The role of planners in contention over transport policy: contrasting behaviour and outcomes in Melbourne and Vancouver since 1970

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Introduction

Melbourne and Vancouver share many similarities but there are acute differences in both the content and the outcomes of transport and land-use policies since 1970. Explanations for these differences are valuable as guides for future action to meet economic and environmental challenges in transport policy.

Examination of the documentary record and interviews with key figures in both cities reveal striking differences in the behaviour of the politicians, officials and civic action groups engaged in contention over transport policy in the two cities.

Planners played a vital role in Vancouver. Their skilled use of standard transport modelling tools, appropriate choice of public consultation processes, and their understanding of the requirements for good public transport in a dispersed city all contributed to the maintenance of political and community support for growth concentration and minimal investment in road capacity for commuters. In Melbourne, planners with similar outlooks could not gain traction.

Public transport and urban planning in Melbourne and Vancouver since the 1970s

Vuchic (1999) categorises possible approaches to urban transport policy and argues that "the most rational and cost-effective policy for achieving … livable metropolitan areas" (p. 247) is to provide incentives for transit and disincentives for car travel. This framework can be used to compare the transport policies, infrastructure investments and outcomes in Melbourne and Vancouver: two cities of comparable wealth and with a shared British heritage in their political institutions.

Vancouver has some apparent obstacles to building transit use including a relatively small CBD employment market and very limited rapid transit infrastructure (the first SkyTrain light rail line opened in 1985). However, even in the 1970s, operators were able to reverse an earlier decline in transit tripmaking in Vancouver: reaching 136 trips per capita in 1977. Transit tripmaking peaked again in the late 1980s and stagnated in the 1990s. It is now showing a trend of modest but steady growth, reaching 130 trips in 2006 (data from operators).

Long-standing land-use and transport strategies in Vancouver match Vuchic's prescription for success. Incentives for transit use include the maintenance of a strong urban boundary and concentration of development in activity centres (Greater Vancouver Regional District, 1996) and continuing investment in locally-proven transit technology and service patterns (Greater Vancouver Transportation Authority, 2004). Disincentives for car travel are most clearly

shown in the city's refusal to build commuter freeways (there is only one, and even this road comes no closer than 5 km to the CBD) and its explicit commitment to using congestion as a travel-demand tool (Greater Vancouver Regional District, 1993b). Many specific targets for transit use, set in the 1990s, are now being met (City of Vancouver, 2006a). A unique trend towards shorter travel times for the journey-to-work – down by 4.3% since 1992 (Turcotte, 2005) – adds to a picture of success in reducing transport system costs and moving towards the land-use planners' 'holy grail of self-containment. This, along with continued investment in rapid transit, gives cause for optimism that current growth in transit use can be maintained.

Despite the benefits apparently offered by Melbourne's extensive train and tram systems, annual per capita tripmaking declined rapidly after 1950, and stagnated for 25 years from 1980 at around 100 trips (operators' annual reports). Patronage has grown since 2006, but this is due largely to increased CBD employment, rising petrol prices and community response to the climate crisis. Service improvements lag well behind demand. For the journey to work, census data since 1976 shows that Melbourne experienced the largest proportional decline of any Australian city in public transport use and the biggest increase in driving. The transit mode share for work trips fell from 24.1% in 1976 to 13.9% in 2006 (Mees et al., 2007).

Unlike Vancouver, Melbourne clearly demonstrates the reverse of Vuchic's ideal. Since 1976, Melbourne has built more lane-kilometres of urban freeways than any other Australian city: a dramatic 'car incentive'. Melbourne has an embarrassment of riches in its extensive tram and train infrastructure. The problem is in inefficient use of these enviable resources and fragmented intermodal service delivery, which creates significant 'transit disincentives' (Mees, 2000). The Commonwealth's recent move to fund expensive urban public transport projects is welcome, but more large freeways opened in 2008, others are proposed; and the urban growth boundary established in the *Melbourne 2030* plan has been abandoned.

