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# **Continuity and change in urban transport policy: politics, institutions and actors in Melbourne and Vancouver since 1970**

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## **Abstract**

Melbourne and Vancouver share many similarities, but there are significant differences in the content and outcomes of transport and urban planning policies since 1970. Melbourne has built a large urban freeway network and is struggling to create a coherent transit network from its large, but fragmented transit system. Vancouver has achieved some enviable successes in urban planning, but is still facing significant car-dependence in its outer suburbs. This paper provides a conceptual theoretical model that asserts the centrality of local politics as the source of reasons for particular urban transport policy trajectories. It describes the political and institutional context for the development of transport policies and the behaviour of key actors in the two cities, and identifies some of key factors behind transport and planning outcomes.

# **Continuity and change in urban transport policy: politics, institutions and actors in Melbourne and Vancouver since 1970**

## **Introduction**

Few urban regions in North America or Australasia have made significant progress towards the creation of sustainable transport systems. In order to achieve better results in the future, it is important to understand more about the success or failure of past attempts at transport and urban planning reform.

The urban regions of Vancouver and Melbourne provide interesting examples of relative success and failure in progress towards the broad goals encompassed by the idea of sustainable transport. From 1970, urban planning and transport policy and practice in the two urban regions have followed very different trajectories. This paper provides some explanations for these differences by examining local politics, institutions and actor behaviour.

Transport policy in both Melbourne and Vancouver has been subject to extensive political contention. This contention can be seen as an ongoing process of challenge and resistance between groups representing differing policy positions. To explore this process, a conceptual model for the conditions that appear necessary for successful urban policy change is used. This model is based various theoretical approaches from political science and from institutional and policy network analysis. It recognises the power of global forces in shaping urban policy outcomes, but places greater weight on the role performed by local actors in local political institutions. It directs analytic attention to ‘windows of opportunity’ in local political conditions during which attempts at change are most likely to succeed.

So, the case studies identify ‘windows of opportunity’ in Melbourne and Vancouver and investigate of the strategies and behaviour of key actors within local political institutions at these times. This examination was undertaken through an extensive review of significant documents and semi-structured interviews. Narratives based on this research form the major part of the paper.

## **Different transport policy trajectories: the cases of Vancouver and Melbourne**

The urban regions of Vancouver and Melbourne are similar on many relevant variables.

At a national level, sociological typologies, such as those of Castles and Mitchell (1990) and Esping-Andersen (1999) demonstrate the close similarities between Australia and Canada in the ways that the welfare state is constituted and private markets are encouraged. Similarities are also apparent in national political institutions based on the relatively recent British colonial heritage. Compared with the USA, the lower tiers of government are constitutionally and financially more dependent on those above, and professionals within government bureaucracies wield greater influence on policy relative to elected officials (Keating 1991).

Greater Vancouver has a smaller population, but the two urban regions are both in the middle-rank of cities in the global economy: each is an important sub-centre in its national economy but is secondary to Sydney and Toronto respectively. Each is a major port for the import and distribution of consumer goods and the export of commodities from the extractive and

agricultural industries that underpin their national economies. Both cities have experienced a decline in employment in manufacturing and processing since the 1980s, with most recent growth in the service sector.

Greater Melbourne is an urban region of around four million inhabitants. Early in its history, the city built extensive suburban train and tram networks that operate today. These shaped the growing metropolis, creating patterns of settlement and movement that are still evident. Transit use between 1950 and 1980 fell faster and further than in any other western city with the exception of Auckland (Mees 2010b). Since then, improvements have been a stated planning goal, but for 25 years after 1980, annual transit use stagnated at around 90 trips per capita (Figure 1). Patronage has grown since 2006, but government officials acknowledge that this was not the result of transport policy initiatives but largely reflected increased petrol prices and employment growth (Gaymer and Kinnear 2009). While Melbourne has an embarrassment of riches in its tram and train infrastructure, it faces significant problems in inefficient use of these enviable resources, which leads to fragmented intermodal service delivery (Lazanas and Stone 2010; Mees 2010b)

