

TITLE: Rethinking nation's needs

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Building the right infrastructure for Australia's future means getting the big end of town to pay their fair share

Economic growth is a very strange thing. In 1949 when our gross domestic product was about a tenth of what it is today, Australia set out to build 145 kilometres of tunnels, 16 major dams and nine power stations as part of the Snowy Hydro scheme.

But 60 years later, when GDP is \$1.3 trillion bigger than that of the nation that Ben Chifley led, and with tunnel-boring technology that the builders of the Snowy scheme could have only dreamt of, it seems we couldn't possibly build a tunnel under that most daunting of obstacles, the "giant" Mount Ainslie.

China has more than 3500 kilometres of rail line capable of speeds of more than 300km/h. Russia is planning a trans-Siberian high-speed rail line, the Mexicans are planning fast rail along the Yucatan peninsula and Turkey has begun construction of a planned 1500 kilometres of fast rail. The GDP per capita of these countries is between 9 per cent and 20 per cent of Australia's.

Of course, some people argue that the problem isn't just the money, but the availability of land. While Japan, Germany and China find it easy to build very fast trains through densely populated countries, the "congestion" between Canberra and Goulburn is used as a reason why such infrastructure is inappropriate for Australia.

And then there is the population argument. Some believe we just don't have enough people to justify such investment. Leaving aside the fact that we built the existing rail lines between Sydney and Melbourne when the population of both cities was far smaller, the Sydney-Melbourne air route moved 7 million passengers last year making it the fifth busiest route in the world.

The irony of the population argument is that many of those who oppose building new transport infrastructure are the same people pushing for rapid population growth. Indeed, given that we are heading for an extra 10 million Australians in the next few decades by the time any fast rail corridor up the east coast was built our population would have likely grown by 50 per cent.

There is a simple reason that the imaginary obstacles of Mount Ainslie and a shortage of land are used to stifle planning for very fast trains: powerful people in Australia don't want to build one.

Australia is planning to spend \$50 billion to build 12 new submarines to replace the six we can't currently staff. We are spending billions of dollars subsidising rail lines to get coal from inland mines to port. And the cost of building a second airport is estimated to be about \$8 billion which, if history is anything to go by, means it will probably cost more than \$10 billion.

When we want to build something we do. We find the money, we find the land. But when public investment in fast trains threatens the profits of private airports and airlines the big end of town flicks the switch to NIMBY. It's no different to the way that the owners of coal-fired power stations pretend to care about the impact of wind turbine noise on residents. Strangely they are not so compassionate when residents complain about the noise and dust of new coalmines.

If we wanted to build very fast trains instead of new airports we could. If we wanted to build more public transport and fewer roads we could. And if we wanted to build more renewable energy and less fossil fuel-fired energy we could. But, at the moment at least, neither the big end of town nor the big end of politics want to. They want to build submarines, airports and coal rail lines instead.

The easiest way to fund the big infrastructure projects we need is to stop funding the big infrastructure projects we don't need. But we could go a lot further, and faster, than that if we also scrapped the \$13 billion a year in subsidies that we give to the fossil fuel producers.

And if we were really serious about transforming Australia we would go back to the first version of the mining tax and collect some serious money for the citizens whose coal and iron ore is making Gina Rinehart and others so wealthy. The fact that Rinehart's wealth has risen so fast at a time when the so-called super profits tax isn't collecting any revenue is proof of how urgently we need to redesign it.

On average Australians are now among the wealthiest people the world has ever known. Of course the average conceals the extremes of both entrenched poverty in some communities and the fact that Rinehart is now the wealthiest woman the world has ever known.

Australia is a rich country that can afford to both build the infrastructure our nation needs and to be generous to the mining barons, but we need to rethink how. At present we express our generosity to them by building the infrastructure they need, giving them the tax concessions they want and amending the mining tax so that they don't actually pay it.

To fund the infrastructure of the 21st century we need to make them pay their fair share, and if the only way to do so is to name big things after them then I for one am willing to sign up. I'm

sure there would be plenty of people willing to catch the "Gina Express" if it finally meant we got a very fast train between Civic and Sydney.

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