Melbourne's transport policy directions run counter to the rhetoric of successive governments. Improvements in transit use have been a stated goal for more than 25 years, culminating in the specific objective for "public transport's share of motorised trips within Melbourne (to) rise to 20 per cent from the current level of 9 per cent" (Department of Infrastructure, 2002, policy 8.1). If this has been the intention, why have the policy settings in Melbourne remained diametrically opposed to those likely to achieve improvements in transit use? What happened in Vancouver to allow its transport system performance to improve to the extent that it has?

The literature points to the political dimension as the key to explaining variations in transport and planning outcomes even among cities with many physical similarities (Bratzel, 1999; Kennedy et al., 2005; Kenworthy & Laube, 2002). In Melbourne and Vancouver, the political contest of ideas over transport policy has been constant.

In Melbourne, through long agitation of interest groups (Davison, 2004), plans for freeway developments emerged in the 1969 Transportation Plan. Significant civic action followed, especially in the inner city. In 1973, political leaders ruled out construction of some freeway projects. Then, in 1980, dominant road planners put forward radical plans to cut urban transit services. Civic action forced a reversal of these plans and contributed to the election, in 1982, of a reformist state Labor Party government with a pro- transit manifesto. But, they failed to make any significant changes to the direction of transport and land-use planning policies.

Vancouver followed a significantly different path. Like Melbourne, there was a dramatic period of contention over freeway plans from 1968 to 1972, but the outcome was very different. Political leadership changed and, by 1975, strong 'growth control' and transit

agendas were established. Since then, supporters of car-based policies in Vancouver often find themselves as challengers seeking to find institutional and political support for their policy prescriptions. There has been almost constant political contention over transport policy: in three main phases. In the first period, from 1976 to 1990, a conservative provincial government provided a base for the supporters of car-based policies. In the second period, from 1990 to 2000, growth-control proponents reasserted their political mandate in a process that led to the Livable Region Strategic Plan (Greater Vancouver Regional District, 1996) and Transport 2021 (Greater Vancouver Regional District, 1993b). The third period, now in progress, is being played out between supporters of road construction and those who wish to strengthen urban consolidation policies through further transit investment and the so-called 'eco-density' agenda (City of Vancouver, 2006b).

To understand why the two cities have followed such different paths, this research explored the behaviour of key political and institutional actors. The sources of information included published and archival material, newspaper reports and semi-structured interviews with key figures in each city between 2005 and 2007. For full details, see Stone (2008).

Political institutions

In Melbourne, the state government has a virtual monopoly of power in urban affairs. In British Columbia, the province has legislative and financial superiority over local government, but the City of Vancouver's commercial and cultural history, its size and aspects of its legislative base have created a vigorous and independent political culture. At the regional level, the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD), since the 1960s, has provided a structure for cooperation between councils and is a base for municipal politicians in conflicts with the province. In Melbourne, the Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) provided a structure for metropolitan coordination that had some legitimacy in representing local interests against the state, but it was dismantled in the 1970s and 1980s.

Behaviour of key actors in Melbourne and Vancouver

Melbourne

In Melbourne, considerable effort was required in the post-war years to create the institutional capacity to construct new roads for the expanding car fleet. While not a period of strong contention, this time was significant for later policy conflicts because it led road planners and their supporters to recognise the need to operate effectively in political arena. The rail and tram systems were operated by once-great statutory authorities which had engaged over many decades in a "fever of perverted competition" (Davison, 2004, p. 198) with each other. Their history tended to blind them to the emerging threat from the car.

The Melbourne Transportation Plan (Metropolitan Transportation Committee, 1969) became the means by which road planners sought to gather the organisational and financial resources required to allow large-scale road construction to commence. The Plan set out a grid of freeways across the metropolitan region. This has set the agenda for road projects right up to the present. The rail operators, by contrast, used the process of the Plan to pursue a city tunnel, something that had been on their planning agenda since 1929 (Winter, 1990). This locked transit planning into a city-commuter focus that ignored changing travel patterns in the suburbs: a problem that remains.