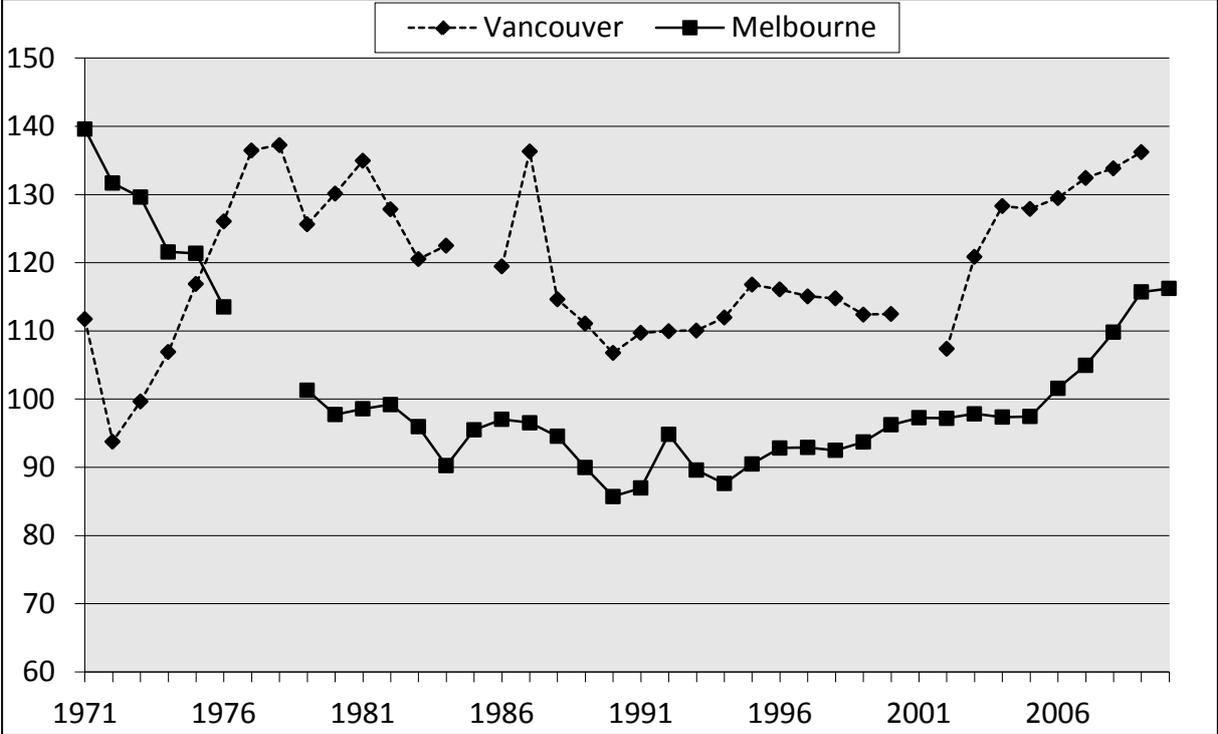


Figure 1: Per capita transit use in Melbourne and Vancouver (annual unlinked trips).  
 (Sources: Transit operators' Annual Reports)

For the journey to work, census data from 1976 to 2006 shows that Melbourne experienced the largest proportional decline of any Australian cities in transit use and the biggest increase in driving (Mees et al. 2008). This is not surprising because, since 1976, Melbourne has built more lane-kilometres of urban freeways than any other Australian city. The city has few geographical barriers to expansion, and a legislated urban growth boundary, established in 2002, was recently abandoned. Zoning controls and building codes are weak, leaving the majority of important decisions in the hands of developers.

