

Reflections on the formation and development of the ATRF, 1972 - 2022

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Abstract

This essay describes the events that led to the formation of the Australian Transport Research Forum, the relationship of the meetings in the early years to federal and state government research and planning departments and agencies, the inclusion of New Zealand and consequent name-change to Australasian Transport Research Forum and attempts to establish the ATRF as an independent sustainable non-profit organisation. The purpose is to summarise the development of the ATRF for the record and for the information of new and prospective members of the Forum. Relevant links with the TRF (US), CTRF, other international and Australasian transport research and planning bodies are included.

1. Establishing the ATRF

Within a few weeks of arriving in Australia in 1972 to take up the newly created appointment as South Australia's Director General of Transport, I attended a meeting of the Standing Committee of Advisers to the Australian Transport Advisory Council of Commonwealth and State Ministers of Transport (later renamed the Australian Transport Council) that included Ministers of Roads, Marine, Aviation, etc. This meeting gave me an opportunity to meet my interstate and federal counterparts and, following the ministerial meeting, the South Australian Minister of Transport (Hon Geoff Virgo MP) encouraged me to accept some of the many invitations to meet senior officers and other transport professionals on their 'home turf' to gain an understanding of the transport planning and research taking place across the country. Such meetings took place in 1972 and 1973; the exchanges were fruitful and informative. Several times in different locations the issue of whether such sharing of ideas and experience could be undertaken in a structured national arrangement.

Mindful of the roles of existing research and professional organisations, particularly the Australian Road Research Board (later ARRB Transport Research), the Institution of Engineers Australia (now Engineers Australia - EA) and the Institute of Transport (now CILTA) a letter was drafted, signed by John Knox (DGT, WA), John Taplin (Director, BTE), Norm Fisher (Chief Finance Officer, Commonwealth Bureau of Roads), John Metcalf (Deputy Director, ARRB), Patrick Pak-Poy (Director, PPK) and myself (DGT, SA), suggesting the possibility and merit of a forum where current transport research, planning and practice could be discussed freely. A target audience of 75 to 100 persons was estimated. The letter was sent to about fifty individuals, including officials, operators, academics and consultants across Australia. Some of those receiving the letter were familiar with the Transportation Research Forum in the US, which was founded in the late 1950s by a group of members of the American Economic Association, and its Canadian counterpart, the CTRF, which held its first conference in 1965.

A positive response to the initial letter of invitation resulted in a meeting of those expressing interest and a willingness to take the idea further. The meeting was convened on September 18th 1974 in the Commonwealth Department of Aviation conference room at Tullamarine Airport; David Hensher (CBR, replacing Norm Fisher), John Spence (WD Scott), Joe Delaney (CBR) and John Bayley (Vic MoT) made important contributions. As expected, given the venue, Melbourne-based organisations were well represented amongst the 40-odd who attended. The meeting agreed that an initial conference of an Australian Transport Research Forum should be hosted by the Bureau of Transport Economics and chaired by its first Director, Dr John Taplin. However, to maximise attendance by capitalising on the potential interest in the Sydney region and recognising Sydney's advantage of access from all parts of Australia, it was recommended that the Forum should be held there, rather than in Canberra, the home of the BTE.

2. The first round of ATRF meetings

So the first conference of the ATRF was held at a motel on the Princes Highway in Artarmon in April 1975, chaired by John Taplin, when 16 papers were presented and discussed over two days in a plenary setting (i.e. no parallel sessions). The theme was 'Pricing & Investment', a topic as important today as it was then. Authors included Ted Kolsen, George Docwra, Fred Affleck, Doug Brindal, David Hensher, Paul Amos, John Paterson and Colin Gannon. Notably, only one paper had a disclaimer footnote, an indication that in those years researchers, consultants and practitioners had greater flexibility to talk openly and without qualification about their work, however politically sensitive it might be, than became the case in later years of the 20th century.

The success of the Sydney ATRF suggested that the concept of an organisation willing to host, organise, lead and, if necessary, underwrite a Forum conference seemed to work, so in the succeeding years meetings were held in each of the State capital cities. Adelaide was in 1976, hosted by the SA DoT. Melbourne in 1977 was very successful, chaired by John Bayley, Director of Transport, when amongst the authors were such up-and-coming researchers as Jenny Morris, Ray Kinnear, Michael Taylor and Tony Richardson. A notable paper was a critique of Commonwealth Government funding of roads and urban public transport by two officers of the federal Treasury. 180 persons attended the 1977 Forum, demonstrating that initial estimates of potential interest in the Forum were low by a wide margin. In 1978 Perth was the host city, 1979 Sydney, 1980 Brisbane and 1982 Hobart. The meetings in the first round were organised by a simple structure of one or two committees, with members drawn from interested private and public sector transport organisations within the sponsoring state. The main support for the organising committee tended to be a key individual who provided a focus for professional and administrative matters. Examples were John Kjar (BTE, 1975), Margaret Starrs (SA DoT, 1976) and Bernard Lynch (Transport Tasmania, 1982).