From 1969 to 1977, there was strong civic reaction to the freeway proposals. Opposition was strongest in the newly gentrifying inner suburbs, but it existed right across the city. In 1973, Liberal Premier Rupert Hamer split the opposition through his decision to cancel some of the inner-city freeways. Road proponents learned important lessons: subsequent plans for metropolitan freeways have been introduced piecemeal. Each section of new road is justified in terms of its local congestion relief, sidestepping larger questions of overall transport policy and avoiding the mass opposition triggered by the over-arching 1969 Plan.

By the late 1970s, the deficit for public transport services was burgeoning. The rail authority wanted to cut services and sack staff, and invest the savings to keep the rest of the system afloat. Road proponents saw this money as a way to revive their freeway program that was stagnating in the face of global recession and tighter Commonwealth financing arrangements. The mechanism for this raid was the Victorian Transport Study (1980), written by Robin Underwood, a savvy road engineer regarded as a savage critic of public spending on public transport, and actively supported by the Transport Minister, Rob Maclellan.

Public transport unions and newly formed user groups led opposition to the extensive transit closures proposed in the VTS. Measured by press coverage, it was the biggest state political issue for most of 1980 and 1981. The campaign damaged the Liberal government's credibility on transport issues and forced it to delay implementation of the cuts as the 1982 election approached. For this election, the ALP wrote into its platform much of the union reform agenda, which emphasised the need for new trains and trams, and extensions to existing suburban lines. Also on the party's election manifesto were policies of opposition to further freeway construction adopted in the early 1970s.

Under the leadership of John Cain, the ALP's 1982 election victory was a watershed in Victorian politics. Coming after 27 years of conservative rule, the new government and its supporters were eager to implement a broad and well-articulated reform program. The principal administrative tool employed by the ALP was to reduce the power of the statutory authorities and bring control back to Cabinet (Considine, 1992; Mant, 1982)

In some portfolios, a handpicked team of senior officials and advisers who had been part of the pre-election policy development ran formal processes to implement new programs (Considine, 1992; O'Grady, 1985). In transport, Steve Crabb set out to establish a huge new Transport Ministry without any formal framework for negotiating policy detail.

Crabb had some understanding of the changes required to build a modern transit system: multimodal ticketing, regular timetabling and simplified bus routes. However, the union officials who Crabb brought into policy development positions did not share these priorities, nor were they important to others in influential positions inside the new agencies: mostly resistant managers from the old transit authorities and road engineers who had little knowledge or interest in public transport operations.

After only 18 months, Crabb also took on the challenging industrial relations portfolio, and was moved from transport after the 1985 election. His successors became mired in managing the union and community backlash against measures designed to cut costs of public transport operations such as the move from trains to trams on the St Kilda and Port Melbourne lines. The escalating conflict with transport unions culminated in 1990 in a dramatic strike by tram drivers and conductors. Cain argues, rightly, that this conflict was rooted in the ideological and factional rifts that eventually crippled his government (Cain, 1995; Considine & Costar, 1992). However, from a transport-planning perspective, many operational changes were

fundamentally flawed (Stone, 2008, pp.197-198; Wilson, 1999), and so the government could not maintain public confidence in its management of the transit system.

In the other main issue in the transport portfolio, Crabb, like most of the people from whom he took advice, supported the continuation of the freeway-building program (research interview), and so was at odds with the policy platform his party had taken to the 1982 election. John Cain, a freeway critic during his time as Shadow Planning Minister (1978), said in the research interview that: "we were tempered by pragmatism – a bit like Lady Macbeth – [sometimes you are] so far up the track that you can't turn back". Crabb was less restrained: only a few weeks after the election, he told an amazed group of road engineers to ignore the ALP policy and continue work on their current freeway project (research interview).

There was no formal policy-review process in transport or urban planning – this might have put a spotlight on the differences between the clear statements of party policy and Crabb's own views on freeway construction. In addition, the ALP's administrative reforms weakened the institutional base of a group of planners who had opposed the VTS cuts and questioned the priority given to freeways (Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works, 1981). Their analysis was based, in large part, on the community-based publication, Seeds for Change (White et al., 1978). Under the slogan 'cluster and connect', this was a local articulation of linear city planning theory that was a forerunner to today's policies of 'activity centres' linked by transit. However, following the ALP's moves against the MMBW, few of these voices of doubt found a place in the new ministries. Road building was the centrepiece of the planning strategy that finally emerged five years into the ALP's time in office (Victorian Government, 1987), and it was David White, another party heavyweight, who laid the groundwork for the massive inner-city City Link tollway project built by the Liberals in the 1990s.