Like Melbourne, Vancouver's early transit infrastructure shaped the region's urban form, but unlike Melbourne, its streetcars were closed down in the post-war years and new rapid transit infrastructure was not built until 1986. But, even in the 1970s, operators were able to use an injection of funds to reverse an earlier decline in transit tripmaking. Per capita tripmaking peaked again in the late 1980s and stagnated in the 1990s, (see Figure 1). It is now showing a trend of modest but steady growth, returning to 141 trips per capita in 2010 following significant investment in new transit infrastructure. Many targets for transit mode share, set for different market segments in regional plans in the 1990s, are now being met (City of Vancouver 2006). In addition, the average time for the round trip to and from work fell from 70 minutes to 67 minutes between 1992 and 2005 (Turcotte 2005). Recent data is less encouraging – the average round trip in 2010 took 74 minutes (Turcotte 2011) – but the long-term trend shows that Vancouver has made more progress than most cities towards the 'holy grail' of self-containment.

A number of transport and planning policies have contributed to this relative success. Investment has continued in locally-proven transit technology and service patterns have been explicitly designed to create an efficient intermodal network (Stone et al. 2012). The region has, since 1996, explicitly used congestion as a travel-demand tool. There is only one commuter freeway – the Trans-Canada Highway – which traverses the city passing the CBD at a distance of 5 km. Road capacity expansion has, until recently, been confined to freight routes in the outer suburbs.

Building codes “impose significant constraints on developers” (Leo 1994, p. 683) and have won international praise for their achievement of 'liveable' outcomes (Punter 2003). At a regional level, a strong urban growth boundary has been maintained for many years: the constraints of mountains, sea and the US border provide a compelling case. The regional development plan, also of long-standing, has had mixed success in constraining growth to its desired zones. Although it has been hotly contested, the regional planning framework has remained relatively stable and has succeeded in directing some development to locations that support the transit network. However, the region still faces demographic obstacles to transit growth: the CBD employment market is small; fifty per cent of jobs still lie outside preferred 'growth concentration zones' (GVRD Planning Dept., pers. comm.); and over 90 per cent of residents in the region live in dispersed suburban dwellings (2001 census data quoted in GVRD 2002).

Data in Table 1 compares transit performance and other relevant parameters of urban form and transport system function in the two cities.

There are some important differences in the institutions of urban governance through which these transport systems are managed. In Melbourne, urban affairs are almost entirely in the hands of the Victorian state parliament. This is, in part, because Melbourne contains an overwhelming concentration of the economic activity in the State (Stilwell 1992) and parliament has stifled moves to establish any form of regional government for fear it would become a direct competitor. Local government has few powers and is fragmented in many small municipalities. It attracts candidates who “are not dismayed by its lack of scope, vision and power” (Holmes 1976, p. 71).

*Table 1: Comparisons of urban form and transport system performance.*

	<b>Melbourne</b>	<b>Vancouver</b>
Total population (millions in 2006)	3.59	2.12
Density (persons per ha. in the urban region in 2006)	15.7	17.2
Urbanised area (km <sup>2</sup> in 2006)	2280	1230
Jobs in 'downtown' (% of total jobs in the urban region in 2006)	18.5	12.6
Passenger cars/1,000 residents (in 1995)	594	520
Rail length (m / 1000 residents in 1995)	214	50
Share of work trips (in 2006):		
- Transit		
- Walk and cycle	13.9	16.5
- Car	4.9	8.0
	78.1	74.4
'Unlinked' transit trips' per capita (in 2010)	116	141

(Data sourced from Statistics Canada and Australian Bureau of Statistics Censuses, Annual Reports of local transit operators, and Kenworthy and Laube 2001)

At the regional level, strong statutory authorities existed until the 1980s. One of these, the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW), provided some structure for metropolitan coordination and legitimacy in representing local interests. However, it was dismantled in the 1980s, and its functions were brought under centralised executive control.

