



Law

Sustainable Interest in Transport

In my mail this week I received a report that Civic Exchange (CE) and the Asia Foundation have just released. You should know that Christine Loh is the driving force behind CE and you might even know that the Asia Foundation is a lot like CE on a wider scale. Both bodies are non-profit, independent and devoutly interested in promoting informed debate on public policy matters. Neither body is beholden to any governments or corporations. In short, they call them as they see them. For this reason alone, how they call them is of interest to me and should be to you as well.

Their report, *Sustainable Transport in Hong Kong, Directions and Opportunities*, was put together by Bill Barron, Simon Ng, Richard Gilbert and Christine. All are old hands on the environmental front whose reputations precede them. There were, not surprisingly, others in the background with one in particular worth noting – the MTR Corporation. Any problems here you might ask? Bit of a conflict of interest isn't it? No, for two good reasons. First, remember I said *they*, our authors, are not beholden to anyone. Second, the MTR would have been very unwise to have attempted to tie any support that it would give to the authors to certain conditions. As it happens railways, which includes the MTR, do have a case on their side when it comes to sustainability and hence can safely be supportive of transport research on the topic. So what did our researchers have to say? They made out a very convincing case for change.

They began with a hypothetical growth scenario. That Hong Kong will grow significantly in population in the not too distant future. Next, that the growth and its associated effects will impinge quite significantly upon our quality of life. I will take both propositions as given. The question it raises is what we

should do about it. Their response is to reduce the impact of both growth and its impingements by improving sustainability.

Our authors set out two basic conditions to achieve this sustainability – hence their vision. 1. A transport system that meets current needs for mobility without imposing unacceptable costs. 2. A transport system that meets future needs at acceptable costs. Debate comes in when one weighs the options to achieve the vision. To best inform that debate acceptability is benchmarked internally and externally. In Hong Kong at the moment we actually do very well internally. Thus our transport system viewed in terms of time spent travelling; its cost and overall quality are high. Externally though, we do not do so well. So what counts externally? Pollution, noise and health can all be factored in. It looks like there will be increased impacts in all three respects as we grow in population. That, according to the authors, is unacceptable and merits an alternative vision for a more sustainable transport policy. That vision, in my view, is 20:20. It is based on six major elements:

1. Greater support for passenger rail.
2. Re-assessing the best balance between rail and road.
3. Re-examining the feasibility of electric trolley buses and trams.
4. Mandating cleaner engines and fuels.
5. Pedestrianisation.
6. Reforming transport policy planning.

Now I have read the report and the rationale in support of each of these elements and said to myself: okay. An American might say "surely this is all apple pie". In other words, our American friend would say surely you couldn't argue with these suggestions. Yet, it has to be noted that Barron *et al* have actually had to frame their vision in the alternative. Doing so is a concession on their part and recognition that they are not of one mind with the government. That to me seems not only unnecessary but unfortunate as well.

Only a week or so ago, the papers were proclaiming the dawn of a new era with the long-awaited ministerial appointments. Okay for the second time. So why not the dawn of some new thinking along the lines sketched here. Staying with my dessert metaphor then, we could have the proof of that new-era pudding in its eating.

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