3. Widening ATRF horizons

In 1983, the cycle of meetings began again, with the BTE hosting the Forum in Canberra, then back to Adelaide in 1984. The 1985 meeting in Melbourne was hosted by the Australian Road Research Board, chaired by Dr John Metcalf, acknowledging the vital role the organisation had played in establishing the Forum. ARRB's research activities in transport planning were led by Dr Marc Wigan, with staff including Jenny Morris, Peter Barnard and Darrell Bowyer. The following year Northern Territory joined the ATRF with the annual meeting held in Darwin,

chaired by Ian Gordon, then Deputy Secretary of Transport. After a return to Brisbane in 1987, a major change took place in 1988 when the New Zealand Ministry of Transport hosted a meeting in Christchurch. New Zealanders had begun to contribute to ATRF in the early 1980s and it became increasingly clear that they should be an integral part of the organisation, justifying a renaming to the **Australasian Transport Research Forum**. The Christchurch meeting was a huge success, thanks to the leadership of Derek Homewood, Secretary for Transport, staff of the Ministry, including Roger Toleman and Glen-Marie Burns and strong support from New Zealand Railways Corporation (including Murray King and Ewan McQueen), the Urban Transport Council (Brian Baxter), University of Canterbury and Victoria University. Thanks to the Northern Territory and New Zealand, the ATRF had achieved another milestone.

The third cycle of meetings, commencing in 1993, was notable for Australians learning from New Zealand's experience and holding meetings outside of the capital cities. Also, for the first time, meetings were hosted by other than governmental organisations, with University of Queensland organising the 1993 meeting at a Gold Coast venue, the Transport Research Centre hosting the meeting in Lorne, Victoria, the following year, and the Transport Systems Centre the meeting in Adelaide in 1997. Such a change was possible because experience had shown that the Forum could be organised to break even or make a small profit.

The early 1990s also saw a move to convert the structure of the ATRF into a membership organisation like its counterparts in Canada and USA. There were several reasons to consider such a change, the main one being that it was clear that governments could not be relied on to support the ATRF in cash and/or kind. A constitution was adopted and a Council elected in 1991 at an inaugural meeting in Hobart in 1991. Members of the Council were Derek Scrafton (SA – Chair), Paul Hooper (ITS NSW – Secretary), David Hensher (ITS NSW – Treasurer), Colin Finch (Tpt Tas), Tony Richardson (TRC Vic), Maurice Haddad (BTE ACT), Margaret Starrs (TM NSW), Liz Ampt (TRC Vic) and Michael Taylor (TSC SA). The Council's home base was Sydney University's Institute of Transport Studies with an ATRF account opened at a bank in Newtown. A few meetings were held in the early 1990s, but the concerns that had led to the Council's establishment never arose in the later 1990s, mainly because the universities had proved themselves capable of hosting and organising successful ATRF conferences. When Paul Hooper moved on from ITS, no meetings of the Council were convened (no problems needed to be fixed) and the Council just faded away. The membership concept was to lay dormant for over 20 years.

Into the 21st century and the fourth cycle of annual meetings, when most conferences were hosted by more than one organisation, sharing the effort required to put on a meeting. In 2003 the Wellington Regional Council, Transit NZ, Transfund NZ and the Ministry were co-sponsors and the following year the Department of Transport & Urban Planning joined with UniSA Transport Systems Centre to host jointly the Adelaide meeting. Also we began to see transfer of any profits from annual meetings being used to fund transport research, an original objective of the 1990s Council. The profits from the Adelaide meeting in 2004 were used to assist PATREC to create an archive of ATRF papers (a task later taken on by BTE on behalf of ATRF) and were also used to assist younger professionals to finance their attendance at the 2005 Forum in Sydney.

One of the elements that determine the success of a Forum is the make-up of the local organising committee or committees, including the extent to which the membership of the committee embraces the transport sector: government agencies, universities, industry,

consultants, user organisations, etc. A challenge over the years has been to get the private transport industry more involved.

The curious might wonder why in 2022 we are celebrating the 43rd (supposedly annual) meeting 47 years after the first one. The explanation is that there have been occasional years when the Forum has not been convened for one reason or another, such as in 2014 to avoid clashes with national and state elections and in 2020 due to limitations on travel during the Covid pandemic. A decision was made to leave 1995 free for the World Conference on Transport Research meeting to be held at the University of New South Wales, which in many ways doubled as a bigger Forum for Australasians.