Economic activity in British Columbia is also concentrated in Vancouver, but there have been fewer limits on the development of local government power. The City of Vancouver takes in around 25% of both the population and the land area, and about one-third of the property values, of Greater Vancouver (GVRD 2006) and can use this strength in dealings with the province. However, the City is still constrained by provincial regulation (Bish and Clemens 1999), and operates within a “strikingly hierarchical, condescending power structure” (Berelowitz 2005, p. 92). Through an “evolution of traditional regionalism” (Bish and Clemens 1999, p. 51), an idiosyncratic form of metropolitan government emerged. The Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) is “best conceptualised as an institution for inter-municipal cooperation” (Sancton, p. 71): its members are not directly elected but come from the ranks of local politicians.

### **Theorising differences in transport policy change: the centrality of politics**

The international literature points towards local institutional conditions and the behaviour of political actors as the keys to understanding variations in transport outcomes. This is necessarily only a brief review of a complex field. For more detail, see Stone and Legacy (in press).

Kenworthy and Laube (2001) have shown that growth in transit use varies significantly even among cities with many physical similarities. They argue that this variability relates to the consistency with which policies to support alternatives to car dependence are pursued by city governments (2002), rather than factors such as wealth or cultural attitudes to mobility that have been suggested by other commentators (Gomez-Ibañez 1991). In Canada (Kennedy et al. 2005) and Europe (Bratzel 1999), research has also pointed to the political dimension as the key to explaining differences in transport outcomes.

We have seen that there are some differences in the institutions within which transport policy is determined in Melbourne and Vancouver, but, while the outcomes of contention are influenced by the nature of the institutions, this is not deterministic. Within any institution, there is no guarantee that “any arbitrary change can be made ... or that changes will be consistent with prior intentions” (March and Olsen 1996, p. 256). Outcomes are also less predictable because policy conflicts can be fought in ways that reflect a “hidden or black polity” (Raab 1992, p. 74).

A major obstacle to policy change is the existence of groups of interdependent professional actors, called ‘policy networks’, which exert strong and persistent control over their particular policy sectors. Policy networks are “very successful in resisting policy changes” (Rhodes and Marsh 1992, p. 197-8). Weakening this resistance appears to require a challenge by an external group of activists and experts who create a visible opposition to an existing policy network and seize a window of political opportunity to get action on their agenda. This, in turn, may lead to a policy change and a new bureaucratic institution (Campbell et al. 1989).

Sabatier argues that “changes in the core elements of public policy require the replacement of the dominant group by another” (1991, p. 153), but it can sometimes be difficult to tell whether short-term change indicates that a dominant grouping has been replaced or if it is only responding to a challenge (Stewart 1991). In the transport arena, there are numerous examples of an existing policy network responding to political pressures by making rhetorical changes to its public position without changing basic attitudes (Vigar 2002).

Bratzel’s study of political processes in six ‘relatively successful’ European cities revealed three stages in the way that ‘windows of opportunity’ emerged and were exploited by skilful political entrepreneurs. These were:

1. serious challenge to city or regional government due to popular opposition to its transport and environmental policies;
2. change in political leadership and in important transport policy positions;
3. institutionalisation of operational changes through the creation of a new policy network (significant political skill required to maintain a mandate for new policies among a range of social actors).

This suggests that change in transport policy requires successful interactions between civic action groups, which can give legitimacy to new ways of framing policy problems and solutions, and the ‘public entrepreneurs’ (Schneider and Teske 1995) who can reframe issues and build coalitions to support change within the institutions of government.

With this in mind, understanding the differences between Melbourne and Vancouver requires identification of ‘windows of opportunity’ during which existing transport policies were challenged by effective civic action.

In Melbourne, the first ‘window’ opened after a grand urban freeway scheme was announced in 1969 (Davison 2004a). Significant civic action followed, especially in the inner city, and in 1973, the entrenched conservative government cancelled the most contentious projects. Then, in 1980, dominant road planners advanced radical plans to cut transit services to fund the freeways still on the books (Davison). Again, strong civic action forced a reversal and contributed to the election of a reformist government with a pro-transit manifesto. But, despite new policy prescriptions, very little significant change to policy direction was made over the decade that this administration remained in office.