Apart from the unions, other civic action groupings supported improvements to public transport during the contention over transport policy in Melbourne in this period. For different reasons, none was able to find the political strength to make an impact on the ALP.

The window of opportunity for policy change effectively closed after 1985 when the ALP transit reforms began to falter. Civic action groups could not mount a new challenge to either the established transit managers, who offered little leadership on alternative visions for the city, or to the roads policy network that enjoyed clear, if covert, political support and had established direct influence over transport and planning policy. Over time, political leaders and the public lost confidence in the ability of managers to rebuild the transit system, leaving roads proponents to dominate policy debates.

Through the 1990s, under the Kennett Liberal government, there was a strong move to re-organise transit services according to the dictates of neo-liberal ideology. However, this revolution disguises the fact that there has been little change in transit services. Privatisation, on the Melbourne model, has largely entrenched the existing fragmented approach to transit planning and operational practice (Mees, 2005). Privatisation has consumed the attention of many of the key actors and has made reform of the system more difficult. The return of the ALP to government in 1999 did not mark a shift in transport and other urban policies. The Melbourne 2030 strategic plan used the rhetoric of urban consolidation and transit-oriented development but expansion of the freeway network was the primary infrastructure focus of the plan; and there has been little change in the approach to management of the public transport system apart from a weakening of the obligations placed on the franchisees (Mees, 2005). New proposals for expansion of the public transport system are poorly developed. There is no process for the assumptions behind these proposals to be contested publicly.

So, Melbourne is in a weak position to respond to growing demands for improved public transport. It remains to be seen whether civic action groups will be able to use the growing urgency of the global and local impacts of climate change or other policy imperatives to create a new window of opportunity for reform of transport policy and practice in Melbourne.

Vancouver

Vancouver's early streetcars and 'interurban' light rail shaped the city's form. This transit was run through a private franchise, held for decades by a subsidiary of the electricity company. By the 1950s, this system, now in state control, was in decay and – to government officials – freeways were the obvious replacement. There was no established urban road construction agency, but Vancouver Council staff hired American consultants who prepared a large-scale plan typical of the times and moved, behind the scenes to assemble resources for construction from federal, provincial and local sources.

When the plans became public in 1967, the Council faced huge opposition from groups across the political spectrum. Opposition included members of the business community who had been shut out of development opportunities; middle-class residents led by academics from the University of British Columbia; working-class and Chinese residents; and counter-culture protestors some of whom went on to found Greenpeace (Weyler, 2004). Strong civic action led to the political defeat of the wider freeway project in early 1968, but proponents pursued smaller pieces of the puzzle. When these plans were revealed, civic opposition rose to an even greater pitch. A new political party, called The Electors' Action Movement (TEAM), won control of Vancouver City Council in a landslide in 1972.

TEAM was a loose grouping of professionals, including several planning academics who were articulating their own interpretations of the ideas of Jane Jacobs and other critics of American freeways and suburban expansion policies (Tennant, 1981). With no strongly entrenched government institutions, planning and transport policies for the City and the region were fluid and it was possible for many of new ideas to find their way onto the political agenda.

Before 1972, TEAM had held a minority of council seats. This experience had shown them where the obstacles to reform lay. They acted quickly to wrest power away from the bureaucracy by sacking the City Manager and five other department heads, including the planning director, and five of the eight other planning staff (Harcourt, research interview).