4. ATRF links

The links to, recognition of and respect for other professional organisations, their aims, membership and activities are important. ARRB was a supporter of the ATRF from start-up, the Conference of Australian Institutes of Transport Research (CAITR) was formed soon after ATRF, and the Australian Institute of Traffic Planning and Management (AITPM) became a national organisation a few years later. The Chartered Institute of Transport (now CILTA and CILTANZ), Institution of Transportation Engineers (ITE), and Engineers Australia are long-established organisations representing transport professionals and it is important for ATRF to acknowledge the complementarity of their activities and the benefits they contribute to the development and significance of the transport sector. BTE's annual Transport Colloquium and universities' public lecture or seminar series are other meetings that should be viewed in the same context. There are also several specialist modal and methodological meetings and workshops, such as the NZ Transportation Group conference on modelling, that need to be accommodated in the annual cycle of conferences and symposia.

The TRF in US and the CTRF in Canada occasionally organise a joint meeting, e.g. in 1967 (Expo year) the TRF met in Montreal and in 2017 there was joint TRF/CTRF meeting in Toronto. In the late 20th century discussions were held in an attempt to hold a joint ATRF/TRF/CTRF conference in Hawaii, but it proved impossible to arrange, mainly because TRF members based in eastern US believed it would be difficult to get approval to travel to Hawaii. (Other US professional bodies seemed to have no such problem, e.g. the American Society of Public Administration met in Honolulu in 1982, a conference attended by a number of Australians.)

Distance and cost have not deterred individuals from overseas from attending and/or presenting papers at ATRF conferences, including when on sabbatical at Australasian universities, on secondment to government departments and agencies or consulting assignments. Visitors from the West Coast of North America have been well represented at ATRF conferences: Bill Waters and Garland Chow, both from UBC, and others from University of California campuses, such as GJ (Pete) Fielding, who was at Christchurch in 1988 and Elizabeth Deakin, who was the keynote speaker in Melbourne in 2007. Other Canadian visitors were Richard Lande at Canberra in 1983 and James McDonald at Darwin in 1986. UK authors of ATRF papers included David Starkie and Andrew Evans in the years when they were Professorial Fellows at Adelaide University and Flinders University, and by Richard Balcombe when a visitor at ARRB. Germany and South Africa are other countries that have been represented at ATRF meetings. In the other direction, many Australians and New Zealanders prefer to attend TRB annual conferences in Washington DC, the ETC in Europe, EASTS in Asia or specialist conferences wherever located. Nevertheless, Australia has been well represented at TRF and

CTRF annual meetings, e.g. there were five at Long Beach in 1990, including Maurice Haddad, then Director of BTE. I have attended many TRF and CTRF meetings in locations across North America, including Annapolis (2000), Gatineau (2011) and Vancouver (2019), winning (with David Stambrook) the Bison Debate in 2005 in Hamilton and losing it the following year in Quebec City (or “Runner-up” as more politely engraved on a tankard!). From time to time the potential to encourage more researchers from island nations in Oceania (and PNG) has been discussed, but without a champion to pursue the idea nothing has yet eventuated.

5. ATRF Governance

After ATRF was converted in 1991 to a membership organisation, its governance evolved to become gradually less formal, returning to the practice of relying on the goodwill of members’ organisations for support and commitment, essentially the Forum’s traditional stakeholder base in government organisations, universities and consulting firms. However, cancellation of the proposed conference in 2014 highlighted the fact that ATRF was experiencing increasing difficulty in securing ongoing assistance from government department and agency supporters to sponsor and underwrite the annual conference, with the exception that the BITRE provided important stability by hosting the ATRF website, maintaining the conference paper archive and providing an ATRF Secretariat support service.

Similar difficulties were being experienced by potential host universities in providing staff resources and financial support for the organisation and management of the peer review of papers submitted for the annual conference, preparation of the conference program, uploading of papers to the ATRF website, preparation of conference proceedings and their lodgement with the National Library of Australia (to obtain an ISSN). To relieve universities of these financial and workload pressures, governance of the ATRF was expanded to establish the Scientific Committee as a separate entity (initially chaired by Geoff Rose and Matthew Burke) the role and function being to work collaboratively with each host university to organise and manage the peer review of papers submitted for the annual conference and the other activities associated with the compilation of the conference program.