Vancouver followed a different path. Like Melbourne, there was a dramatic period of contention over freeway plans from 1968 to 1972, but this led to significant change. By 1975, new political leadership at the regional and provincial level had established strong ‘growth control’ and transit agendas. In the decades that followed, supporters of car-based policies have often found themselves as challengers seeking to find institutional and political backing for their policy prescriptions. There has been almost constant political contention over transport policy. Three main phases can be identified. From 1976 to 1990, conservative provincial governments provided a base for the supporters of car-based policies. Then, from 1990 to 2000, growth-control proponents reasserted their political mandate in a process that led to the Livable Region Strategic Plan and Transport 2021. A 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.

To understand how the two cities came to follow different paths, research explored the behaviour of key political and institutional actors at these key points in time. Sources included published and archival material, newspaper reports and semi-structured interviews with key figures in each city, undertaken between 2005 and 2007. (For details, see Stone 2008.)

## **Behaviour of key actors in Melbourne and Vancouver**

### *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. Transit systems were operated by once-great statutory authorities which had engaged over many decades in a “fever of perverted competition” (Davison 2004b, p. 198) with each other. Their history tended to blind them to the emerging threat from the car.

After losing support for their grand freeway scheme road proponents learned important political lessons: each subsequent freeway proposal – a fragment of the original plan – is justified in terms of its local congestion relief, sidestepping larger questions of overall transport policy, and avoiding mass opposition.

Rail operators, by contrast, used the Plan to pursue a city tunnel, something they had wanted since 1929. This helped to lock transit planning into a city-commuter focus that ignored changing travel patterns in the suburbs: a problem that remains.

By the late 1970s, the transit budget deficit 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 a study written by a savvy road engineer, known as a savage critic of public spending on transit, and actively supported by the transport minister. Measured by press coverage, proposed transit closures were the biggest state political issue in 1980 and 1981. Transit unions led the opposition and forced a halt to the plans as the 1982 election approached.

The victory of the reformist Australian Labor Party (ALP) at this election 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 was the creation of large ministries with policy directly under the control of Cabinet (Considine 1992). 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.

In transport, the ALP had written into its platform much of the union reform agenda, which emphasised the need for new trains and trams, and extensions to existing suburban lines. The platform also included opposition to further freeway construction, a policy adopted in the early 1970s. The new minister set out to establish a huge new Transport Ministry, but without any formal framework for negotiating policy detail. He had some understanding of the changes required to build a modern transit system: multimodal ticketing, regular timetabling and simplified bus routes. However, union officials 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 transit operations.

After only 18 months, the minister 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 backlash against measures designed to cut costs of transit operations. This conflict was rooted in ideological and factional rifts that eventually crippled the government (Cain 1995). However, from a transport-planning perspective, many operational changes were fundamentally flawed (Stone 2008, pp.197-198).

In the other main issue in the transport portfolio, the minister, like most of the people from whom he took advice, supported the continuation of the freeway-building program, and so was at odds with the policy platform his party had taken to the 1982 election. The Premier, a freeway sceptic but not involved in the detail of transport policy at the time, recalls: “we were tempered by pragmatism, a bit like Lady Macbeth, [sometimes you are] so far up the track that you can’t turn back” (Cain, research interview). The minister, however, was accelerating onto the freeway track. Only a few weeks after the election, he told an amazed group of road engineers to ignore his government’s published policy and continue work on their current freeway project (research interviews).

There was no formal review of planning policy either: this would have put a spotlight on the differences between party policy and the minister’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 transit cuts and questioned the priority given to freeways (MMBW 1981). Their analysis was based, in large part, on a polemic written by prominent environmental and social activists (White et al. 1978). This was a local articulation of linear-city planning theory: the forerunner of today’s policies of ‘activity centres’ linked by transit. However, few of these voices of doubt found a place in the new planning ministry. Road building was the centrepiece of the planning strategy that finally emerged after five years (Victorian Government 1987), and ALP leaders laid the groundwork for the massive inner-city City Link tollway project built as a PPP in the 1990s (Pretorius et al. 2012).

