

MOVING FORWARD ? BUT WHERE TO ?

This paper was originally published in the New Zealand Herald

The Government's New Zealand Transport Strategy opens the way for the introduction of tolls to pay for the development of new roads.

Some will see this as opening the floodgates a chink further on private ownership of what should be public assets. Opponents will declare that our water assets have been "saved", and now we need to save the roads.

That would be unkind. Given the scale of Auckland's congestion issues, the Government's policy direction merits analysis, not rhetoric.

International experts tell us that the solution to congestion is not to build more roads. Nine months ago representatives of the Auckland Councils identified heavy rail, light rail and buses for its integrated transport model for the region. Contracts were awarded for the Britomart development, the centrepiece of Auckland's new transport strategy.

It may seem strange in that context that the Minister proposes to spend an additional \$94 million on roading (on top of \$973 million budgeted for the 2001/2002 year). This compares with \$30 million and \$3 million respectively to alternatives to roading such as walking and cycling (worthy causes that rate with muesli or all bran as being good for you, but not always appealing).

It may seem stranger still that the Government is also acknowledging that road tolls might be used to fund the construction of even more roads.

For the average Auckland commuter, cars still have the edge. As yet, there is no more convenient alternative. And at least access to the essential roading network is free. Some therefore see charging for road use as another tax, and if private owners make the charges, it is an affront. The spectre rises of foreign capital, over-charging and of profits disappearing off shore. The whiff of the taint of user pays is hard to ignore. But this is hardly a balanced interpretation of the Government's policy announcement.

The Minister's Transport Vision provides that charging will apply only to new roads, not existing ones. "Ownership", whatever that may be, will remain in public hands. The four-cent per litre increase in petrol taxes has already been identified as going into a fund dedicated to transport, rather than into the Government's general coffers.

But that still doesn't answer the question of why the Government is focussing on roads while the region's Councils are clearly more interested in the alternatives. The problem with the alternatives is that they cost a lot to set up and, in the case of both heavy and light rail, the annual running cost is high. The romantic visions of light rail cars winding their way around the city like Dutch trams in the Damrak start to get a tawdry look when you consider the annual cost of maintenance.

In the last few years, we've seen our water supplies under pressure, the electricity network fail and we're told that our stormwater network is in serious need of further investment. Some regional funding is available, but no one is enthusiastic about continued increases in taxes and rates to cover the cost.

This is why the Minister's package points the way to a future that may well be affordable, integrated, safe and sustainable, as he claims.

By allowing for wider investment in new roads, and opening the way to recovering some of the real costs of building and maintaining those roads, the proposed measures should free up capital for other infrastructure investment which is seen as pressing.

That capital could also be used to explore and promote alternative transport projects. Given the choice of higher tolls during peak hours with electronic assessment and billing, those alternatives to getting into your car may become very attractive indeed. Promoting the construction of new roads for Auckland may just have the very effect the opponents to new roads desire.

That will depend on how willing we are to accept that our roads aren't free, and they never have been.

The sign over our old CPO confidently proclaiming that "the trains are coming back" is looking as tired as the building it hangs from. But perhaps not for long. The final impetus for a smart new public transport system may be building new roads, and penalising us for using them at times we most want to use them.