THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

I: The Great Australian Mobility Myth

We confuse movement with progress

SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORT SERIES | ISSUE #1

Institute of Transport and Logistics Studies

Acknowledgement of Country

We recognise and pay respect to the Elders and communities – past and present – of the lands that the University of Sydney's campuses stand on. For thousands of years, they have shared and exchanged knowledges across innumerable generations for the benefit of all.

Look across Australia's transport debate and a pattern emerges.

We widen motorways to relieve congestion. We subsidise faster deliveries to satisfy convenience. We celebrate aviation connectivity as a symbol of freedom. We dream of high-speed rail as a nation building monument. We electrify cars and declare the problem solved.

Movement equals progress. More kilometres travelled means more opportunity. Faster always feels better.

It is a compelling story. It is also incomplete.

Transport emissions totalled about 90 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent in 2022, accounting for roughly 21 percent of Australia's total emissions. On road vehicles contribute about 85 percent of that figure. Aviation accounts for roughly nine percent of domestic transport full fuel cycle emissions in 2022 to 2023 (Bureau of Infrastructure and Transport Research Economics, 2025).

Those numbers tell us something simple. Transport is not peripheral to climate policy. It is central.

Yet most of our public debate treats emissions as a technical problem rather than a structural one. Swap petrol for electricity. Improve engine efficiency. Develop sustainable aviation fuels. Build a faster train.

Technology matters. But technology operates within systems shaped by policy and culture.

The through line connecting the previous arguments is this. Australia has a demand problem disguised as a technology problem.

We treat short haul flights as untouchable because they are convenient. We expand urban motorways because congestion is politically toxic. We allow free shipping to shape urban freight patterns because consumers expect immediacy. We neglect regional freight decarbonisation because it is complex and out of sight. We market eco-tourism without interrogating the emissions embedded in distance.

In each case, we assume that the underlying demand is fixed. The only question becomes how to supply it more cleanly.

But demand is not a law of nature. It is influenced by infrastructure, pricing, planning rules and social norms.

When we widen highways, we induce more driving. When we subsidise express delivery, we encourage faster and often less efficient logistics. When we allow long distance commuting patterns to proliferate, we entrench car dependence.

The result is a system that must work ever harder to decarbonise because total movement continues to expand.

Consider the school run. Two thirds of primary school children are driven to school most days. That is not simply a reflection of parental preference. It is the outcome of urban design, safety perceptions and institutional arrangements.

Consider freight. The Bureau of Infrastructure and Transport Research Economics estimates Australia's domestic freight task reached about 786 billion tonne kilometres in 2024 to 2025. That freight will grow as population and economic activity expand. The question is whether it grows primarily on diesel fuelled roads or through electrified and more efficient modes.

Consider coastal shipping. Australia is an island continent, yet coastal shipping performs only a modest share of the freight task compared with road and rail. Geography offers options that policy has not fully embraced.

Even electrification, essential as it is, does not address congestion, land use sprawl or the sheer volume of vehicle kilometres travelled. An electric traffic jam still consumes time and space.

The mobility myth runs deeper than infrastructure. It is cultural. We equate freedom with distance travelled. We treat speed as inherently positive. We assume that any constraint on movement is a loss.

Yet not all movement improves wellbeing. Long commutes erode family time. Congestion increases stress. Urban sprawl isolates communities. Excessive freight traffic degrades local air quality and safety.

A sustainable transport strategy must distinguish between necessary mobility and habitual excess.

This does not mean retreating into austerity. It means designing systems that deliver access rather than distance. Access to jobs, services, education and recreation without requiring ever longer trips.

Access can be improved by locating housing near employment, by investing in reliable public transport, by supporting local economies, by designing cities where daily needs are within reach.

When access improves, demand for long distance travel can stabilise or decline without coercion.

There is also a fairness dimension. Not all Australians have equal mobility. Car dependent systems disadvantage those who cannot afford private vehicles or cannot drive. Congestion and pollution burden certain communities disproportionately. Reforming transport demand can improve equity as well as emissions.

The political challenge is obvious. Policies that manage demand often provoke resistance. Congestion pricing feels like a new cost. Flight restrictions feel like reduced choice. Parking reform sparks local opposition.

But avoiding these conversations does not eliminate trade-offs. It simply defers them.

Climate targets tighten over time. Infrastructure built today shapes behaviour for decades. If we continue expanding systems that assume ever increasing movement, we make decarbonisation more difficult.

Australia has an opportunity to lead in reimagining mobility for a large, dispersed nation. That leadership will not come solely from new engines or faster trains. It will come from aligning transport policy with climate reality.

We need to move beyond the idea that progress is measured in kilometres travelled or minutes saved.

Progress can mean quieter streets near schools. Fewer trucks on congested highways because more freight moves by rail or sea. Regional supply chains powered by cleaner energy. Tourism that balances experience with responsibility. Cities where daily life does not require sitting in traffic.

The cleanest kilometre is often the one not travelled. That is not an argument against ambition. It is an argument for smarter ambition.

Australia's mobility myth tells us that more is always better. A sustainable future may require accepting that enough is enough.

If we can make that cultural shift, technology will amplify it. If we cannot, technology will struggle to keep up.

Movement will always matter on a continent this vast. The question is whether we are willing to distinguish between mobility that enriches life and mobility that merely accelerates emissions.

We have spent decades expanding how far and how fast we move. The next phase of progress may depend on learning when not to.

REFERENCES

Bureau of Infrastructure and Transport Research Economics (2025) *Australian Infrastructure and Transport Statistics Yearbook 2025*, https://www.bitre.gov.au/publications/2025/australian-infrastructure-and-transport-statistics-yearbook-2025/freight.

Sustainable Transport Series

About the authors of this series

John rejoined the Institute of Transport and Logistics Studies as the Neil Smith Research Chair in Sustainable Transport Futures in October 2022, after an 8-year absence. Over the course of his academic career, John has published over 300 scientific articles in peer-reviewed journals, books, and conference proceedings. He has also been an Associate Editor of Transportation, and Co-Editor and Chief of the Journal of Choice Modelling and Transportation Research Part A. He has also held various roles on multiple conference committees both in Australia and overseas.

Since graduating with a PhD, John has been obtained numerous grants worth over $3.4 million. These include a number of ARC discovery grants in the areas of Public Health, Transportation crowding, general economic theory related to utility separability as well as one on improving the external validity of Discrete Choice Experiments. In addition to academic grants, John has been involved in $9 million in industry-based contract research since the year 2005. Find out more about John: https://profiles.sydney.edu.au/john.rose

Andrea joined the Institute of Transport and Logistics Studies as the Neil Smith Lecturer in Sustainable Mobility and Accessibility in March 2023. Before becoming a lecturer, Andrea spent three years as visiting research scholar thanks to two scholarships, the Early.Postdoc mobility and the Postdoc mobility, awarded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. Andrea holds a Master of Science in Statistics with Honors from the University of Bologna and a PhD in Economics from the University of Lugano. Over the years, Andrea has taken part in different consulting projects with several public and private institutions such as NSW Government, University of Florence, and University of Catania. Find out more about Andrea: https://profiles.sydney.edu.au/andrea.pellegrini

For more information
University of Sydney Business School
Institute of Transport and Logistics Studies
business.itlse@sydney.edu.au
sydney.edu.au

CRICOS 00026A TEQSA PRV12057