Various civic action groupings supported improvements to transit in this period. However, none was able to find the political strength to make an impact after 1985 when the ALP transit reforms began to falter. Established transit managers offered little leadership on alternative visions for the city and the roads policy network enjoyed clear, if covert, political support and had established direct influence over transit and planning policy. Over time, political leaders

and the public began to accept the idea that a renaissance of Melbourne's transit system was impossible.

Through the 1990s, under an ideologically driven conservative state government, transit management was re-organised according to neo-liberal dictates (Mees 2010b). 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 operations (Lazanas and Stone 2010). International transport companies have been granted separate franchises to operate the large train and tram systems and, although all assets remain in public hands, it has endured despite a series of financial and political crises. Independent operational expertise has been lost because the public agencies have become contract regulators rather than transit planners (Stone 2010).

The return of an ALP government in 1999 did not mark a shift in transport and planning policies. Its regional strategic plan (DoI 2002) used the rhetoric of urban consolidation and transit-oriented development but expansion of the freeway network consumed most of the associated budget; and there was little change in the approach to management of the transit system apart from a weakening of the obligations placed on the franchisees (Mees 2005). New proposals for expansion of the transit system are poorly developed (Stone 2010; Mees 2010a) and there is no process for the assumptions behind these proposals to be contested publicly (Dotson 2009).

So, Melbourne is in a weak position to respond to demands for improved transit that have followed the lasting spike in patronage that began in 2005. Many analysts accept that poor performance of the transit system was a key factor in the ALP's unexpected election loss in 2010. The incoming conservative government has shown little appetite for change in transit management and it remains to be seen whether external events of civic action will be able to create a new 'window' for reform of transport policy in Melbourne at the next election in 2014.

### *Vancouver*

In the late 1950s, with Vancouver's transit in decay, government officials believed that freeways were the obvious replacement. As in Melbourne, there was no established road construction agency, but American consultants prepared a large-scale plan typical of the times and Council officials worked 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, and, as in Melbourne, conservative politicians backed away from the grand freeway project. Proponents pursued smaller pieces of the puzzle against a backdrop of cuts in Federal funding, and several short sections of elevated road were built on the edge of the CBD. But, in 1971, plans for a new crossing of Burrard Inlet were revealed, and 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 planning critics (Tennant 1981). With no strongly entrenched institutions like Melbourne's statutory authorities, planning and transport policies were fluid and it was possible for many of these 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 planning regulation took the form of design guidelines, with fixed principles summed up by the watchword: ‘neighbourliness’, to be met through negotiation. This framework has proved remarkably robust.

TEAM also had support in the newly formed regional government, which established a Planning Department to help sort out its priorities. Its new leader pursued alternatives to the traditional ‘top down’ approach and at public meetings found an “astounding” opposition to growth (Lash 1976, p. 56). Some planners and politicians were uncomfortable with a consultative approach to regional planning, saying that “people expect planners to tell them [the answers]” (p. 55). The final decision to go ahead with the open-ended *Livable Region* planning process was “hard fought”, but the strong community sentiment on development strengthened the resolve of the provincial reformers to introduce urban growth boundary legislation in 1973. The first Livable Region Plan (GVRD 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 services should be delivered. Offered more funding by the province, transit operators achieved solid patronage growth, partly because their bus system operated as a coherent network. This success strengthened political support for transit expansion, but this stalled when the conservatives regained provincial power in 1975.

New opportunities for transit 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 centrepiece of a working transit system, not just an event toy.

Friction between the province and the region came to a head 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 transit funding, which led to a fall in patronage. In the late 1980s, the province tried to use its new planning powers to introduce a road-based transport plan but Vancouver City and its suburban allies rejected this (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* (GVRD 1990). These included giving priority to walking, cycling, transit, and goods movement over private cars. To build support, the GVRD undertook public opinion surveys, conferences, and a wide range of work in political and technical committees to evaluate various planning options (GVRD 1996b).