In 2015 the NSW Ministry of Transport (Tf NSW) organised and hosted an ATRF conference at short notice and there were continuing concerns about the long-term viability of ATRF. The BITRE, led by Director Gary Dolman, played a key role in revitalising the Forum by establishing ATRF Incorporated, a legal entity under the ACT Associations Incorporation Act, with formal governance and administrative structures, a registered office in Canberra, an Australian Business Number and taxation status as a not-for-profit entity. Under that structure three committees are now responsible for administering and managing the affairs of ATRF Inc:: the Executive Committee that governs the overall activities of ATRF Inc including its strategic direction (essentially the Forum Board and legal entity); the Scientific Committee (SC) that oversees and manages the peer review of papers submitted for the annual conference; and the Local Organising Committee (LOC), which has primary responsibility for arranging and running the conference in the host city or other location with the assistance of a professional conference organiser.

Under its governance structure the EC is elected annually at the Forum AGM, the SC is a semi-permanent group of academics and practitioners chaired by a single academic institution and the LOC is established annually by the EC in the host jurisdiction. To overcome the past financial uncertainty associated with the host organisation(s) to underwrite the annual conference ATRF is now focussed on becoming prudentially financially self-sufficient.

6. A future for ATRF

I believe the founders and those at the Tullamarine meeting in 1974 would be happy to see the ATRF as it exists in 2022, to know that planning a Forum requires the Local Organising Committee to think in terms of 150 participants and the Scientific Committee has to deal with around a hundred submitted papers. In this essay I have mentioned a number of individuals who have played a role in the development of the ATRF, but they are only a few examples drawn from a long list of persons to whom thanks must be given for their contribution to the ATRF over many years. ATRF in 2022 has over 300 Australasian members, plus 23 overseas members, mainly from Europe, North America and South America.

There is no reason for the ATRF not to look forward to a successful future - it is up to successive generations of those with an interest and involvement in transport research, planning and policy to ensure that is the case. The format of meetings seems to be acceptable, which makes life easier for future organisers of the Forum, but that format is not cast in stone and changes may be desirable or necessary in future, just as the 2022 ATRF is different from that in 1975 and that Australian TRF became the Australasian TRF. There will be years when the attendance will not be as high as a meeting held in Sydney, Melbourne or Auckland can attract, but that should not detract from the need to ensure as wide as possible geographic coverage of Australia and New Zealand in the sequence of annual meetings.

To maintain relevance to its diverse membership ATRF will need to expand its activities beyond the annual conference, taking advantage of technologies to include, for example, webinars, podcasts and special interest groups, at the same time recognising the work and programs of other transport organisations in much the same way as was the case when the ATRF was first established in the 1970s.

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Further reading

Hensher D: ATRF Where, Why, What, Whom... . Proceedings of the 13th ATRF, Christchurch, 1988

Starrs MM & McKenna K: The Purity of Transport Research. Proceedings of the 4th ATRF, Perth, 1978

Taplin JHE: ATRF Origins and the Early Years. Presentation to the 35th ATRF, Perth, 2012

Appendix: Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACT	Australian Capital Territory
AGM	Annual General Meeting
AITPM	Australian Institute of Traffic Planning and Management
ARRB	Australian Road Research Board
ATRF	Australian/Australasian Transport Research Forum
BTE	Bureau of Transport Economics (includes variations such as. BTRE)**
CBR	Commonwealth Bureau of Roads
CILTA	Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport Australia
CILTNZ	Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport New Zealand
CTRF	Canadian Transportation Research Forum
DGT	Director General of Transport
DoT	Department of Transport (includes many portfolio variations)**
EA	Engineers Australia (formerly Institution of Engineers Australia)
EASTS	Eastern Asia Society for Transport Studies
EC	Executive Committee
ETC	European Transport Conference
ITE	Institute of Transportation Engineers
ITS	Institute of Transport Studies
LOC	Local Organising Committee
MoT	Ministry of Transport (includes many portfolio variations)**
NSW	New South Wales
NT	Northern Territory
NZ	New Zealand
PATREC	Planning and Transport Research Centre
PPK	Pak-Poy & Associates (later Pak-Poy & Kneebone)
Qld	Queensland
SA	South Australia
SC	Scientific Committee
TM	R Travers Morgan Pty Ltd
Tpt Tas	Transport Tasmania
TRB	Transportation Research Board (USA)
TRC	Transport Research Centre
TRF	Transportation Research Forum (USA)
TSC	Transport Systems Centre
UBC	University of British Columbia
UniSA	University of South Australia
UTC	Urban Transport Council
Vic	Victoria
WA	Western Australia

** Numerous and frequent variations in the titles of government organisations (usually due to changes in Ministerial portfolios) are ignored in the text.