infrastructure NSW, former Liberal premier Nick Greiner, has made it no secret that he favours investment in a slew of motorway and tunnel projects estimated to cost up to \$23bn, including a link between the F3 and the M2, the M4 East, and the M5 East duplication, before rail. Meanwhile, this week's draft has revived the F6 motorway corridor through southern Sydney, which has been estimated to cost up to \$10bn.

Greiner was unavailable to comment for this story but Infrastructure NSW chief executive Paul Broad says road projects are top of the list because Sydney's 110km orbital road network, which began in 1962, must finally be completed before large-scale rail gets a look-in. The reality is that 93 per cent of passenger and freight traffic still travels by road in NSW while only 7 per cent is carried by rail, says Broad. Government would be hard-pressed to justify spending up to \$10bn for a project such as the northwest rail link while road still dominates transport choices, he says.

Michelle Zeibots, research principal at the University of Technology, Sydney's Institute for Sustainable Futures, says Broad and the road lobby have little understanding of the challenge ahead.

"Sydney's orbital road network is already finished. What Broad is talking about is the addition of radial motorways that will direct more traffic into heavily congested centres like Sydney's Central Industrial Area, the CBD and the newly developing Macquarie Park in Sydney's northwest," Zeibots says. More passenger vehicles will reduce the land use development capacity and retard future economic growth, she adds.

Zeibots has been fighting the motorway zealots for more than a decade. She was part of a public interest consortium, Truth About Motorways, that in 1997 challenged in the Federal Court traffic forecasts made by Macquarie Infrastructure Investment Management for its Eastern Distributor Motorway under the Trade Practices Act.

Macquarie's claim of 60,000 cars a day by 2006 never went to trial as Macquarie made a security for costs application that stopped the case in its tracks.

Zeibots says most of the traffic forecasts for these tollways, including the Eastern Distributor, are above their ceiling capacity, which refers to the maximum volume of vehicles that can physically fit on the road.

The Eastern Distributor forecasts were above the estimated ceiling capacity and have never been reached in practice. Despite this, a succession of toll road projects, such as the cross-city and Lane Cove tunnels, based on pie-in-the sky forecasts, failed, with investors losing hundreds of millions as volumes failed to get within a bull's roar.

Motorway proponents, including investment bankers and politicians of all hues, have described traffic modelling as a black art, explaining away the consistent failure to anticipate traffic volumes accurately.

Hundreds of investors in Brisbane's struggling Clem 7 tunnel recently launched a \$150 million class action against engineering consultants AECOM Australia after traffic reached only one-third of the forecasts since opening in March 2010.

Critics are also watching Brisbane's newly opened Airport Link motorway, which has traffic forecasts of 95,000 vehicles a day this year, rising to 120,000 by 2026.

Investors' loss of confidence in traffic forecasts means that future road projects will almost certainly have to be funded from the public purse, reducing funds for key public transport projects.

The public faces a grim choice, says Zeibots. "We build the tollways flagged by Infrastructure NSW or we get a second Sydney Harbour rail crossing, but we cannot afford both," she says.

With petrol prices soaring, the equation that underpinned the value of property in the outer suburbs is under threat. The cost of commuting long distances on tollways is rising, which has driven a surge in public transport usage in Sydney and Melbourne. The mantra of road builders such as Macquarie Bank and Transurban that demand for fuel was price inelastic -- that is, people would continue to drive to work no matter how much oil prices rose -- has proven to be self-serving spin.

Traffic on roads in inner Sydney peaked in 2005 because lifestyles and preferences are changing, says Glazebrook. More than 30 per cent of Sydneysiders now live in apartments, he says.

In another sign of what is to come, fewer young people are getting driver's licences. In 1998, 84 per cent of 25-year-olds in NSW held a licence. That had fallen to 74 per cent by 2009 and continues to decline. Increasing numbers of young people are likelier to have a smartphone than a car as they take advantage of online e-commerce and entertainment. Teenagers and young adults have even less reason to leave their bedrooms than before.

The internet also is affecting the once pervasive car culture of the US. In 1978, nearly half of American 16-year-olds and three-quarters of 17-year-olds had driver's licences, according to Department of Transportation data. In recent years that has fallen to 31 per cent of 16-year-olds and 49 per cent of 17-year-olds, with the decline accelerating since 1998.

Car share is becoming popular with 10,000 members in the City of Sydney alone. Household occupancy is rising, after falling for decades. "The public are voting with their feet in terms of where they choose to live and how they choose to move around," says Glazebrook. "More and more people are valuing accessibility above private open space."

The net result is that the number of vehicle kilometres travelled per person in Australia has been relatively flat since 2006. But why, then, has traffic congestion continued to get worse in Sydney?

Zeibots says that, in the rush to build motorways, adding capacity to the public transport network was neglected and maintaining adequate service levels for the metropolitan area suffered.

Despite all the motorway building in Sydney in the past decade, the average road network speed in the morning peak dropped from 34km to 30km an hour in 2004. This coincided with a period of severe disruption to the rail network and the slowing down of the rail timetable. The combination of no new capacity and slower rail services hardwired slower road speeds into the networks.

It's self-evident that commuters always choose the mode of transport that is fastest. If rail speeds slow, you need only a small percentage of rail commuters to shift to the road network, which has comparatively low capacities, to increase travel times for motorists generally. So maintaining fast, high-capacity public transport services, not building more roads, is the best solution for addressing urban congestion.

Building a second harbour rail crossing would increase capacity in the public transport system by 50-60 per cent, relieving choke points at the centre of the network that are restricting traffic flows.

Yet in Victoria the Baillieu government is considering spending up to \$9bn on an east-west road tunnel under Melbourne when the same carrying capacity could be created by investing in rail projects valued at just \$1bn.

The biggest problem is a perception that the budgets for urban railway projects always blow out, which has become a self-perpetuating myth. Gavin Gatenby, convener of transport advocacy group Ecotransit Sydney calls it "the NSW disease" and he fears it's spreading to other states.

The costs of rail infrastructure were allowed to blow out during the Labor years in NSW, he says, and now bidders on construction projects simply "bid up" to the tender price.

He cites the southwest rail link, a 10km line under construction between Glenfield and Leppington that is set to cost \$1bn or \$102m a kilometre. By comparison, the 70km Mandurah line, which runs along the Kwinana Freeway in Perth, was completed for \$1.22bn by the West Australian government, which enforced tight cost controls. "If the West Australian government had built the Glenfield-Leppington line it would have come in at \$200m, not \$1bn," says Gatenby.

Construction of Sydney's northwest rail link is tipped to come in at \$10bn, or a whopping \$435m a kilometre.

Even the costs of light rail have been allowed to spiral out of control, Gatenby says.

Perhaps the lessons of the past decade have not been learned and some politicians still see roads as better vote-catchers than public transport, despite all the evidence that tollways have not met the challenge of reducing congestion and improving the comfort levels of the travelling public.

"There is still time to create balance in transport spending but it's running out. These are decisions that will impact how we live for the next century and beyond," Zeibots says.

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