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 transit funding. Eventually, the GVRD adopted a new Livable Region Strategic Plan (GVRD 1996a). 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 ... iteratively" (interview). *Transport 2021* (GVRD 1993a) is remarkably coherent. It sets out a detailed plan to improve transit and consciously allow road congestion, particularly on bridges, to grow 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 (GVRD 1993b). 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 as contested as in the 1970s. Politicians were sceptical about involving the public, preferring control 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 the motion to proceed passed by a single vote (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 freight congestion and ageing trolleybuses (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, for a time, pursued a transparent and interactive planning model.

Future transport investments remain the unpredictable outcome of political contention. The airport SkyTrain line, opened in 2009, was built, at the insistence of the province, as a PPP. The distribution of risk was hotly debated but, in the event, patronage has exceeded expectations. The province also intervened to corporatise TransLink, thus reducing transparency and the power of local politicians in investment decisions. By 2012, most new suburban transport investment plans were road-based. This threatens to undermine regional government targets for transit use and growth concentration and shows that the Vancouver's constant contention over transport policy is entering a new and fascinating phase.

## **Similarities and differences**

### *Actor group strategies and resources*

One of the most striking differences between Vancouver and Melbourne is the strength of Vancouver's progressive urban planning policy network and its ability to maintain a reasonably consistent political and public consensus in support of its agenda over more than three decades. In Melbourne, a road-planning policy network has remained in control.

While road planners in Melbourne achieved dominance by building their technical expertise and by developing effective political alliances, established transit managers were conspicuous by their absence or ineffectiveness in political and technical debates.

The process of establishing Vancouver's atypical urban planning policy network began with strong civic action in which opposition to freeways was framed in ways that generated support across a many groupings in Vancouver society. The new political leaders were drawn directly from the civic action groups and so were disposed to take decisive action and to support the efforts of new appointees to senior planning positions. These planners were able to adapt modernist planning tools to build a strong rational basis for their interventions and maintained, if only narrowly, political backing for the processes used to build public support for the new directions. In Melbourne, progressive planners seldom had any influential political patronage and the ALP's administrative reforms had the effect of removing what little power they might have had.

Civic action groups made two important challenges to the road-planning policy network in Melbourne. In the first, in the early 1970s, freeway opponents had a base in community groups across the many suburbs. They achieved some re-drafting of the freeway planning maps and a change in government rhetoric, but they did not break up the policy network that had written the plan. In the second challenge, in 1981, the dominant challenge group was the led by the transit unions whose structures paralleled those of the fragmented transit authorities.

Since 1982, community groups that challenged the road-based planning agenda or build support for a different approach to improving transit services have had little success. The critique of urban planning articulated by environmentalists in the 1970s may have been useful for some planners. However, its proponents did not have a detailed analysis of the problems of Melbourne's transit management and so their prescriptions did not address operational issues that might then have been built into civic action campaigns. Even those groups that have concentrated solely on transit issues have found themselves in opposition to established transit managers and unions.

The most serious missed opportunity for external advocates for policy change was the failure to establish a presence in the right circles when new directions for transport policy were set in 1982. This would have been a difficult task, given minister's idiosyncratic style, but the consequences of being 'outside the tent' at this time were enormous. There is little evidence of organised attempts that failed; rather it seems that either the need was not recognised, or, if it was, no appropriate mechanism could be found.

Other oppositional groups emerged in response to particular freeway proposals. These faced the deliberately restricted agenda for public processes established by the road-planning policy network, and were often riven by internal conflict that made them unattractive to potential participants. In the late 1980s, one group did produce an insightful new analysis of Melbourne's transport policy (PTUA 1991), but could not build on this, in part because the short period of political focus on reform of transit management had passed.

The comparison with Vancouver makes it clear that strategic choices made by the different actor groups in Melbourne were vitally important. However, it is likely that other factors would have made the process of transport policy change in Melbourne comparatively more difficult, even if the strategies and resources of actor groups had been different.