New and surviving planners were keen to work with the new agenda "without creating a crisis … among developers and architects" (Leo, 1994, p. 678). New development regulation took the form of design guidelines met through negotiation. The guidelines had fixed principles summed up by the watchword: 'neighbourliness'. The framework for negotiation set by these guidelines has proved remarkably robust. Thirty years on, 5% of the population of Greater Vancouver live in the 9.3 sq km downtown core (2001 census data quoted in Greater Vancouver Regional District, 2002). This achievement reflects the planners' skills in choosing the elements of design – like streetscape scale, access to sunlight, protection of view-lines, and provision of community facilities – are most important for reaching environmental or social objectives (and so are non-negotiable); and which – like the 'density bonus' of additional floors in tower blocks – could be traded for developer profit. This "imposes significant constraints on developers" (Leo, 1994, p. 683). For a full account, see Punter's *The Vancouver Achievement* (2003).

TEAM also had support in the newly formed GVRD, which established a Planning Department to help sort out its priorities. They rejected the traditional 'top down' approach and in their public consultations found an "astounding" opposition to growth (Lash, 1976, p. 56). Some of Lash's colleagues and politicians on the GVRD were similarly uncomfortable with his consultative approach to regional planning, saying that "people expect planners to tell them [the answers]" (p. 55). Lash says that the final decision to go ahead with the open-ended *Livable Region* planning process was "hard fought".

This work strengthened the resolve of the provincial reformers who introduced urban growth boundary legislation in 1973. The first Livable Region Plan, endorsed by the GVRD in 1975, encouraged growth in jobs and housing in four regional town centres. These changes in planning policy assumed a much greater role for transit, and a consensus began to emerge on how new transit should be delivered. Offered more funding by the province, the transit operator achieved solid patronage growth, partly because its system operated as a coherent network. This success strengthened political support for transit expansion, but this stalled when the conservatives returned to provincial in 1975.

New opportunities for transit in Vancouver came from a very different angle. In 1980, the province entered the race for the Expo 86 world fair (Punter, 2003). The Expo theme was transport, and Vancouver would need new transit to show to the world (Berelowitz, 2005). The province favoured an elevated, driverless system, later known as SkyTrain. Others, including former freeway activist and City mayoral candidate, Mike Harcourt, preferred the existing plan for conventional light rail. On his way to winning the first of three terms as mayor, Harcourt threatened to block Expo unless there was funding for a rapid transit system. His brinkmanship did not change the SkyTrain technology, but its route was altered to link the CBD with two suburban town centres. With five-minute headways and coordinated feeder buses, it was the centre of a working transit system, not just an event toy.

Friction between the province and the region came to ahead during a recession in 1983. When the GVRD overturned a suburban council's approval for low-density housing outside the urban growth boundary, the province responded by revoking the GVRD's regional planning powers. This ushered in a period of widespread development that was simply "shaving off hillsides and building boxes" (Cameron, research interview). The province also cut its contribution to transit funding, forcing a cut in services and a fall in patronage. In the late 1980s, the province tried to use its new planning powers to introduce a road-based plan called 'Freedom to Move', which was strongly rejected by Vancouver City and its suburban allies (Cameron, interview).

To win the tussle with the province, supporters of growth control needed to renew their political mandate. They began by endorsing principles for a new growth management strategy in *Creating Our Future* (Greater Vancouver Regional District, 1990). These included giving priority to walking, cycling, transit and goods movement over private cars. To build support for *Creating Our Future*, the GVRD set up a public process including conferences, public opinion surveys and a wide range of work in political and technical committees to evaluate various planning options. Full details can be found in the Regional Strategic Review (Greater Vancouver Regional District, 2006).

In 1991, Harcourt became Premier and the province again became a cooperative player. They restored some of the GVRD's planning powers and committed future funding. After more than six years, the GVRD adopted a new Livable Region Strategic Plan (Greater Vancouver Regional District, 1996). Alongside this new land-use blueprint, the GVRD also had a new

transport plan. Ken Cameron, then head of planning at the GVRD, had the transport project housed in his office: the two plans "evolved together, and iteratively, not one driving the other" (interview). *Transport 2021* (Greater Vancouver Regional District, 1993b) is remarkably coherent. It sets out a detailed plan to improve transit and to consciously allow road congestion to grow, particularly on bridges, as a demand management tool. The negative impact of this policy – increased costs for goods movement – was acknowledged, but a quantified estimate of these costs was seen as "tolerable" (p. 43) when compared with the wider benefits of reduced car use for passenger travel. Analytic work included transport and land-use modelling exercises using standard techniques. What was different in Vancouver, compared to many other cities, was that those feeding data and assumptions into the models were not using the normal biases that road engineers use to give their freeway projects an advantage (Greater Vancouver Regional District, 1993a). The results showed the potential benefits of transit investments, which are now coming to fruition.

