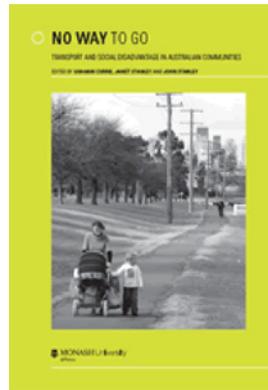


Is transport welfare?

Richard Allsop reviews

No Way To Go: Transport and Social Disadvantage in Australian Communities

Edited by Graham Currie,
Janet Stanley
and John Stanley
(Monash University ePress,
2007)



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Transport policy wars are usually fought on two battlefields. On one, the combatants fight over the funding mix between roads and public transport, while on the other, there is vigorous dispute about the relative merits of public versus private provision of infrastructure and services.

This book considers a third front in the transport wars—‘mass’ transit pitted against ‘social’ transit.

Of course, for those who like really big government there is no battle here at all (just fund everything), but for the saner parts of the political spectrum, there is a real need to weigh up priorities.

But can transport policy usefully be an extension of welfare policy?

The contributors to *No Way To Go: Transport and Social Disadvantage in Australian Communities* generally take an implicit position in the mass versus social debate, but it becomes explicit when two of the editors write that ‘the individual benefits of reduced social exclusion to the people involved are likely

to be many times greater in ultimate value than those that focus on people who are already included’.

In other words, taxpayers are likely to get more bang for their buck by providing a base level of service for the currently transport disadvantaged (social transit), rather than by increasing levels of service where there is already reasonable provision (mass transit).

A key premise of the book is that ‘poverty has less to do with absence of income than with people’s lack of capacity to choose and do what they want to be’. While this may generally be a dubious proposition, it is true that in the area of transport it is the lack of availability of a base service, rather than unit trip price, which is the obvious manifestation of comparative disadvantage.

One of the strengths of this book is that it does consider this important debate without too many diversions into the other contentious transport debates.

Refreshingly, for a public transport book, it is recognised that ‘car availability is a strong defence against transport disadvantage, particularly if the car is your own’ and that ‘the car will continue to be central to assuring social inclusion for very large numbers of Australians’. While co-editor John Stanley has in the past written critically on how the Victorian train and tram privatisation was undertaken, the fact that he is CEO of the private bus industry association in Victoria means that *No Way To Go* also contains no in-principle opposition to private operation of services.

Overall, the book provides useful information about international trends in addressing transport disadvantage, considers particular categories of disadvantaged groups and assesses some current trends in government policy.

The fact that most of the contributors are academics means that, at times, the book gets weighed down by academic style and prejudice, a problem compounded by an unusual structure (partly arising from its origins as an ‘e-book’), some repetition and some deviation from the main task of the work. Although the mobility issues confronting those in remote indigenous communities are undoubtedly among the most serious in the nation, they are so far removed in nature from those facing other disadvantaged people in normal urban situations that they could well have been considered elsewhere.

More illustrative of the main issues of the book are the chapters which consider such issues as how the ageing of the population will increase the num-

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bers of people unable to drive cars for health reasons. Undoubtedly, the most powerful case study is provided by Anne Hurni, who contributes a chapter looking at the transport problems confronting sole parents and young people in western Sydney.

Decades ago, the poorest members of the community lived in inner urban areas where both extensive public transport and the ability to walk to many destinations prevented specific problems of transport disadvantage from arising. Today, the location of many of the poorest members of the community on the urban fringe, or in provincial centres, means that walking or public transport are not viable options and living in such places therefore produces comparative transport disadvantage.

Warrnambool provides the case study for a regional centre and the chapter about it contains some interesting examples of how the funding of community transport can provide counterproductive outcomes for those it is designed to help.

This chapter includes some useful suggestions for regulatory reform. The authors argue that non-students should be allowed to access spare capacity on

school buses and also that school buses should be allowed to be used to provide route bus services at other times of the day. Currently, they are prevented from doing so as school buses do not meet *Disability Discrimination Act* (DDA) requirements.

The DDA is clearly going to have a major impact on transport funding priorities for the next two decades. State governments have been handed an enormous cost burden by this piece of federal legislation and, in many cases, meeting its requirements will preclude consideration of spending on other priorities.

The main problem with *No Way To Go* is that it does not offer any real answers to questions about how anyone in government should assess the merits of different measures to address transport disadvantage. Nor does it provide a workable model for weighing these up against measures to improve mass transit. Actually, the more one considers the topic the more one concludes that if public transport is to have a viable future, it really will be necessary to include social transit in the welfare budget and leave transport authorities only responsible for mass transit.

After all, if the socially disadvantaged are provided sufficient welfare payments so that they can afford to buy a car, those welfare payments are not included in road budgets. Thus, it hardly seems equitable to include welfare-motivated social transit in the public transport budget.

Addressing transport disadvantage is surely an aspect of a policy to address general disadvantage. The value of spending on social transit can be more easily compared with other welfare measures, as opposed to other transport measures. And, if the decision is made to spend welfare dollars on social transit, community services departments can contract-in services in the same way that education departments have historically contracted school bus services.

Transport authorities should be solely charged with the responsibility of moving as many people as possible as efficiently as possible.

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