*The role of institutional structures for urban government and management of transport systems*

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, transit systems and their associated institutions in Melbourne were much larger and more complex than were those in Vancouver. Long periods without effective accountability to either parliament or the public allowed them to become very powerful, but also, over time, they became fragmented, inward looking and defensive. When serious competition developed between road and transit agencies for capital in the 1960s and 1970s, Melbourne's transit agencies used their established, though diminishing, power to entrench out-dated thinking about operational priorities and future investment requirements for their complex and ageing systems, and were unable to resist the challenge from the roads policy network.

Agents for change in transport policy in Vancouver did not operate in such a complex institutional environment where difficult path dependencies were at work. So, when new actors gained political and institutional power, it was easier for them to steer transport policy in new directions. Local and regional governments were able to dominate urban planning and transport policy development because, by comparison, the province had no serious bureaucratic machinery for promoting freeway construction or for initiating urban planning policy interventions that its politicians may have wanted to pursue.

Reformists in Melbourne in 1982 needed to curb the power of the various statutory authorities in order to establish their policy agendas. However, the dismantling of the planning authority was done in a way that led to an erosion of the public accountability of policy-makers. By encouraging road planners to ignore the ALP's policy on freeway construction, the minister provided a model for behaviour that has become widespread in transport and planning policy development in Melbourne. Statements of government policy are regularly prepared by anonymous officials and include general expressions of intent while, inside the department, those same officials pursue quite different programs.

There are interesting parallels between the structures and roles of the GVRD and Board of Works in Melbourne as sites for the coordination of regional policies and the delivery of technical services. In the 1960s, the MMBW had some success in consolidating and directing the location of urban growth and recognised the need for different approaches to transit service planning. By 1981, it was critical of moves to cut transit services and to accelerate the freeway program. These tendencies never had the political opportunities to form a strong planning policy network similar to that which had grown up in the GVRD by the 1990s.

In Vancouver, too, members of progressive policy networks were able to survive periods of political weakness because the City of Vancouver – and, by association, the GVRD – through its size, geography, commercial and cultural history, and aspects of its legislative base has a degree of independence from the provincial government. By contrast, the Victorian state government holds a virtual monopoly of resources and power in urban planning in Melbourne, and so it is more difficult to maintain a long-term challenge from the outside.

### *The role of geography*

In Melbourne, there are few physical barriers to urban expansion. In contrast, water, mountains and scarce arable land surround Vancouver. This is likely to have focussed the minds of decision-makers.

In Melbourne, the major modern port facilities lie in close proximity to the central city, while Vancouver has relocated its major freight operations from the downtown waterfront to the Fraser River on the urban fringe. The virtual co-location of major destinations for freight movement and passenger travel in Melbourne made the freeway network appear attractive to a range of interest groups. The roads policy network shifted its justifications for freeways depending on political circumstances. Planners did not seek freight solutions that could avoid the demand for private car travel induced by radial freeways. By contrast, the physical separation of freight and commuter destinations made it easier to distinguish between the passenger and freight tasks during the preparation of the second Vancouver LRSP.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear from these case studies that change, or its lack, is not the outcome of any systematic process of problem identification and policy learning. Rather, the evidence strongly supports the theoretical prominence given to the constant processes of challenge and resistance over policy.

In Melbourne, geography, institutional history, and structures of urban governance each contributed obstacles for challengers to the road-based policy paradigm. Nevertheless, windows of opportunity did exist, but were not taken. Civic group leaders, planners and politicians have not been able to build public confidence in a 'transit alternative'.

In Vancouver, a 'progressive' policy network was able to hold the ascendancy for significant periods through the persistent presence of some key actors, tough political tactics, and skilful use of participatory process and modernist transport planning tools. It was able to survive within regional and local institutions during periods of political weakness.

These case studies confirm that there is no simple formula for transport policy reform. But, the essential ingredients are civic action groups, politicians, and planners who are willing to participate in robust political contention over many years; who can support each other in the development of an appropriate transit-planning agenda; and who can constructively engage with the wider community to build or re-assert support for their programs.

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