



**To:** Transport & Health Policy Makers, & Practitioners  
**From:** Prof Adrian Davis, TRI, Edinburgh Napier University  
**Date:** 15<sup>th</sup> March 2023  
**Subject:** Essential Evidence 4 Scotland No.65 Examining the politics of transport planning

---

Top Line: Politics is a key determinant of transport policy. Attempts at evidence-based transport policy are often thwarted by ideological stances at odds with environmental sustainability & focused on road building.

The development of transport policy in Australian cities in recent decades has been combined with land use planning and embedded within metropolitan-wide strategic plans. The last 15 years have seen a rise in consensus-based processes designed around deliberation and inclusive public dialogue to support these plan-making processes and the development of key policy priorities. These plans inscribe an understanding into the planning landscape that investing in urban public transport is both desired and critical; particularly in the face of climate change or higher rates of urbanisation. This is strongly coupled with an understanding that integrating land use and public transport planning can offer residents and employees the benefits of improvements to their accessibility, the ease with which they can reach daily activities they need access to.

However, deliberation and consensus-based processes can only—at best—deliver broad and general agreements about rather insipid concepts such as sustainability, urban resilience and liveability, and indeed broad commitments to produce accessibility without ever detailing how these goals might be achieved.<sup>1</sup> This is typically the approach taken in metropolitan strategic plan-making, but these processes rarely remove the inherent politics and power plays that come to be associated with everyday policy decision-making. Moreover, the literature on transport planning in Australian cities has produced countless rationalities for understanding why there continues to be a dominance of road construction over public transport.<sup>2</sup> In case studies examined by researchers of Australian cities, antagonism directed at elected politicians by concerned residents and community-based groups was spurred by concerns over the lack of transparency of business cases, expediency of participatory processes, and the urgency to sign contracts before a state election (Melbourne, Perth).<sup>3</sup> As Cox, among others has noted, infrastructure is never neutral and always inherently political.<sup>4</sup> This includes hard (as in material structures) or soft (as in skills and knowledge). The politics of infrastructure concerns the politics of mobility’.

By 2013 there was a discernible “turn” in transport planning (echoing the UK) with the investment agenda shaped by large road infrastructure projects that rise to prominence from outside the discourse fostered by an open and evidence-based strategic planning process. Instead, the decision-making process is opaque and emerges from the political domain. The resulting proposals represent partisan policy agendas that are imposed on communities who in turn question the democratic and procedural legitimacy of these flagship projects. In what appears to be a continuation of a dominant and deep-seated path dependent culture of road construction in Australian cities there is now open antagonism between power wielded by elected officials and the strategic policy priorities negotiated between civil society groups and the planning bureaucracy. The antagonism bears parallels to the insurgent planning practices known from parts of the developing world, where civil society members and groups act outside the invited spaces of formal stakeholder participation by appropriating invented spaces of informality and, sometimes, subversion of the regulatory regime.

---

<sup>1</sup> Purcell, M., 2009. Resisting neo-liberalisation: communicative planning or counter-hegemonic movements? *Planning Theory*, 8 (2), 140–165.

<sup>22</sup> Flyvbjerg, B., 1998. *Rationality and power: democracy in practice*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

<sup>3</sup> Legacy, C., Curtis, C., Scheurer, J. 2017. Planning transport infrastructure: examining the politics of transport planning in Melbourne, Sydney and Perth, *Journal of Urban Policy & Research*, 35(1).

<sup>4</sup> Cox, P. 2020. Theorising infrastructure: a politics of spaces and edges, in Cox, P. et al (Eds) *The Politics of cycling infrastructure: space and (in)equality*, Bristol University Press.