The GVRD is now justifiably proud of the process that delivered the *Livable Region Strategic Plan (LRSP)* and *Transport 2021*. However, its beginnings were contested, as Harry Lash's planning process had been in the 1970s. During the early 1990s, some politicians were sceptical of the value of processes that were open to the public at an early stage and were not controlled by 'expert opinion'. It took a strong stand by planning staff, using evidence from polling and market research, to demonstrate the extent of community support for an open process and to get political support for it (GVRD planner, interview).

In 1997, frustration from regional councillors at provincial interference in transport policy coincided with desire by the province to shed responsibilities for looming problems such as congestion for freight and an ageing trolleybus fleet (Vancouver councillor, interview). The result was a bold new structure for operating and funding transport, established within the GVRD, but with a place for provincial representation on its board. Called TransLink, the new agency brought planning and operational management for both roads and transit under one umbrella with a guaranteed funding stream. TransLink has overseen new transit infrastructure and continues to pursue a transparent and interactive planning model.

The continued expansion of the transit network is not immune from provincial politics. The third SkyTrain line, to the airport and Richmond, now in construction, is being built, at the insistence of the province, as a public-private partnership, and the distribution of risk is hotly debated. Also controversial is the so-called 'Gateway' plan for expansion of suburban freeways put forward by an alliance of trucking interests with support from the province and several suburban councils. These proposals, it is feared, could undermine the ability to reach targets for transit use, growth concentration and other sustainability goals.

Conclusions

Road planners in Melbourne learned effective political skills in the 1950s and 1960s. These skills were honed in response to public opposition to inner-city freeways after 1969. They maintained their ascendancy through the reforms of the 1980s, and controlled the transport and land-use planning agenda. Although in a much weaker position than Melbourne's road planners, urban planners in the MMBW in 1981 did raise a challenge to proposals for transit service cuts and accelerated freeway construction. The institutional base for this challenge was lost in the ALP's administrative reforms.

Steve Crabb, the key reformist politician in 1982 held a strong view in favour of the status quo in the balance between road and transit and took a very individualistic approach to policy formation and the restructuring of transport administration. His engagement with transport was short-lived but, in the process, much of the government's political capital was expended. Since then, there has not been sufficient political momentum for any fundamental reform of transport and land-use polices

Vancouver, having never started the process of urban freeway construction, never created a politically focused government agency that embodied the automobile-based planning agenda. Freeway supporters have been in the position of relatively weak 'challengers' to an environmentally oriented policy network in urban and transport planning that emerged in the 1970. A new and unusual policy network was established in the City of Vancouver and in the GVRD after the political upheavals of the early 1970s. This network adopted innovative processes to advance its planning agenda. These processes demonstrated and built public and political support for environmentally oriented planning policies. The policy network withstood strong challenges in the 1980s and was able to successfully manage the political and community engagement required to build support for the LRSP and Transport 2021.

The key political entrepreneurs in Vancouver were based in local government and were engaged in the contention over transport policy for decades. They became familiar with the detail of the transit-planning agenda that was clearly articulated by the various planning agencies and were skilful enough to find opportunities in the ongoing contention over transport expenditure to ensure that the built outcomes were as close as possible to the original intentions.

For the future, this research indicates two clear directions for the work of planners in Melbourne who wish to create a transport system that performs better on a range of sustainable urban development measures. First, use all available technical tools to build an evidence-based case against further investment in programs that provide further incentives for car-use and in favour of the adoption of coherent policies and targets for urban containment and increased mode shares for transit, walking and cycling. Second, consciously support the emergence of new political entrepreneurs who can re-shape the policy networks that control urban policy and resource allocation.

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